Embracing the Bad Victim: Sexual Violence and Sympathy on Popular Television

SHADIA SILIMAN

Sexual violence—the umbrella term under which rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and a variety of other forms of sexually-directed attack fall—has become an increasingly popular topic of discussion in the contemporary U.S.[1] According to a 2010 survey by the National Institute of Justice and the Department of Defense, nearly one in five women either has been raped, or experienced an attempted rape in her lifetime (Rabin). The ubiquity of sexual violence and discussions around it, particularly the #MeToo movement, have prompted the proliferation of the neologism rape culture. In a rape culture, the act of rape is normative and condoned behavior. The term originally formed during second-wave feminism and is now entering the public's vocabulary (Herman 45; Jordan). As a result, depictions of sexual violence on U.S. fictional television programs have significantly increased over the past twenty years (Greenberg and Hofschire 100; Kahlor and Morrison).

It is difficult—not to mention reductive—to attempt to determine whether the increase in depictions have become generally more or less problematic over time. However, one particular pattern of depictions has carved a space out for itself on television: storylines in which rape is deployed to evoke sympathy for an unlikable female character. Within the past eight years, such popular series as *Sons of Anarchy, Orange is the New Black, Breaking Bad, Mad Men*, *Bates Motel, Private Practice, Game of Thrones,* and *The Walking Dead* have all relied on a rape, or an attempted rape, as a plot device for humanizing an unsympathetic female.

On the surface, the use of rape as a humanizing plot device might seem progressive or praiseworthy. These depictions ostensibly spread awareness of the

[1] Sexual violence, as defined by the World Health Organization, is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or unwanted sexual comment or advance against a person's sexuality using coercion; *rape* applies specifically to physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of an individual (see Krug et al).

Shadia Siliman is a doctoral candidate in Gender Studies at Indiana University Bloomington. She currently serves as the Diversity Intern at IUB's Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. Her research investigates sexual violence and consent through the lens of a Queer of Color Critique, with an emphasis on legacies of intersectional thought as proposed by Women of Color feminists. She is currently writing her dissertation on how various narratives of sexual violence are disseminated within spaces of higher education. She can be reached at shadia.siliman@gmail.com.

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 7, No. 2

problem of rape and point to an unlikable personality as a potential result of trauma, bringing attention to a negative consequence of rape for victims. Perhaps most importantly, they do not outwardly appear to victim-blame: to suggest that a victim is to blame for an act of sexual violence perpetrated against them.[2] These depictions seem to point to the vulnerability of anyone to the problem of sexual violence, and suggest that rape is to blame for the unlikable qualities of a female character, rather than the other way around.

This pattern, however—in which rape is deployed as a plot device to humanize an unlikable female character—points to a deeply problematic way in which sexual violence is understood and addressed in the U.S. cultural landscape. It reveals audiences' discomfort with unsympathetic female figures both on and off television, since their safety must be compromised to ensure their likability and, often, their access to power. It also affirms how many audience members have been trained to react to the issue of rape solely through the mechanism of sympathy. When this plot device is used, the status of "victim" cancels out all other qualities or characteristics that might contradict this sympathetic victimhood.[3]

This essay provides two case studies of this phenomenon, from the popular television shows *Scandal* and *House of Cards.* In both storylines, unlikable female political figures are attacked in plotlines intended to evoke audience sympathy. The case studies examine content from the shows, as well as reactions from audiences in blog posts, recaps, and opinion pieces, in order to demonstrate the effect of these plotlines on viewers' perceptions of these female characters.

Though they are not indicative of the entire landscape of rape culture on or off television, these plotlines provide examples of a very specific deployment of rape as a plot device, demonstrating one way in which rape is being used on television, and perhaps being understood in U.S. culture as a whole. These case studies support this essay's ultimate argument: that the referral to sympathy, enabled through the trope of the 'helpless victim', allows audiences to skirt the responsibility of scrutinizing rape culture, as well as the audience's own complicity. This invocation of sympathy encourages audiences to collapse the identity of victims of sexual violence both on and off screen, conflating their experiences with their personalities. In so doing, this trope reinforces a raced and gendered dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' victims.

---

[2] An example of victim-blaming would be the supposition that a woman deserves to be raped because of the clothes they were wearing when the attack took place. For examples of research that treats victim-blaming as a measure of how problematic depictions of rape are, see: Kahlor and Morrison, Britto et al.

[3] The choice between using the terms "victim" or "survivor" to describe those who have experienced sexual violence means ascribing a specific status of healing to that person (see Kelly et al.). This essay uses the term "victim," because the shows and trope analyzed are specifically deploying victimhood and its accompanying narratives of trauma, silence, and helplessness.

Literature Review: Depictions of Victimhood on U.S. Television

Both Sarah Projansky and Lisa Cuklanz have written on U.S. television's love affair with the "helpless victim," a trope which first appeared on television in the mid-1970s. The trope emerged as a reflection of the second-wave feminist shift towards socially validating and supporting, rather than blaming, victims of rape. The second wave feminist movement in the U.S. "moved the public conversation about rape from silence to exposure and political activism" (Freedman). "The anti-rape movement sponsored speak outs, hosted forums and distributed literature and fact sheets correcting the lies and the myths, desperately trying to shift blame to where it belonged: with the rapist" (Poskin). Feminist activists and scholars during this era lead rape reform efforts and pushed back on the victim-blaming underlying most depictions of female rape victims on television. The result of this reform was a formulaic representation of rape victims as vulnerable and helpless, requiring sympathy and careful treatment. Cuklanz explains that sympathy for, and legitimation of, the experiences of rape victims are the rape reform ideas to have found the greatest acceptance in the mainstream mass media (as opposed to more complex but less consistently appearing concerns, such as how rape trials are pursued (*Rape on Prime Time* 156)). This sympathy, Projansky and Cuklanz argue, has become the main vehicle for viewers' efforts to legitimate victims' experiences.

The stranger rape narrative lost some of its footing by the mid-1980s, replaced by storylines of date and acquaintance rape in the 1990s, and then by more complex victim portrayals moving into the new millennium. However, many victims on television remained uniformly deserving of one thing: viewers' sympathy. Projansky stipulates that the post-feminist cultural turn of the 1980s (which effectively dismissed the work of second-wave feminism, declaring gender equality to be achieved) has led to the recent re-emergence of tropes such as the helpless victim (95). In contrast, Cuklanz argues that the helpless victim never left our screens ("The Limitations of Mass Mediated Discourses on Rape" 379).

Real-life victims experience a range of reactions to sexual violence. Sexual violence provokes incredible trauma for some, and drastic changes in personality for others. Second-wave feminists whose activism inspired the construction of the helpless victim character intended to end victim-blaming, and recognize that victims have been wronged, rather than to contribute to a dehumanizing trope of helplessness. The purpose of this essay, in dismantling this mechanism of immediate and all-encompassing audience sympathy, is not to deny how the experience of being raped can affect a person. Instead, this essay seeks to highlight how sympathy, on its own, is not necessarily an appropriate or constructive response to the problem of sexual violence.

Projansky and Cuklanz agree that contemporary cultural texts, including television, still fail to tell stories of sexual violence that closely examine social context without also blaming the victim. Instead, many television scripts become so focused on taking a "politically correct" stance and not blaming the victim that they frame that person as unconditionally sympathetic. Cuklanz as well as Corrine C. Bertram and M. Sue Crowley explain that, when audiences are expected to provide only a sympathetic response to portrayals of rape victims, they avoid confronting the dominant social norms that maintain sexual violence. The "false comfort of concern" allows the audience to focus on an entirely emotional response (Culkanz 101; Bertram and Crowley 64). This response, Cuklanz insists, effectively de-politicizes victimhood and the problem of rape culture (*Rape on Prime Time* 101).

Just as 1970s-era depictions of victims treated them primarily as "ciphers through which the trauma of rape [could] be indicated," helpless victims are conflated with the attack of sexual violence perpetrated against them.[4] A rape reveals the utterly human vulnerability of a character, inviting a sympathetic response from viewers that makes that person supposedly more relatable. An unlikable character becomes likable in the wake of being raped, because she cannot be both a victim (deserving of sympathy) and a bad or irritating person (deserving of scorn). When the only way that audiences know to react to sexual violence is through concern and sympathy, victimhood cancels out all other traits (Bertram and Crowley 65). The character is also eternally a victim; on these television shows, the characters' choices in the wake of being attacked can be (and typically are) attributed to trauma. The previous rape of an unlikable character, revealed through flashback or spoken description, can also be used to retroactively justify their previous behavior, no matter how terrible.

This essay argues that the trope of the helpless victim holds a presence in contemporary U.S. television. Not all victims of sexual violence on U.S. television are depicted as helpless or are made to seem helpless (and therefore likable) through the use of rape as a plot device. Rather, the helpless victim makes a covert appearance when characters who are not typically in need of viewers' sympathy suddenly deserve nothing less after a reveal that they have been attacked. Female figures are already the default victims of sexual violence on television, and female characters often must be made more "likable" for audiences. "There has long been a plague of poorly developed female characters outfitted with symbols of likability–

[4] When an individual is raped, whether on television or in real life, the incident is typically referred to as "her rape" or "his rape." Similarly, the perpetrator is spoken of as "her rapist" or "his rapist." Because this language reinforces the notion that the burden of an act of sexual violence lies with the victim, this essay instead uses phrases such as "the person who attacked her/him" or "the act of sexual violence perpetrated against her/him." See Arcus for a problematization of the passive voice when discussing experiences of sexual violence.

good looks, one-liners, adorable flaws–instead of personalities" (Paskin). *Homeland* executive producer Meredith Stiehm says of the slow televisual move away from every female character being likable, "the world wants women to be lady-like. It's a slow evolution of not expecting the traditional niceties" ("TV's New Leading Ladies"). While a steady growth of female antiheroes and powerful, unlikable female characters exist on television, a demand persists for these characters to be "lady-like." Building on Projansky, Cuklanz, and Bertram and Crowley, this essay points to the increasing use of the trope to balance out the growing numbers of unlikable female characters with a deeper patriarchal demand for likable women on television.

The use of flashbacks to tell the story of a rape only reinforces the helplessness of the character historically, as viewers are expected to direct sympathy, instead of thoughtful critique, at the character's behaviors from the time of the rape up until the present. In the two examples that follow—storylines from *Scandal* and *House of Cards*—an unlikable female character (as evidenced by both fan responses and the treatment of the character within the show) is revealed to have been raped in the past. These attacks are used by the shows to retroactively justify the characters' unlikable behavior. The reason that the victim is currently unlikable lies in her previous attack, rather than in some alternate complexity within her character or background. The status of the character as a victim helps garner sympathy, framing her as more likable and more human.

This is not all that the storylines share in common. Both shows aired recently (within the past three years) and have been popular and critically lauded (Ostrow; Stanley). As such, they indicate at least some of the contemporary televisual sensibilities of audiences in the U.S. Both show's rape plotlines took place in a later season, making the episodes more recent (season three of *Scandal*, from 2013-2014, and season two of *House of Cards*, in 2013). In addition, the characters both are or become First Ladies, and are deeply involved in the power game of U.S. politics; they share several personality traits; and there are parallels in the attacks perpetrated against them.

The analyses of these storylines include reactions from audiences, particularly through blog posts, recaps, and opinion pieces. While not representative of the totality of viewers, these expressions help to paint a picture of how these plotlines are being understood and absorbed by at least some viewers, revealing the lessons being taught about sexual violence.

Case Study One: Sympathy and Sexual Violence in *Scandal*

Few contemporary television characters have garnered the antipathy of viewers quite like First Lady Melody "Mellie" Grant (Bellamy Young) of *Scandal.* The power-hungry and politically savvy Mellie is well-known for her willingness to do

anything to keep her husband, President Fitzgerald "Fitz" Grant (Tony Goldwyn)—and eventually herself—in power. Employing a falsely sweet and hyperfemininized demeanor in public as she threatens and manipulates in private, Mellie is even willing to use her children as political instruments. In an attempt to keep her husband and the media on her side in season two, for example, a pregnant Mellie forces her obstetrician to induce her labor so that she will give birth to her child earlier than expected, despite the danger this poses to the child ("Truth or Consequences").

Previous to the revelation of the attack she experienced, "Mellie-hating" was popular not only among Mellie's fellow characters, but across the show's fan base (Miranda-Wolff). Viewers acknowledged her as a "love to hate" character, a "Lady Macbeth" and a backstabbing "Stepford Wife" (Strecker; Fallon). Mellie has most often been demonized by viewers for standing in the way of the President's affair with the show's protagonist, Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington). She is often framed as frigid, both sexually and emotionally, as she repeatedly fails to connect with her husband. One blogger vividly described her as "the rigid bitch who wouldn't let the cheating lovebirds have their fun" (Hannum).

Many fans' tunes changed, however, when it was revealed through a series of flashbacks in the show's third season that Mellie was raped by her father-in-law, Jerry (Barry Bostwick). The episode "Everything's Coming Up Mellie" introduced a strikingly different Mellie from fifteen years earlier: a woman passionately in love with her husband and supportive of his political ambitions, appearing relaxed, and forgoing heavy makeup or ornament (a striking contrast to her doll-like, hyperfeminine appearance in the present). She is naïvely shocked by her husband and his father's shouting match over politics. One day, after one of these fights ends and Fitz leaves them both behind at their house, Jerry drunkenly advances on Mellie, sitting down next to her and placing his hand on her thigh. Though she tells him to stop, he wrestles her, asking, "Do you really want me to stop?" ("Everything's Coming Up Mellie" 00:25:30-00:25:38) She continues to fight back, shouting, but he holds her down, rips her dress, and rapes her.

The rape is emphasized as a turning point in Mellie's personality, as she transforms overnight from an innocent and loving wife into a fledgling political animal. The morning after, she sits down at the breakfast table with Jerry and employs (it is implied, for the first time) her signature hyperfeminized and cutthroat persona. Mellie threatens to tell her husband about the attack if Jerry does not provide support for Fitz's political campaign, and Jerry acquiesces ("Everything's Coming Up Mellie"). The day before, Mellie was looking forward to a future of philanthropy and charity work. By the next morning, she seems willing to exploit anything—even a rape perpetrated against her—for power. The only event on which this change hinges, according to the show, is the rape.

In the 'current day' scenes that follow in the episode, Mellie presents as more vulnerable than the show has ever depicted her. In several moments, she even reverts back to the naïve Mellie of fifteen years ago. Toward the end of "Everything's Coming Up Mellie," for example, she is aggressively questioned by an interviewer about Fitz's infidelities, and appears as shocked and paralyzed by the confrontation as she was during Jerry's and Fitz's flashback fights. Nine episodes earlier, Mellie was willing to expose those same infidelities on television, destroy his political career for her own gain ("A Woman Scorned"). That Mellie is oddly absent during this more recent, aggressive interview, as Fitz must swoop in to defend her. The episode implies that the rape is as present in her psyche as it is in the viewers' minds, explaining her uncharacteristic helplessness.

By interspersing clips of the miserable, lonely Mellie of the present with flashbacks to the wide-eyed, innocent Mellie of the past, the show teaches viewers to see her likable past persona when looking at the unlikable present one. The episode thus teaches viewers that Mellie is, above all, a rape victim. Her framing as sympathetic and helpless is threaded through the rest of the season, as viewers are repeatedly reminded of the attack. In the wake of one of these reminders, the one person whom to whom she has disclosed, former flame Andrew (Jon Tenney), tells Mellie that "Someone needs to look out for you, be on your side" ("We Do Not Touch the First Ladies" 00:15:02-00:15:09) Mellie never before required protection. Only with the knowledge of the rape she experienced can Andrew's sentiment make sense in the show's universe.

Many fans praised the show's use of the rape plotline to humanize Mellie (Stuart; Murphy). Some called on the larger fanbase to immediately stop hating her, revealing their belief that the treatment of victims of rape with anything but sympathy—regardless of that victim's past—is unacceptable. Some marked the episode as a turning point in transitioning from "hating" to "loving" the character (Fallon; Strecker). Additionally, as many fans noticed, the reveal of the rape in a flashback implied that all of Mellie's ruthless behavior in the fifteen years since were a direct result of the rape (Murphy; Stewart). One blogger forgave Mellie of her most reprehensible actions, explaining that she was just "trying her absolute best" (Murphy). "If you don't like or at least have more sympathy for Mellie after last night," one author wrote in a next-day recap of the episode, "you have no soul and kick puppies for sport" (Arceneaux). For those viewers, all of Mellie's decisions—even the choice to put her unborn child in danger back in season two—are attributed to trauma, rather than to her conscious decision-making.[5]

Case Study Two: Divergence from the Trope in *House of Cards*

[5] Interestingly, many viewers expressed disappointment in the show's use of a rape plotline to make Mellie more sympathetic (see Fallon; Stewart).

While Mellie and her husband are often at odds, the power couple of *House of Cards* are almost always conspiring. If there is any complement to underhanded political monster Frank Underwood, the show's protagonist, it is his equally ruthless wife Claire. Claire's occupation as the head of an environmental nonprofit organization has done little to stop her from earning the title of "ice queen" from fans (Stuever). Claire methodically destroys the reputations of those who interfere with her and Frank's scheme to propel Frank into the office of the presidency. Not even Frank is exempt from her backstabbing: when he privileges his career over Claire's without first consulting her, she secretly (and single-handedly) decimates a legislative vote he carefully brokered ("Chapter 9").

Just like Mellie, Claire is often compared to Lady Macbeth; unlike Mellie, Claire is singularly beloved by many viewers, celebrated as an unapologetically conniving female television character (Stanley). Thanks to *House of Cards*, viewers were gifted a "strong-willed, merciless female antihero" (Whitney). The characters around her express disgust at her cold-blooded persona. A former employee who is pregnant, Gillian (Sandrine Holt), is horrified by Claire's calm assurance that she will revoke Gillian's health insurance if she does not acquiesce to Claire's demands. "I'm willing to let your child wither and die inside you if that's what's required" Claire says ("Chapter 14" 00:31:10-00:31:25). "I'm sorry I ever met you," an ex-lover (Ben Daniels) tells Claire when she ruins his career and put his fiancé's family in danger to keep their past together a secret ("Chapter 22" 00:40:43-00:40:48).

Like Frank, Claire is nearly inhuman in her cunning; unlike Frank, the show makes periodic attempts at humanizing Claire. The most transparent of these plots is the season two reveal that she was raped. When she and Frank attend a military commissioning ceremony in the second episode of season two, Claire is visibly unsettled by the presence of one of the awardees, General Dalton McGinnis (Peter Bradbury). Frank finds Claire crying in the bathroom, and she reveals that McGinnis raped her when she and McGinnis were in college (a secret she has kept for nearly three decades ("Chapter 15"). Later in the episode, Claire tells Frank that McGinnis silenced her during the rape by stuffing a bed sheet in her mouth. Recalling her past self, she says, "Every time I think of her pinned down like that, I strangle her, Francis. So she doesn't strangle me. I have to. We have to" ("Chapter 15" 00:30:22-00:31:05). Claire has strangled herself into silence, secretly living as a helpless victim, unable to tell her story or confront McGinnis. Since the attack, the show suggests, Claire has killed her past self again and again, her trauma destroying her old persona and crafting a new, colder Claire.

In response to Frank's anger towards McGinnis on her behalf, she tells him, "You'll still feel the hate in the morning. You'll use it, but not on him" ("Chapter 15" 00:31:55-00:32:15). Claire has experienced this same hate, but has redirected it from McGinnis to others, explaining her chilly demeanor. Living with the rape

has filled her with a rage that she still carries. Many viewers framed the anger as having fueled Claire for her entire life following the rape, construing her trauma as eternally propelling her (Bishop; Stahler). As the episode "Chapter 15" demonstrates, however, Claire must hide this anger. One article consults a self-proclaimed expert on rape who implies that Claire's emotionally subdued disposition in the episode is due to "the nature of trauma," which "can mute the person's emotions" (Goldstein). According to this logic, Claire's trauma might even explain her overall muted demeanor since the beginning of the show.

Claire breaks away from the helpless victim trope, however, only two episodes later, when she takes control of McGinnis' fate. During a live television interview (at which point Frank is the Vice President, making her the Second Lady), Claire reveals the rape. She retools the story, claiming a pregnancy as a result, which she claims to have terminated ("Chapter 17"). When Claire publicly names McGinnis, she sets in motion the destruction of his career, as well as the foundation for sexual assault reform legislation that she spearheads in the next episode. The series ultimately reveals that Claire pursues the legislation for the sake of Frank's (and therefore, arguably her own) political career. Along the way, she meets Megan (Libby Woodbridge), a Marine who also steps forward to accuse McGinnis of rape ("Chapter 25"). When presented with the opportunity to abandon the bill for another project, though, Claire betrays her promise to support Megan by pushing the legislation, sending Megan into a depressive tailspin.

Claire is revealed to be vulnerable when we learn of McGinnis' attack against her. But Claire knows that sharing that information in her live interview will garner sympathy from others; she knowingly exploits the helpless victim trope in the name of her own political gain. Other characters fall for Claire's exploitation of the trope, as Frank gains political allies immediately after the interview. This, in addition to her discarding Megan—who represents her helpless past self, and with whom Claire ostensibly 'should' sympathize—suggests a deeper ruthlessness beyond a desire for retribution against McGinnis. Whether or not her 'past self' was ruthless, Claire is reinforced in these episodes as cruel to her core. Claire's interview may have served to allow her a victim's revenge, but she ultimately uses the disclosure for a mission unrelated to the rape, in the name of her desire for power.

Much like Mellie of *Scandal*, Claire uses the rape perpetrated against her for political leverage; unlike Mellie, the ruthlessness that is used to explain Claire's leveraging of the rape is attributed to something in her personality separate from trauma. Claire's response to the rape she experienced may not seem politically correct or 'appropriate' for a victim, but for that reason, she disrupts narrative tropes regarding sexual violence. With the discovery that she was raped, audiences are expected to react with sympathy, and to ignore Claire's consistently cunning behavior by collapsing her into a helpless victim. Doing so comes back to bite the audience when Claire quickly returns to her cutthroat ways. Characters who bought

into Claire's one-dimensional victimhood are framed by the show as gullible and foolish, a reveal which reflects back on the audience members who made the same mistake. By twisting the trope, Claire's storyline demonstrates how sympathy functions as a barrier to understanding victims as complete people.

The Problem of Victimhood

The one-dimensional portrait of victimhood presented by the helpless victim in the both of these storylines harkens back to that of the 'good victim'—the female who could not have possibly brought on an attack—as opposed to the sexually unapologetic or inadequately demure 'bad victim' (Corrigan 90). The helpless victim is another reiteration of the good victim. The stories of Mellie and Claire, and others like them, simply turn seemingly bad victims (that is, abrasive female characters) into good ones retroactively, facilitating audiences' sympathetic responses.

In twisting the trope of the helpless/good victim, Claire serves as a reminder of how it relies not only on sympathy, but also gender and race. Good female victims are not just appropriately blameless and helpless: they are also necessarily white. An intersectional lens reveals how the race of these women impacts how they are understood as victims, and how they are allowed to be perceived as victims by audiences. Intersectionality serves as a necessary analysis of, and attention to, the intersections of positionality factors (such as race, class, (dis)ability, nationality, and gender, among many others) in producing lived experience (Carbado 4; Carastathis 2).

A unique inevitability of sexual violence pervades the lives of women of color, making stories of sexual violence unexceptional in their lives in a way that they are not for white women (Projansky 6). "Rape culture targets all women," Janell Hobson explains, "but due to white supremacy, economic disparities and heterosexism, some women face the threat of violence more frequently." Hypersexualized depictions of women of color, which have projected the image of women of color as inherently sexually violable, "have functioned since the early 1400s" ("Black Women and Sexual Violence"). White women have the opportunity to be considered victims of sexual violence. As white women who are granted at least some integrity to be violated, Mellie and Claire are not coincidentally implicated in these humanizing plotlines—they are qualified for them.

Good female victims are also appropriately feminine, explaining why Mellie and Claire are both feminized so dramatically throughout these storylines (particularly compared to their usual depictions). Their femininity is ramped up to further contribute to their figures as victims (Stringer 153). These characters' equally flawed male counterparts are typically celebrated, rather than framed as requiring humanization (Paskin; Whitney). Even their "difficult" traits—to push

back and demand from others—are associated with masculinity. On these shows, to be made a victim is to be feminized, as rape culture links victimhood of sexual violence to femaleness and stereotypical weakness.

In a patriarchal society, the possession of, and desire for, power is associated with masculinity (Quinn 387). Mellie and Claire behave in ways that are stereotypically masculine enough to place them in competition with their powerful husbands. Mellie's hyperfeminine facade in the present is arguably a crafted cover for her more masculine character attributes. In the episodes in which Mellie and Claire are revealed to have been raped, though, they are feminized to the point of being meek, vulnerable, powerless, and even voided of an ambition for power.

Further, femininity is tied specifically to white womanness. Gender and race are inextricably intertwined in the valuation of feminine performance. proper feminine performance-—perhaps even any demonstration of femaleness-—has historically been attached to whiteness and deemed impossible for non-white female bodies. According to Patricia Hill Collins, "Black women, by definition, cannot achieve the idealized feminine ideal because the fact of Blackness excludes them" (199). Femininity is fundamentally not available for the female-bodied of color; that is what makes it femininity. Going back for centuries in the U.S., and persisting today, white women have been able to claim feminine purity and restraint on the backs of women of color (Calafell 114). White women are allotted the opportunity to be feminine.

It is no mistake that every single one of the media examples listed have used this trope—including *Orange is the New Black, Grey's Anatomy,* and *Sons of Anarchy*—deploys rape in to garner sympathy for a white female character. The person who can be attacked must fulfill this specific combination of race and gender. The white female figure teaches us who cannot be a good victim: not men, not masculine white women, and not women of color (even if they behave in a stereotypically feminine way), among many others. Through the lens of the patriarchy, men are too sexually dominant and strong, masculine women are too much like men, and women of color are too hypersexualized and indecent, to claim the status of victimhood (NOW). In white womanhood, itself the ideal form of womanhood, an individual is deemed pure and weak enough to be vulnerable to attack (Lugones 90).

The deployment of the helpless victim trope reinforces the gendered and raced dichotomy between the good and bad victim. However, Claire's storyline diverges where Mellie's adheres to the trope: Claire's "pure," feminized, helpless past self allows viewers to understand her as deserving the claim to victimhood. At the same time, her cruelty even in the face of the opportunity to embrace her past self demonstrates that she may always (that is, before the attack) have been "difficult." Claire's storyline places viewers in an uncomfortable space by implying that she was never really helpless, but still did not deserve to be attacked. This raises an

important question about the intersection of race and gender for the good victim: was Claire ever the quintessential "good" victim, or did her race and femininity, as they conspired to depict her as perpetually helpless, let audiences assume that she had to be?

Britto et al. remind us that audiences use what they see on television to socially construct their reality. Often, when viewers lack direct experience with an issue, they rely on media depictions to educate themselves on the issue (Britto et al. 39). They can encourage and reinforce rape myths among viewers and can even sway real life behaviors. Britto et al. provide an example from their study on how victims are depicted on the popular television series *Law & Order: SVU* (one of the most popular sources of information about sexual violence for the public). The authors report that *SVU* indulged the popular myth that a victim must have been physically injured if they were raped, by failing to portray rape in other contexts, such as spousal or acquaintance rape. "The lack of inclusion of rapes without severe injuries serves to negate their importance and may lead victims, offenders, jurors, and individuals working within the criminal justice system to similarly minimize rapes that do not involve injury" (Britto 51). "If they have little or no personal or sociological knowledge of sexual assault and abuse, this may entail referencing media images" that reinforce such myths (51). When individuals lack personal knowledge regarding sexual violence, they may refer to television depictions to guide their judgements around the issue, including those participating in the criminal justice system. Television depictions of sexual violence have real-world consequences.

The stories of Mellie and Claire demonstrate how sympathy can function as a barrier, rather than a catalyst, for appreciating the experience of sexual violence. Regardless of their differences, both depictions fail to show the variety of ways that victims can move on from an attack. For one, there is the insulting implication that female victims are likely to adopt abrasive personalities as a result of being attacked. These storylines also deny female victims the opportunity to be unlikable without their character flaws being attributed to a trauma. By encouraging viewers to conflate a figure who has been sexually assaulted with the crime perpetrated against them, the mechanism of the sympathetic response disallows women from having a personality—as conniving or malicious as it might be—separate from acts of sexual violence they experienced. When television shows use rape to make a female character more likable, they teach each of these lessons to the audience; and viewers may apply those lessons when judging real-life victims of sexual violence.

The use of this trope keeps rape culture in place, not only by excusing audiences from having to think about sexual violence as a structural problem, or one in which they might be complicit, but also by suggesting that there are good and bad victims. The trope also reinforces the myth that only feminine-presenting white women can be "real" victims. This excuses sexual violence against any other intersection of

identity and solidifies racialized and gendered stereotypes around sexual violence. It also delegitimizes experiences of rape in which the victim is not sufficiently "helpless." Finally, viewers are left with the implication that rape is an appropriate "punishment" to make unlikable women more likable (no matter how indirect this correlation might seem through devices like flashbacks).

Conclusion: Moving Beyond the "Good Victim"

The trope of the "good victim" should not be the sole female figure with the right to claim being attacked. Women deserve to be "difficult" without that quality having anything to do with an attack perpetrated against them. To be clear, bad victim does not just mean a person who is not a good victim—the non-white, non-feminine, non-helpless person—but particularly the worst victim. This could be the prostitute who is attacked when she is with a client, or the man who fears that his masculinity is compromised when he shares that he has been attacked by a woman. Because they are the farthest from the image of the "good victim" to which a patriarchal society is accustomed, they should be addressed as exemplary victims. The "bad victim" must be embraced in every sense and treated as a model for what it means to experience sexual violence. Instead of attempting to prove that all victims are "good victims," the standard of the good victim must be eliminated altogether.[6]

The use of rape as a "plot device" to make viewers care about a character demonstrates exactly how problematic this cultural construction of sexual violence is. Rape is not an event that makes a person more interesting or complicated, and to treat is as such does a disservice to both television characters, and real people, who have experienced sexual violence. Victims of sexual violence require and deserve more than sympathy. They need to be understood as complex human beings who have indeed suffered a horrific crime against their person, but who are also multifaceted people with other experiences and unique personalities aside from traumas. Individuals are interesting outside of the violence they have experienced, and the same should be true of television characters.

Works Cited

Arceneaux, Michael. "How You Like Her Now?: Recapping Scandal, 'Everything's Coming Up Mellie." *Complex*, 15 Nov. 2013, www.complex.com/pop-culture/2013/11/scandal-recapeverythings-coming-up-mellie.

[6] This follows the recommendation of Sylvia Wynter, asking us to treat those farthest from power as exemplars for radical epistemologies (357).

Arcus, Doreen. "The Passive Voice Has No Place in Conversations About Rape." *WBUR*, 28 Jan. 2019, www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2019/01/28/the-language-of-sexual-violence-doreen-arcus.

"A Woman Scorned." *Scandal*, season 2, episode 20, ABC, 2 May 2013.

Bertram, Corrine C., and M. Sue Crowley. "Teaching About Sexual Violence in Higher Education: Moving from Concern to Conscious Resistance." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2012, pp. 63-82.

Bishop, Liana. "Claire Underwood's Controversial Role in 'House of Cards.'" *AtDaily*. 3 Mar. 2014, www.atdaily.com/claire-underwood-controversial.

"Black Women and Sexual Violence." *National Organization for Women.* now.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Black-Women-and-Sexual-Violence-6.pdf.

Britto, Sarah, Tycy Hughes, Kurt Saltzman, and Colin Stroh. "Does 'Special' Mean Young, White, and Female? Deconstructing the Meaning of 'Special' in 'Law & Order: Special Victims Unit.'" *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 39-57.

Calafell, Bernadette Marie. "Monstrous Femininity: Constructions of women of color in the Academy." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2012, pp. 111-130.

"Chapter 9." *House of Cards*, season 1, episode 9, Netflix, 1 Feb. 2013. *Netflix.* www.netflix.com/watch/70248297.

"Chapter 14." *House of Cards*, season 2, episode 1, Netflix, 14 Feb. 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70293579.

"Chapter 15." *House of Cards*, season 2, episode 2, Netflix, 14 Feb. 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70293580.

"Chapter 17." *House of Cards*, season 2, episode 4, Netflix, 14 Feb. 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70293582.

"Chapter 22." *House of Cards*, season 2, episode 9, Netflix, 14 Feb. 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70293587.

"Chapter 25." *House of Cards*, season 2, episode 12, Netflix, 14 Feb. 2014. *Netflix,* www.netflix.com/watch/70293590.

Corrigan, Rose. *Up Against a Wall: Rape Reform and the Failure of Success.* New York UP, 2003.

Cuklanz, Lisa. *Rape on Prime Time: Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence.* U of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

---. "The Limitations of Mass Mediated Discourses on Rape." *The Review of Communication,* vol. 3, no. 4, 2003, pp. 379-83.

"Everything's Coming Up Mellie." *Scandal*, season 3, episode 7, ABC, 14 Nov. 2013.

Fallon, Kevin. "How 'Scandal' Star Bellamy Young Transformed Mellie Grant Into Fans' Favorite Character" *The Daily Beast.* 17 Apr. 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/17/how-scandal-star-bellamy-young-transformed-mellie-into-fans-favorite-character.html.

Fishman, Mark, and Gray Cavendar, editors. *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs.* Aldine de Gruyter Publishing Co, 1998.

Freedman, Estelle B. "Feminism's Amazing Achievement: Changing the Conversation—and Laws—About Rape." *Salon.* 25 Aug. 2013, www.salon.com/2013/08/25/how_feminism_redefined_rape.

Goldstein, Jessica. "'Scandal,' 'House of Cards,' 'The Americans,' and How Rape Survivors Are Portrayed on TV." *ThinkProgress.* 2 Apr. 2014, thinkprogress.org/culture/2014/04/02/3421759/realistic-rape-survivors-tv.

Greenberg, Bradley and Linda Hofschire. "Sex on Entertainment Television." *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of Its Appeal,* edited by Dolf Zillman and Peter Voderer, Routledge, 2000, pp. 93-112.

Hannum, Claire. "An Ode to Mellie Grant from 'Scandal.'" *The Frisky.* 24 Oct. 2014, www.thefrisky.com/2014-10-24/an-ode-to-mellie-grant-from-scandal.

Herman, Dianne. "The Rape Culture." *Women: A Feminist Perspective,* edited by Jo Freeman, Mayfield, 1984, pp. 45-53.

Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Routledge, 2004.

Jordan, Ashley. "TIME Magazine is Wrong. Rape Culture Does Exist." *TIME Magazine,* 3 Apr. 2014, thehumanist.com/commentary/time-magazine-is-wrong-rape-culture-does-exist.

Kahlor, LeeAnn, and Dan Morrison. "Television Viewing and Rape Myth Acceptance among College Women." *Sex Roles,* no. 56, 2007, pp. 729-39.

Kelly, Liz, Sheila Burton, and Linda Regan. "Beyond Victim or Survivor: Sexual Violence, Identity and Feminist Theory and Practice." *Sexualizing the Social: Explorations in Sociology,* edited by Lisa Adkins and Vicki Merchant, Palgrave Macmillan, 1996, pp. 77-101.

Lugones, Maria. "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System." *Hypatia,* vol. 22, no. 1, 2007, pp. 186-209.

Miranda-Wolff, Alida. "'Scandal's' Mellie Grant is an Awesome Politician, Not a Psychopath." *Bustle.* 7 Nov. 2013, www.bustle.com/articles/8456-scandals-mellie-grant-is-an-awesome-politician-not-a-psychopath.

Murphy, Shannum. "'Scandal' Fans, It's Time to Stop Hating on Mellie." *Hollywood Life.* 15 Nov. 2014, www.hollywoodlife.com/2013/11/15/scandal-mellie-rape-scene-season-3-episode-7.

Ostrow, Joanne. "Ostrow: Kevin Spacey Shines in 'House of Cards' Political Drama on Netflix." *The Denver Post.* 2 Feb. 2013, www.denverpost.com/television/ci_22483448/Kevin-Spacey-shines-house-cards-political-drama-netflix.

Paskin, Willa. "What's So Bad about Likable Women?" *Slate.* 10 Jan. 2014, www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2014/01/likeable_versus_unlikable_women_the_great_debate.html.

Poskin, Polly. "A Brief History of the Anti-Rape Movement." *Resource Sharing Project.* 2007, www.resourcesharingproject.org/brief-history-anti-rape-movement.

Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture.* New York UP, 2001.

Quinn, Beth A. "Sexual Harassment and Masculinity: The Power and Meaning of 'Girl Watching.'" *Gender & Society*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2002, pp. 386-402.

Rabin, Robi Caryn. "Nearly 1 in 5 Women in U.S. Survey Say They Have Been Sexually Assaulted." *The New York Times.* 14 Dec. 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/health/nearly-1-in-5-women-in-us-survey-report-sexual-assault.html.

Stahler, Kelsea. "'House of Cards' Season 2 Tackles Rape Scene Like No Other Thriller Has." *Bustle.* 14 Feb. 2014, www.bustle.com/articles/15595-house-of-cards-season-2-tackles-rape-scene-like-no-other-thriller-has.

Stanley, Alessandra. "Washington Spin Doctor, Heal Thyself: 'Scandal', ABC Political Drama with Kerry Washington." *The New York Times.* 4 Apr. 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/04/05/arts/television/scandal-abc-political-drama-with-kerry-washington.html.

---. "Political Animals That Slither: 'House of Cards' on Netflix Stars Kevin Spacey." *The New York Times.* 31 Jan. 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/02/01/arts/television/house-of-cards-on-netflix-stars-kevin-spacey.html.

Stewart, Dodai. "Making Sense of the Rape Scene on 'Scandal.'" *Jezebel.* 15 Nov. 2013, www.jezebel.com/making-sense-of-the-rape-scene-on-scandal-1465117671.

Strecker, Erin. "'Scandal': We Need to Talk About That." *PopWatch.* 15 Nov. 2013, popwatch.ew.com/2013/11/15/scandal-mellie-rape.

Stringer, Rebecca. "Vulnerability after Wounding: Feminism, Rape Law, and the Differend." *SubStance*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2013, pp. 148-68.

Stuever, Hank. "'House of Cards': Power Corrupts (Plus Other Non-Breaking News)." *The Washington Post.* 31 Jan. 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/house-of-cards-power-corrupts-plus-other-non-breaking-news/2013/01/31/b72c54b6-6bd0-11e2-8740-9b58f43c191a_story.html.

Surette, Ray. *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities.* Wadsworth Publishing, 1998.

"Truth or Consequences." *Scandal*, season 2, episode 12, ABC, 31 Jan. 2013.

"TV's New Leading Ladies: Don't Call Them Likable." *NBC News.* 26 July 2014, www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/tv/tvs-new-leading-ladies-dont-call-them-likable-n163101.

"We Don't Touch the First Ladies." *Scandal*, season 3, episode 12, ABC, 6 Mar. 2014.

Whitney, Erin. "How Claire Underwood and 'House of Cards' Changed the TV Antihero Forever." *HuffPost.* 5 May 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/05/house-of-cards-tv-antihero-archetype_n_4899440.html.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Afterword: 'Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman.'" *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature,* edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, Africa World Press, Inc., 1990, pp. 355-72.