Empowerment Through Violence: Feminism and the Rape-Revenge Narrative in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*[1]

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Abstract:
One of the many problematic facets of the constructions of rape victims in popular as well as news media is the way in which they are consistently denied agency. Passivity is deemed the hallmark of a 'true victim' (contrasted with those women who are accused of lying about rape or having 'asked for it' with their behavior), and the victim remains in this passivity while a supportive male avenges her. An alternative to this is presented by the rape-revenge narrative, in which the victim reclaims agency and resorts to violence to avenge her own rape, insinuating that brute physical force may be a victim's only recourse in a rape culture dominated by systemic misogyny. Using as an example Stieg Larsson's novel *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, I examine the feminist potential of the rape-revenge narrative and its application in the novel.

1 According to RAINN.org, the website of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, about one in six American women will experience rape or attempted rape in their lifetime.[2] It seems unsurprising, then, that rape and sexual assault are often the subject of movies, novels or TV series, and that news reports are frequently dominated by stories of grisly, brutal rapes. However, the cases that make it across our TV screens are hardly representative of reality. Though two thirds of all rapes are committed by someone the victims knows well[3], often even a partner or friend, and are accompanied by manipulation and emotional abuse, rather than physical force, the most sensationalized cases are typically those that involve highly violent stranger rape. This sort of story is epitomized by the Central Park Jogger case of 1989[4], in which a woman in New York was raped and critically injured while out jogging.

2 This is both indicative of and a contributing factor to misconceptions about the nature and prevalence of rape. These common but often false ideas about how rape happens are called 'rape myths' and have little to no factual basis. Joanna Burke describes rape myths as "converting historical and geographical specificities into flaccid catchphrases that seem clear

[1] In this paper, I will focus exclusively on rapes of women by men. While men also fall victim to rape, the purpose of this paper is to explore the rape-revenge narrative and its potential as a feminist narrative that empowers abused women to fight not just their abuser, but a misogynist, patriarchal system at large. I use the definition of rape that is also employed by Joanna Burke, which is that "sexual abuse is any act called such by a participant or third party" (Burke 9).

[2] Statistics posted on website, accessed on 18 February 2013. For international statistics on sexual assault see the crime report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime at www.undoc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/crime/CTS12_sexual_violence.xls

[3] ibid.

[4] A summary of the case can be found in New York Magazine: http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/crimelaw/features/n_7836/; accessed 18 February 2013.

and self-evident, yet […] profoundly damaging for people who suffer sexual abuse" (Burke 24). She identifies some of the most common myths, which in addition to those named above, also include the idea that it is impossible to rape a woman who fights back (24), or that women routinely fabricate false rape claims to take revenge on men (28).

3 These myths pertain not only to the identity of the rapist as a stranger and to the setting of the rape (a park, a dark alley, etc), but also to the supposed behavior of the rape victim. A rape victim, according to popular imagination, must be visibly traumatized in the immediate aftermath, and will continue to be profoundly damaged for the rest of her life. According to this 'logic', someone who appears calm, does not immediately seek help, and/or continues to interact with her rapist/victimizer cannot have been raped. We can see these dynamics at play in popular reactions to well-publicized rape allegations, such as in the cases against Dominique Strauss-Kahn or Julian Assange. Regardless of the actual events, which are known only to those involved, the media construction of the alleged victims in both cases serves to illustrate how the idea of the 'perfect' or 'true' victim influences the willingness to believe allegations of rape. The accuser in the Strauss-Kahn case, the hotel maid Nafissatou Diallo, initially claimed to have sat in the hallway in shock for half an hour immediately following the assault. Later it was revealed that she called her fiancé, and that she may have also continued cleaning another room. This, among other things, turned public opinion against her: if she was able to make phone calls and continue working, surely, she could not have been raped.[5] Similarly, public opinion was not on the side of the two Swedish women who raised sexual assault charges against Julian Assange. They were accused of lodging false charges for political reasons, and commentators on the case made much of the fact that both women had pursued sexual relationships with him and had continued to interact with him after the alleged assaults. "What's more, the following morning [...] the pair amicably went out to have breakfast together", an incredulous journalist writes in a Daily Mail article at the time.[6]

4 There are, however, countless complex dynamics at play that explain why some women do not report assaults right away, or at all. In the above examples, both alleged perpetrators were white males in powerful political positions. All three of the accusing

[5] A summary of the allegations, including links to further information, can be found here: http://jezebel.com/5833487/prosecutors-move-to-drop-charges-against-strauss+kahn; accessed 18 February 2013.

[6] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1336291/Wikileaks-Julian-Assanges-2-night-stands-spark-worldwide-hunt.html#ixzz17R0oRvSC; accessed 18 February 2013

women were accused of lying for financial gain. This shifting of blame away from the accused men and onto the accusing women, through the deployment of rape myths, are signs that we live in what is called a rape culture. A rape culture is a culture in which sexual violence is routinely normalized and excused, and in which male aggression is accepted and even rewarded. This normalization works along several axes and also works in conjunction with systemic racism, sexism and classism. Media construction of the rapist as a violent stranger hiding in a dark alley helps to throw suspicion on allegations cast against men who are popular, powerful and/or well respected in the community. Similarly, constructions of the "perfect victim" and certain expectations of behavior immediately following a rape also shifts blame away from the perpetrator and onto the victim. Additionally, the scripts for high-profile cases that receive media coverage may also influence other victims of abuse: fear of not being believed and/or having one's past dug up for scrutiny may dissuade victims from reporting an abuse.[7]

5 These media narratives are not unique to news coverage of rape cases. Stereotypical ideas of rapists and victims also abound in fictional accounts. Crime dramas are especially guilty of this. In an exhaustive report of rape in television dramas from the mid 1970s on, Linda Cuklanz traced what she called the "basic plot", a formula plot in rape stories where "the victim is attacked by an unseen rapist" and where she suffers "severe psychological and physical damage". This rape is then avenged by a police officer or other supportive and "good guy", and his righteousness is contrasted with "the rapist's intense depravity" (6).

6 If all of these constructions of rape and its victims have one common thread, it is the passive role it relegates women to. They are the passive victims of violence that is enacted on their bodies – in the first instance through the actual rape, and in the second instance through the mechanisms of rape culture that dictate the responses (from disbelief to vilifications).

7 One narrative structure that counters this trend of passivity is that of the rape-revenge plot. Emerging from the genre of horror films, and epitomized by the crude 1977 slasher film *I Spit on your Grave*, these stories center around what Carol Clover calls the "victim-hero" (4). This character's status, Clover writes, "has been enabled by 'women's liberation'. Feminism, that is, has given a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge" (4). In *I Spit on your Grave*, the victim-hero is the young writer Jennifer, who is brutally gang-raped by four young men and subsequently kills

[7] The discussion of whether and how highly visible rape cases influence the decision of victims to report was also stoked by the case of Jörg Kachelmann in Germany in 2010. One good summary of the opinions voiced can be found here: http://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/kriminalitaet/justiz-dilemma-die-einzige-zeugin-11025696.html

them off one by one. This is, in essence, the blueprint for a number of films that followed in the seventies and eighties: in these films, the victim of rape does not passively fade into the background as the good men take over to avenge her (or the public descends to denounce her). She takes matters into her own hands and avenges her rape.

8 Central to Clover's argument is her statement that "horror is far more victim-identified than the standard view would have it" (8). Contrary to standard arguments that the viewing pleasure in horror is connected to the "mastering, voyeuristic gaze" (9), she sees it in the identification with the victims of horror movies, the Final Girls (and Boys). This type of narrative, then, explicitly invites the audience to identify with, and thus side with, the rape victim. We are witness to the events from her point of view, we remain on her side when she is doubted, we sympathize with her, and we root for her when she when she undertakes to get her revenge. Rape-revenge scenarios, such as *I Spit on your Grave*, are "literally predicated on the assumption that *all* viewers, male and female alike, will take [the victim's] part, and via whatever set of psychosexual translations, 'feel' her violation" (Clover 159).

9 Plotlines revolving around an avenging hero are not restricted to horror films – they are, rather, extremely common in fiction and film. Revenge-plots centering specifically on rape, however, are much harder to find outside of action or horror movies and courtroom-dramas. There is, however, at least one text that takes advantage of the mechanisms of the rape-revenge narrative: Stieg Larsson's *Millenium*-series. In the series, written at least in part to raise awareness about the prevalence of violence against women, a rape-revenge narrative featuring the victim-hero Lisbeth Salander is one of the mechanisms through which Larsson engages his readership and confronts them with the topic.

10 *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is the first book of the *Millenium*-trilogy, written by the Swedish author Stieg Larsson. The books were published posthumously after the author's death in 2004, with the first one appearing on the market in 2005. The plot of the first installment revolves around the journalist Mikael Blomkvist, who falls into public disgrace after he is convicted of having published false information on a wealthy business tycoon. He takes a hiatus from the publishing world and agrees to investigate the mysterious disappearance of a woman, Harriet Vanger, some 30 years earlier. In this he receives unexpected help from the hacker Lisbeth Salander, a complex character who becomes the unlikely heroine of the story.

11 Though the books are primarily thrillers that feature political intrigue, corruption, serial killers and a lot of violence, they also have a clear message. In the original Swedish, the first installment of the trilogy was titled "Män som hatar kvinnor" – which literally translates

to “men who hate women”. In life, Larsson was dedicated to championing the rights of women, and often made this the topic of his writing (Donaldson James 2). The origin story of the Lisbeth-character, as well as Larsson’s motivation to write the novels, sounds almost mythic: as a 15-year old, he witnessed a gang rape and felt unable to step in and protect the victim. In his work, he tried to do what he could not do as a teenager – to speak out against systemic misogyny and violence against women.

12 In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Larsson’s female protagonist has the chance to recover her agency and strike back. Much of the first half of the book is given over to a classic rape-revenge plot. Lisbeth Salander is molested and raped by her court-appointed guardian, the lawyer Bjurman. Knowing that her history (institutionalizations as well as an impressive police file) would make her an unreliable witness at best, and having learned to mistrust the police through her dealings with them, she takes matters into her own hands. She attacks Bjurman with a taser, ties him up on his own bed where he had kept her in handcuffs for hours, subjects him to anal penetration with his own toys, and finally tattoos the words “I am a sadistic pig, a pervert, and a rapist” (Larsson loc 3708) across his chest. With these actions, she not only literally asserts her power over him, but she also figuratively takes back control over her own life. As her guardian, Bjurman had denied her access to her bank accounts, and thus made her dependent on him. Now that she holds power over him by virtue of a recording of his sexual assault on her, she can blackmail him into relinquishing control over her bank account, and thus her life.

13 But Lisbeth not only wages battle against the sadistic lawyer Bjurman. In a number of flashbacks on Lisbeth’s life, the reader repeatedly sees her retaliating against attacks with violence. When groped in a subway station, for example, she “kicked [her assailant] in the head” (loc 2218). There are also numerous references to “All the Evil”, something that happened when Lisbeth was about 13 years old. In the second installment of the *Millenium*-series, *The Girl Who Played with Fire* (2006), we learn that she set fire to a car in which her father was sitting, a violent man who trafficked in women and beat her mother to the point of a brain haemorrhage.

13 At the climax of the novel Lisbeth barges into the serial killer Martin Vanger's torture chamber, and charges him with a golf club: “Her teeth were bared like a beast of prey. She moved with the lightning speed of a tarantula and seemed totally focused on her prey as she swung the club again, striking Martin in the ribs” (loc 6448-6455). This time she is not fighting against someone who has personally victimized her, but it is easy to read Martin Vanger, with his veneer of the successful and amicable businessman and with his torture

chamber hidden beneath his house, as the epitome of the “man who hates women”. The methodological way in which he went about finding, torturing and disposing of his female victims, all the while keeping up his appearance as loving boyfriend and friendly member of the island community, showcases the insidious way in which systemic misogyny runs rampant in society. All the more so when taking into account that Martin was initiated into serial killing by his own father at a young age. This can be read as a simile for the ways in which one is born and socialized into a misogynistic culture. In beating Vanger and pursuing him in a car chase that finally leads to his death, Lisbeth is not only avenging Vanger's victims. She is also symbolically avenging herself, as well as every woman who has been victimized by the misogyny of an entire society.

15 On the surface, then, this text seems to be affirmative of female agency and willing to portray a female character that defies many stereotypes of femininity. Furthermore, the text deals extensively with the topics of rape and sexual abuse and is careful to leave no room for ambiguity when it comes to allocating the blame for this violence. So is Lisbeth Salander a feminist hero? Does the book have a feminist message? Different readings of the text offer up different answers to these questions.

16 In the novel, Lisbeth is established as an independent, resourceful and strong woman. Aside from her physical strength, which she proves beyond doubt in her many encounters with violent men, she also displays an impressive emotional strength. Though she is undoubtedly affected by her difficult past, she is determined to keep going and capable of taking care of herself. She lives on her own, works a relatively high-paying job she enjoys, has an occasional lover named Miriam Wu and some friends in the hacker community, as well as a circle of punk friends in Stockholm. She is also portrayed as unusually gifted: “She is a world-class computer hacker, extraordinarily good at chess and mathematics, and has a photographic memory” (Lorber). She develops an elaborate scheme to wrest control over her life from Bjurman, and conceives of a ploy towards the end of the novel to steal some of the money embezzled by a tycoon. The plan involves several fake bank accounts, an intricate knowledge of the banking system as well as their computer and security programs, and the creation of an alter-ego.

17 Aside from the resourceful and smart female protagonist, Larsson included at least two other powerful female characters: Blomkvist’s lover and business partner, the resolute Erika Berger, as well as Blomkvists’s sister, who is a self-proclaimed feminist and, as a lawyer, specializes in helping women.

18 In addition to this inclusion of strong, feminist characters, Larsson made an effort to realistically portray the pervasiveness of violence against women, and the failure of the state to protect against it. The different sections of the novels begin with statistics on violence against women ("46% of the women in Sweden have been subjected to violence by a man", loc 1786). This is juxtaposed with Lisbeth's lengthy explanation as to why she does not report Bjurman to the police, providing a chillingly disillusioned picture of the support a rape victim can hope for:

> Bjurman had touched her breasts. Any officer would take one look at her and conclude that with her miniature boobs, that was highly unlikely. And if it had happened, she should be proud that someone had even bothered. And the part about sucking his dick – it was, as [Bjurman] had warned her, her word against his, and generally in her experience the words of other people weighed more heavily than hers. (loc 3192-3198)

19 Larsson also succeeds in contextualizing sexual abuse and situating it within the hierarchical power structures that make sexual abuse possible. As stated, one of rape cultures main tenets is the fostering and rewarding of male aggression. This often happens within organizations or institutions that are hierarchically structured, such as corporations, governments, political parties and even families. All of these groups are featured in the text, and their often positive or benevolent intentions and effects are contrasted sharply with their negative and harmful effects, which are caused by ignorance as often as by intentional malice.

20 The main aggressor of the first novel is Martin Vanger. He is introduced to the reader as the CEO of the vast Vanger-corporation and one of the numerous members of the Vanger family. Through his research, the journalist Blomkvist discovers that Martin is also a serial killer who has been murdering women for years, undiscovered by anyone. His killings were both initiated and supported by his position within the family and the corporation: it was his father Gottfried, himself a serial killer, who taught Martin to hate and kill. After his father's death, Martin perfected his killing method, using his considerable wealth to build his secret torture chamber and 'buy' trafficked women from other countries whom no one would miss. Gottfried Vanger was also involved in Swedish Neo-Nazi groups. In this, he followed in the footsteps of his uncle Harald Vanger, who was a member of the Nazi party and published a book advocating for euthanasia. The church finds mention in the book, as well: Gottfried Vanger chose as his victims women whom he deemed to have committed sins. He killed them as a punishment and arranged their bodies to symbolize the corresponding passages in the Bible. Larsson thus draws parallels between bigotry, misogyny and hierarchical power structures, and exposes the culture of violence that is at the root of it all.

21 Despite this successful realization of Larsson's stated intent to raise awareness about systemic misogyny on many levels of the text, there are several aspects that render the novel potentially less empowering or feminist than it appears at first glance. Though Lisbeth is described throughout as a strong woman, there are problematic aspects to her characterization as well as to the author's choice of the types of violence she is subjected to. Though Larsson wants to raise awareness, he tends to resort to clichés in his portrayal of both rape and its effect on the victims. As stated before, most rapists are not sadistic serial killers like Martin Vanger and his father and most rape survivors have not been systematically abused by a variety of different men over most of their lifetime. [1] The events described in the novel are extreme, and though probably chosen for their shock value, the author misses out on the opportunity to educate his readership about the realities of rape for most victims. Readers can close the book(s) with their belief in the myth of violent stranger-rape safely intact.

22 In his depiction of Lisbeth's character, Larsson also resorts to many stereotypes about the behavior of rape victims. Again and again he reminds us that, despite her strength, she is also a broken woman whose "attitude encouraged neither trust nor friendship" (loc 524), as she has "serious emotional problems" (loc 558). Her very appearance and behavior spell out troubled in a clichéd way: she dresses in a dark Goth get-up, has many piercings and tattoos, and associates primarily with the former members of a punk band. Additionally, she seems to seek refuge in alcohol ("twice she was so intoxicated that she ended up in the emergency room", loc 2218) and drugs.

23 Most problematic, however, is Larsson's description of her sexuality. The two most pervasive stereotypes about female rape victims are that they either become scared of male sexuality and turn to women, or become sexually promiscuous and indiscriminately seek out partners for casual sex with no emotional connection. Larsson includes both of these stereotypes in his description of Salander. Though she is said to have "never thought of herself as a lesbian" (loc 4589), Salander's ongoing relationship in this novel, as well as in the sequels, is with the lesbian Miriam Wu. While it is perhaps commendable that Larsson includes a same-sex relationship in the novel without making a big to do about it, the depiction of Lisbeth's history and characterization make it problematic nonetheless.

24 While she is seeing Miriam, the two are not exclusive, and Lisbeth also seeks out sex with the journalist Mikael. They are working together on the investigation and have not developed any personal rapport beyond their professional relationship, when she initiates sex with him.

> Blomkvist was reading a novel by Sara Paretsky when he heard the door handle turn and he looked up to see Salander. She had a sheet wrapped round her body […] She went over to his bed, took the book and put it on the bedside table. Then she bent down and kissed him on the mouth. She quickly got into his bed and sat looking at him, searching him. (loc 5619)

Blomkvist is initially reluctant, but she assures him that their professional relationship will not be damaged, and so he goes along. Afterward, Lisbeth remains emotionally detached and though they continue to have sex from time to time, they never develop a close personal relationship. And again, while it could be construed as positive that Larsson writes a female character with a high level of sexual agency, he also clearly links her inability to trust and forge personal bonds with her difficult past, thus turning her promiscuity into a pathology.

25 Another strike against the otherwise feminist sensibilities of the novel is the very structure of the rape-revenge narrative. As Clover points out in her analysis of *I Spit on Your Grave*, the initial critique of this genre is its graphic display of, and inherent reliance on, brutal violence, especially of a sexual nature (115). While Clover makes a potent argument for a feminist reading of this narrative, and while this feminist reading is also not only possible but intentional with regard to *Dragon Tattoo*, the fact remains that these narratives give ample screen-time to rapes that are gut-wrenchingly uncomfortable to watch. The *Dragon Tattoo* movies [2], of course, are more graphically explicit than the book, but even so, a large part of both texts is devoted to inflictions of violence. Accordingly, many critics, like Melanie Newman writing for the UK-based blog F-Word, have castigated the misogyny of the novel's "explicit descriptions of sexual violence". Comparing Larsson's novel with thrillers by other authors which also feature rape, Newman concludes: "Kick-arse babes don't change the facts and neither do stats on violence against women. Face it, Stieg Larsson, James Patterson, Dean Koontz: only misogynists make money from rape".

26 Furthermore, the narrative trope presented in this text (as well as all rape-revenge texts) of the victimized woman who turns to violence is itself in line with some rape myths. The texts perpetuate the idea that women are deeply affected and irreversibly damaged by being raped, to the extent that the experience enables previously non-violent women to take a gun, torture and kill the rapist. This reinforces the idea of a 'right' kind of post-rape behavior (if you are not completely hysterical, you cannot have been raped), while at the same time fostering the impression that rape is a fairly rare occurrence. If rape victims can be picked out of a crowd based on their behavior (depending on the narrative, either traumatized and withdrawn or aggressive and promiscuous), and if most women don't obviously exhibit that kind of behavior, then rape cannot be that common.

27 As a narrative structure, the rape-revenge plot certainly has some feminist potential. Texts following this structure have a strong female lead that viewers are geared to identify with. Moreover, the story is told from the point of view of a rape survivor, and presented as the authoritative version. This is in sharp contrast to the passive role rape victims are routinely forced into in the media, where news reporters and other commentators sit in judgment over whether or not her account is credible, and whether she behaved appropriately before and/or after the alleged rape. These features make the rape-revenge plot a potentially powerful tool for constructions of feminist narratives.

28 However, Larsson's *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* falls short of its feminist intent despite employing this tool. In addition to the problems inherent in the genre, with its reliance on a graphic display of sexual violence, Larsson makes use of a number of damaging rape myths in the construction of his protagonist and her story. In her strength and defiance, Lisbeth may well serve as a role-model, but the world of Larsson's novels reproduces at least as many misconceptions about rape culture and its patriarchal foundations as it dispels.

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