

## **Bad Girls: Agency, Revenge, and Redemption in Contemporary Drama**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cultural movements including #TimesUp and #MeToo have contributed momentum to the demand for and development of smart, justified female criminal characters in contemporary television drama. These women are representations of shifting power dynamics, and they possess agency as they channel their desires and fury into success, redemption, and revenge. Building on works including Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*, dramas produced since 2016—including *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ozark*, and *Killing Eve*—have featured the rise of women who use rule-breaking, rebellion, and crime to enact positive change.

**Keywords:** #TimesUp, #MeToo, crime, television, drama, power, Margaret Atwood, revenge, *Gone Girl*, *Orange is the New Black*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ozark*, *Killing Eve*

From the recent popularity of the anti-heroine in novels and films like *Gone Girl* to the treatment of complicit women and crime-as-rebellion in Hulu's adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* to the cultural watershed moments of the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements, there has been a groundswell of support for women seeking justice both within and outside the law. Behavior that once may have been dismissed as madness or instability—Beyoncé laughing wildly while swinging a baseball bat in her revenge-fantasy music video “Hold Up” in the wake of Jay-Z's indiscretions comes to mind—can be examined with new understanding. Women are angry, and that anger is being mirrored and justified in popular culture. As British writer Sophie Heawood noted in 2014, “The older I get, the more I see how women are described as having gone mad, when what they've actually become is knowledgeable and powerful and fucking furious (Heawood).” Hold up, indeed. Contemporary narratives have not only made room for furious women in their stories, they've begun to celebrate them as empowered and justified agents for change. There has been an evolution in the trope of the bad girl; while she was once merely a jealous, petty, and vindictive trouble-maker—Nellie Olsen at any age—today's bad girl is a woman with purpose who tends to be decidedly darker than her beloved male criminal counterpart: she's smart, she's ruthless, and she's had it with laws and oppressive social conventions. Most importantly, she refuses to be quiet about it.

The concept of the bad girl has evolved in the wake of recent cultural and political events: her genesis, her indiscretions, how she is punished—because women who break the rules are *always* punished, one way or another—and her fight for agency and redemption. An exploration of criminal (or, in some cases, arbitrarily criminalized) behavior perpetrated by women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ozark*, and *Killing Eve* offers compelling insight into shifting cultural desires and expectations. In a recent cultural landscape wherein Walter White was revered while his long-suffering wife was so vilified that the actress portraying her received death threats (Gunn), it is now worthwhile to examine the cultural influence of recent political movements and their continued impact on the characterization of criminal women in contemporary drama.

## **GONE GIRL**

While there are many notable productions worthy of discussion, it is the success of Gillian Flynn's bestselling 2012 novel *Gone Girl*, which was rapidly adapted into a 2014 film starring Rosamund Pike and Ben Affleck, that marked a cultural flashpoint for the treatment of women's anger and criminal behavior in contemporary drama. The thriller centers around characters Nick and Amy Dunne—both abysmal—in the wake of Amy's disappearance, which plays out in the bright glare of the 24-hour news cycle as Nick is tried in the court of public opinion. However, what at first appears to be a case of an unfaithful husband killing his inconvenient wife takes a sudden turn when it is revealed to Nick—and the reader—that Amy staged her own kidnapping as revenge for Nick's indiscretions and other failures. While the plot is unpredictable, Amy's anger is cold and constant; Amy is no heroine, but her justified fury strikes a chord with the audience.

*Gone Girl* gained traction because it tapped into the outrage that would soon be expressed by the #TimesUp and #metoo movements. While the novel *Gone Girl* and its subsequent film adaptation received acclaim, there was one specific passage in the book that well-captures the ideas and undercurrent of anger that have defined the era of #metoo and #TimesUp. In a passage that went viral and spawned dozens of think pieces, Flynn captured the essence of a problematic, real-life female archetype that is diametrically opposed to women's agency, shoring up the very patriarchy that oppresses her. Flynn calls her the Cool Girl:

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the

world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl. (Flynn 210)

While Flynn directs no shortage of vitriol at men throughout her novel, she places blame for the illusion of the Cool Girl on women: "Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl...And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be" (Flynn 210). Flynn identifies these women, the wannabe Cool Girls, as being complicit in the perpetuation of what is ultimately a dangerously disempowering persona and she takes them to task for their disillusionment.

As she is presented by Flynn, the Cool Girl is an unfortunate trend, a cultural curiosity whose harm is largely localized to herself. She is annoying to those who know that her performative coolness is just that, a show. She does not seem to be dangerous until her actions are examined on a larger scale and the misogyny inherent to her existence becomes apparent: " [She] likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain. (How do you know you're not a Cool Girl? Because he says things like: 'I like strong women.' If he says that to you, he will at some point fuck someone else. Because 'I like strong women' is code for 'I hate strong women')" (Flynn 210). When examined beyond the individual and as a collective, the approval the Cool Girl seeks transforms into a desire with troubling implications, particularly when she becomes a voting bloc. When the Cool Girl evolves into the complicit woman, she actively reinforces power structures that harm and disenfranchise women, beginning in the voting booth.

The concept of complicity has taken on fresh urgency in the era of the Trump administration, which is itself closely associated with women described as being complicit. When discussing complicity, the 53% of white women who voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 election (CNN) is a frequently-cited figure—though it is lower than the percentage of white women who supported Republican candidates in previous elections (Simmons). Women employed in Trump's administration are also often described as being complicit in the administration's efforts to shore up a distinctly white patriarchy at the expense of women, minoritized communities, and the socioeconomically marginalized and disenfranchised. The association between women either affiliated with or who support the Trump administration has especially been emphasized in popular culture, with television shows like *Saturday Night Live* frequently lampooning public figures including Kellyanne Conway, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, and, perhaps most memorably, Ivanka Trump. Trump was parodied by actress Scarlett Johansson in a perfume ad sketch for a fictional fragrance called *Complicit*, "for the woman who could stop all of this...but won't" (Johansson). The sketch went viral, amassing nearly ten million views on YouTube alone.

## **THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

Complicity, and the role that women play in protecting the social, cultural, and political institutions that put them at a disadvantage, has become a much more frequent topic of discussion since 2016. While it has been particularly reflected in television in both comedy and drama, it is in dramatic television where the vestiges of the Cool Girl are visible in the more dangerous and vulnerable complicit woman. In shows like Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*—an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel that imagines the total disempowerment of women with startling swiftness and alacrity after a revolution carried out by religious zealots—it is made clear how essential complicit women are to the continuity of Gilead's oppressive regime. The social structure of women in Gilead is caste-like, and while some women are treated much, much more violently than others, all are oppressed and wholly disempowered.

The idea that no woman is safe is emphasized in the second season finale when Serena-Joy Waterford, the wife of Commander Frederick Waterford and herself an architect of Gilead, is severely punished with the amputation of a finger after arguing that women should be taught to read and then reading aloud a passage from the Bible that supports her beliefs (The Word). It is a particularly dark moment in the series that serves to put cracks in Serena Joy's faith in Gilead's harsh theocratic patriarchy, if not to break the spell entirely. Serena Joy's punishment is a shocking, violent scene that eventually leads to her gaining some clarity about how even the most privileged women in Gilead—and she is at the top of this social strata—are completely powerless under the system they are essential to upholding. Serena Joy's fear of her husband and the monster of Gilead she helped build and support resonate most deeply with the audience in her moving final scene of the episode when she surrenders her daughter (who is June's biological daughter) to June. With the aid of others who are rebelling against Gilead, June seizes her opportunity to escape with the child, and Serena Joy is the only one who can stop her. In an uncharacteristic moment of clarity, Serena Joy instead helps June and the child escape because she realizes that her daughter will never be safe in Gilead (The Word).

While Serena Joy's prospects are grim after her punishment, they are still far better than nearly every other woman in Gilead's society, where women at every level suffer, though in different ways. The most privileged women are married to powerful men who hold quasi-military positions in Gilead's government and who are stylized with titles like "Commander." These wives are easily identified by their teal, 1950s style, tea-length dresses, and high-heeled pumps, evoking a bygone. The color of their wardrobe is rich but placid, and their pearl necklaces are luminous but understated. The wives are women designed to blend into the background of their plush, gilded surroundings.

Beyond the wives of men like Commander Waterford, the rest of the women in society exist only to serve Gilead. The less fortunate women of Gilead are also color-coded for rapid identification. From the complicit aunts who enforce the training of handmaids, to the workers and slaves who shovel radioactive waste at sites out west, secondary women are clothed in drab, shapeless attire like refuse to be discarded. The handmaids, famously, don startling scarlet cloaks; the color serves to represent these women as the child-bearing lifeblood of Gilead as well as branding them as fallen, criminalized women—adulterers, lesbians, protestors—who are atoning for their past sins by serving the nation. Their wardrobe serves as a re-imagined scarlet letter, one that cannot be concealed. In a notable subversion of the law, the cloak also comes to symbolize the impending revolution: "They should never have given us uniforms if they didn't want us to be an army" (The Handmaid's Tale). There is a marked narrative shift in the story when the symbol of the handmaids' oppression is co-opted to represent their resistance. Significantly, this symbol has also been adopted as a visual form of protest in the United States.

Perhaps more than any other show on television, *The Handmaid's Tale* is viewed as an artistic reaction to the political and cultural events that have taken place in the United States since 2016. Writer Celia Wren described the show as a galvanizing touchstone, saying "the series has struck a chord with Americans chafing at the policies and personality of President Trump, whom many consider an exemplar of misogynistic male privilege. Real-life protestors have recently donned red-and-white garb to demonstrate against what they see as infringements on women's rights around the country (Wren 30 Commonweal)." As a show deeply rooted in themes of sin, transgression, and rebellion, images from *The Handmaid's Tale* have become powerful and widely recognized symbols of protest.

Margaret Atwood herself has been vocal about similarities she sees between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the current political climate. In a June 2017 *Boston Review* interview with Junot Diaz—who would be accused of verbal and sexual abuse during the #TimesUp movement less than a year later (Alter)—Atwood discussed correlations she saw between the novel and reality: "It's not only Trump. The general climate in some parts of the United States is certainly heading in a *Handmaid's Tale* direction. And that is why the recent sit-ins in the state legislatures were so immediately understandable, with groups of women in Handmaid costumes turning

up...while an all-male batch of lawmakers were passing laws on women's health issues" (Atwood 149). These protests serve as a startling visual representation of women's anger and their willingness to object to unjust laws and lawmakers. That these protestors don the attire of handmaids and risk arrest and criminal charges to express their outrage speaks volumes about the cultural impact of the show.

Atwood and Diaz go on to discuss how every human rights atrocity committed in *The Handmaid's Tale* was rooted in history and had happened in the past, and, in some cases like stoning, is still legal in multiple countries. This idea is discussed by Atwood at greater length with Olivia Aylmer in an April 2018 *Vanity Fair* interview, wherein Atwood describes the second season of *The Handmaid's Tale* as 'a call to action' (Aylmer). Aylmer compares the show to moments in history characterized by deep oppression, saying: "The story was always designed to depict forms of injustice that have really happened, and as a form of witness literature--a genre with deep, resonant historical roots" (Aylmer). The Nazis and Stalin are both referenced for context, with Atwood citing poet Anna Akhmatova as a particular inspiration (Aylmer). Over the course of both interviews, however, Atwood finds the narrative of oppression inextricably linked to political regimes.

Like Wren and Atwood, Katrina Spencer also attributed the hype surrounding the show, at least in part, to emotional fallout sparked by the 2016 election results. According to Spencer, the timing of the first season of the show--amidst a confluence of galvanizing political events--also contributed to the intense interest it sparked in critics and viewers alike:

Remember: when the first episodes were released, Donald Trump had just taken office as president, having made some tasteless and misogynistic comments...the #MeToo movement had yet to garner its national following; the wildly popular Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*, with its largely female cast, had become a household name; and, of course, one of the most qualified women in history, former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, had lost the election that would have allowed her to steer the most powerful country on the planet. The world, in a word, was abuzz with interest in women being centered in narratives and treated as human beings deserving of respect, recognition, and rights. (Spencer 1)

It is interesting that Spencer mentions *Orange is the New Black* as a precursor to the success and recognition of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a vital piece of cultural commentary, because, in many ways, it was the success of *Orange is the New Black* that made it viable for streaming services to greenlight the production of gritty dramas that focused on women. The show is remarkable for the ways in which it has developed stories of incarcerated women who have been marginalized by society, and for the agency the characters are given. The show is particularly meaningful for the way it thoughtfully evaluates criminality, a theme that is explored at length in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Criminalization is a strong undercurrent throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* thus far. In flashback scenes, viewers see the erosion of women's rights--a change that is gradual at first, and then soberingly rapid--until the point that being merely a woman is practically a criminal act. In the third episode of the first season of the show, Offred reflects on the erosion of women's rights, lamenting that she didn't realize what was happening until it was too late: "Now I'm awake to the world. I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen. When they slaughtered Congress, we didn't wake up. When they blamed terrorists and suspended the Constitution, we didn't wake up then either. They said it would be temporary. Nothing changes instantaneously. In a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (*The Handmaid's Tale*). Flashback scenes show specific moments of major change in the nation that would become Gilead.

As Spencer observes, "the women of reproductive age are no longer seen as people but merely beings that harbor viable wombs...these women are broadly stripped of their autonomy and agency so they can serve

as fertile, governmentally monitored units (Spencer 1).” Within Gilead, women are stripped of all their rights, from owning property and having jobs and bank accounts to reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy. Any form of resistance is recognized by the state as being a criminal act and the women and men who defy Gilead’s laws are punished severely in ways that include: isolation, enucleation, genital mutilation, dismemberment, and public execution by hanging, drowning, and firing squad. The corpses of the executed are left to rot in the open air, where they serve as a stark reminder of the consequences of disobedience. Offred and the other handmaids engage in criminal behavior with both small rebellions and major transgressions throughout the series; the women--and the audience--find freedom in these criminal acts. Though the punishments are severe, these acts of defiance against Gilead are also life-sustaining.

Atwood’s description of Season Two of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a ‘call to action’ (Aylmer) is well-aligned with the character arc of protagonist June, played with simmering fury by Elisabeth Moss. While the first season of the show explored the many brutal ways Offred--the patriarchal name assigned to June as the property of Commander Fred Waterford—was victimized by Gilead, Season Two focuses on how June--and many other women and some men—rebel against the oppressive regime. The movement in June’s character arc is quite clear as she reclaims more and more of her identity through acts of rebellion. For example, the pilot episode of the series is titled “Offred,” which theorist Judith Butler may describe as demonstrable subordination (Butler 53), an idea that is explored in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*. Within the confines of Gilead, June is so stripped of her agency that she can only be identified in relation to the man who owns her. However, the first episode of the second season is titled “June,” hinting at the idea that June is wresting back her autonomy.

This change is fully realized by the final episode of the season, entitled “The Word.” The episode opens with June folding the clothes of recently-executed Eden--a 15-year-old girl forced into marriage and then convicted of adultery—and reciting a litany of titles held by women: “Wife. Handmaid. Martha. Mother. Daughter. Girlfriend. Queen. Bitch. Criminal. Sinner. Heretic. Prisoner” (*The Handmaid’s Tale*). The latter part of the list describes women who have transgressed against Gilead, and it sets the tone for the rest of the episode. Transgression could very well be the theme of the episode; at one point, June laughs in the Commander’s face—an action that is perhaps the most transgressive of them all. This scene displays what Atwood describes as the quintessential difference between men and women: “Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them” (Atwood). This idea and the concept of women’s laughter as a means of subversion is explored in great depth by Kathleen Rowe, who describes laughter as “...a powerful means for self-definition and a weapon for feminist appropriation” (Rowe 3). Viewed through this lens, there is nothing June could have done to undermine Commander Waterford more, and they both know it.

The final image of Season Two is chilling. Having just handed her daughter to Emily, another handmaid who is being smuggled into Canada in the back of a truck that is supposed to be taking June as well, June stands alone in the red-tinged darkness of an empty Boston tunnel. Rather than escaping with her infant daughter, June chooses to stay and make a stand in order to rescue her older daughter, Hannah. June pulls up her deep red hood and the light transforms her face from that of a non-threatening young woman to a sinister figure who appears determined to unleash hell upon Gilead. As the camera draws in closer, the song “Burning Down the House” by The Talking Heads begins to play, and the lyrics offer a preview of what is in store for Gilead’s oppressive regime in Season Three of *The Handmaid’s Tale*: “Watch out you might get what you’re after/Boom babies strange but not a stranger/I’m an ordinary guy/Burning down the house/Hold tight wait till the party’s over/Hold tight we’re in for nasty weather/There has got to be a way/Burning down the house/Here’s your ticket pack your bag/Time for jumpin’ overboard... Fightin’ fire with fire” (Talking Heads). Having successfully smuggled Commander Waterford’s only child out of Gilead and made his wife Serena Joy an accomplice in the process, June has won major battles in her fight against the regime, and as the credits roll

on the Season Two finale, the final moments suggest that she will soon be waging a war.

## OZARK

The crime drama *Ozark* offers a different—though no less compelling—take on women’s anger and engagement in crime. Though the show is written in the vein of *Breaking Bad*, it features significant departures from that show’s formula, particularly with respect to the role of women in the story. The breakout character in *Ozark* is Wendy Byrde, a woman who goes from being overwhelmed by her circumstances as a result of her husband’s mistakes to confidently taking charge of a criminal enterprise. Though Wendy, played with depth and grit by Laura Linney, spends much of the first season of this Netflix drama reeling in the aftermath of her inept accountant husband Marty’s entanglement with a cartel, she is no Skylar White. She demands—and receives—the whole story from Marty, and from that point on she is nothing less than his equal and his partner in the operation.

There is a noticeable shift in the marriage’s power dynamic in Season Two, which began streaming in 2018. Marty breaks down from the pressure exacted by the cartel that has tasked him with establishing a \$500 million money laundering enterprise in a Missouri backwater resort town and begins planning the family’s escape to the Gold Coast of Australia, where they will adopt new identities and spend the rest of their lives in hiding. When she finds out, Wendy recognizes the folly of this plan and decides instead to save her family using a markedly different approach.

Recalling the imbalance of power in the Waterford’s marriage in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Byrd’s partnership in *Ozark* is perhaps the kind of dynamic Serena Joy envisioned as she helped create the world that would eventually serve as her prison. The difference is that while Serena Joy ceded control, Wendy Byrd unapologetically seized it. Though *Ozark* is very different from the others discussed here, it is equally interested in the internal and external forces engaged for women to claim agency, both for themselves and for their enterprises. Wendy’s refusal of a role characterized by demonstrable subordination (Butler 53) is precisely what empowers her.

The cartel problems besetting the Byrde family, which includes their teenage daughter, Charlotte and younger son, Jonah, exacerbate an existing fissure that began in Chicago many years earlier. Several causes led to the family’s current crisis: the loss of a pregnancy due to a car accident, Marty’s secret involvement with money laundering, Wendy’s affair with an older man, and her dissatisfaction with giving up her successful career as a political campaign manager to be a stay-at-home mother, an ill-fitting role that she suffers from amiable stoicism. While the family’s banishment to the Ozarks can certainly be interpreted as punishment for their misdeeds, it is also their last chance at redemption. Their lives are complicated, and their problems run very deep; it is interesting, then, when Wendy decides that the only way to save her family is to further entrench them in the community and with the cartel. Whereas the only solution Marty sees is to flee in the dead of night, Wendy decides to dig in and ingrain the family in the community so deeply that they become, she hopes, untouchable. In doing so, she earns the admiration of the cartel, whose representative comes to realize that Wendy—not her husband—is the Byrde family’s most formidable asset.

During the final episode of Season Two, which sees the realization of the Byrde’s ambitious plan to establish a riverboat casino to launder the cartel’s money, Helen, the cartel’s representative from Chicago, emphasizes the impressiveness of Marty and Wendy’s accomplishment. In the cartel’s eyes, according to Helen, the casino represents not only redemption for the Byrdes, but also a new chapter filled with untold opportunities for the cartel in the United States: “You can see the rest of your life from up here. . . I’m not sure you appreciate the historical significance of what it is you’re about to pull off. Medellín, Sinaloa, Juárez—every one of them tried to create something like this. Every one of them failed. A legitimate, self-sustaining operation

like a casino. This is why crime organizes” (Ozark). As the conversation continues, it is clear not only to the viewer but also to Helen that Marty is anxious and cagey, while Wendy is cool, unruffled, and friendly. Helen keeps talking about what the future could look like for the Byrdes: “Have you given any thought to the next five years?... Because you’re pillars of the community now. You’ve established a foothold in the gaming industry. You could expand, completely legitimately. Honoring your obligations to my client, obviously” (Ozark). This passage is fraught with meaning; the Byrdes have done the impossible and in doing so they have earned the cartel’s respect, but the only path forward for the Byrdes now is through their partnership with the cartel.

While Wendy and Marty were unified for much of Season Two, the end of this scene shows them once again diverging. Wendy sees Helen’s vision—and the cartel’s—and she shares it with them. She knows there is no way out, and she is looking forward to the future. Marty is still trying to plan an escape for his family so they can find their way back to their old lives, which no longer exist. The final conversation between Marty and Wendy in this scene, after Helen departs, is telling. When Wendy says, “Helen’s right, you know. This could be a great new chapter in our lives. We just have to work harder at being better parents,” Marty’s response hints at his desire for the family to flee without revealing his plans: “What if that’s not possible here?” Wendy’s response is simple when she tells Marty “It has to be,” (Ozark) though at this point neither one of them knows the other’s plan for securing their family’s future, or the sacrifices they are willing to make to get there.

There is a marked change in tone later in the episode when Wendy is talking to Helen alone. This conversation is much more candid than the earlier one with Marty, and there is a significance to Helen’s openness with Wendy as she reveals her early skepticism of the Byrdes’ casino scheme: “I was serious, you know, when I said how impressed my client is. I have to say, when the idea of a casino was first floated, neither of us thought you had a chance in hell. My client even had us monitor your every move. Your purchases, your browser history” (Ozark). In the next moment, Helen reveals that she and her client were sure the casino would fail to launch and the Byrdes would go on the run—basically guessing Marty’s Gold Coast escape plan, which was always doomed because it was obvious and predictable, just like Marty.

The bold plan, the one that poses the greatest risks but also the most freedom and security for the Byrde family, is to stay put in the Missouri Ozarks and embrace the life they have built there. Marty does not see that, but Wendy does, and that shifts his power to her in the eyes of Helen, and therefore the cartel. Acknowledging this, Helen says, “I’ve been particularly impressed with you...It’s not easy navigating this world as a woman” (Ozark). Helen, cool and unflinching, is a powerful woman representing the interests of a violent and deadly criminal enterprise, and in this scene, it is telling that it is Wendy Byrde, not Marty, who has earned her respect and admiration. When she again asks Wendy what she wants out of her “new situation” (Ozark) Wendy thinks for a moment and says she wants Helen’s gratitude—not money, not authority, not a tangible prize, but something far more useful. Helen looks surprised and pleased and even more convinced that Wendy Byrde is the smart bet for the cartel’s future in the Ozarks: “Well, you have that. And that is a powerful thing” (Ozark). This conversation solidifies Wendy’s determination to thrive in the Ozarks and in her new life, which will take her and her family one step further away from the escape Marty is secretly planning.

Wendy’s conversation and newfound rapport with Helen also lead to a decision Wendy will make near the end of the episode that will cement her ties to the cartel and prove her loyalty to the cause. Wendy takes her place as a powerful figure and completes her evolution into a criminal when she identifies a man as a threat to the casino’s launch, knowing that her actions will lead to the man’s murder. While there have been many murders on the show over the course of two seasons, most are crimes of passion. This one is not, and it represents a significant moment for Wendy, who is calm, clear, and dispassionate during this exchange with Helen. Thinking Wendy does not realize the enormity of what she is about to do, Helen offers her uncharacteristic words of caution: “Before you say anything else, you might think this is a simple conversation...but I promise you, it is more difficult than you comprehend. Once you tell me something, it



can't be retracted" (Ozark). Helen goes on to explain how using the cartel to kill someone will profoundly change Wendy, forever: "[You do not understand]. You can't. Not really. Your whole body changes. The way you smell, your reflection, how it feels when your husband touches you" (Ozark). Though Helen is explicit in her warning about what will happen if Wendy chooses violence instead of finding another way, Wendy is steadfast: "That doesn't change the fact that we still have a problem" (Ozark). The man is murdered within hours.

In the final scene of the Season Two finale, the role-reversal that has gradually taken place between Marty and Wendy Byrde is completed when Wendy refuses to leave the Ozarks and makes a compelling case for staying. The power dynamic between the husband and wife shifts fully in Wendy's favor as she makes an argument that is shrewd and logical in the face of Marty's quiet, desperate panic, which she points out to him: "We're not leaving the Ozarks. It's not safe to go...You're not acting out of logic. You're acting out of emotion. And I know I've asked you to be more emotional. I've begged. So, I love you for it, but I am not getting on that plane and neither are the kids" (Ozark). Of course, there is great significance in Wendy twice describing Marty as being emotional and illogical, characteristics that are so often pejoratively ascribed to women in what Butler refers to as the "existential dialectic of misogyny...in which reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine" (Butler 50). It matters, then, that Wendy uses these specific words to disempower Marty; he is motivated by his fear of what the cartel may do *to* the Byrde family, while Wendy is looking into the future and seeing what the cartel can do *for* them.

During this tense conversation, which takes place in front of the casino boat during a crowded celebration of the boat's grand opening, Wendy--cool and calculating with a perpetual Midwestern smile--lays out what the future will look like for the Byrde family. They will continue their partnership with the cartel and transform the Ozarks into their very own Gold Coast. If it means using the cartel's violence for their family's security and prosperity, so be it. Wendy, who in the pilot episode of the series watched in horror as her lover was thrown to his death, now sees the use of force as a means to an end: "We're not alone here. We have partners who are very grateful for what we've done. Always better to be the person holding the gun than the one running from the gunman" (Ozark). With this statement, Wendy makes it clear that she is not the person she used to be, and that she is willingly putting down roots in this criminal world and accepting all that it has to offer.

Wendy's moving final monologue—the last words spoken as Season Two closes—is to Marty and their children. She explains to the children who she was and how she has changed since the family moved to the Ozarks: "...there was a time I wanted to leave, too. And, yes, I had an affair. And I did it because I wanted to be someone else. I wanted to live a different life. And I was so wrong. Because this is who I am and this is who I want to be. Just think about it" (Ozark). In this closing scene, Wendy is the family source of power. She is empathetic and self-assured, loving but steely, genuine and confident. As this chapter of the Byrde family's story ends, there is every indication that the next will open with Wendy at the helm of the family's criminal enterprise.

### **KILLING EVE**

The trend of sharply written criminal women in contemporary television drama shows no signs of slowing down; in fact, these characters are bolder and more present than they have ever been. These characters, who challenge gender conventions in often surprising and compelling ways, offer larger and more meaningful roles for women, and they tend to showcase female characters who claim great power and agency for themselves. It is no coincidence that women's stories are being told with greater prevalence and urgency today than ever before.

Women's anger and commitment to forcing change have manifested in society as well as in art. New ground was recently broken with BBC America's airing of the drama series *Killing Eve*. Adapted from Luke Jennings's *Codename Villanelle* novellas, the sly, violent show about an assassin pursued by—and pursuing—a determined MI-5 agent is the perfect expression of the evolution of criminal women characters and a complex, engaging representation of what it means to be a woman in 2018. Throughout the first season, the assassin Villanelle—born Oksana Astankova and portrayed by Jodie Comer—is shown matching wits with Agent Eve Polastri, an American-raised Brit played by Sandra Oh. *Killing Eve* is a new breed of criminal drama wherein women are the core dynamic of the story—they are the heroines, the villains, the facilitators, and the obstacles. This is a show that passes the Bechdel Test with flying colors; the story is rooted in the experiences of Eve and Villanelle, and the momentum of the story is powered by their fury and their desire.

It is also noteworthy that for a taut, suspenseful thriller with sleek, glossy imagery and high production value, *Killing Eve* is a show with a wicked sense of humor. Eve is smart and dry—acerbic in her observations and the way she sees the world—while Villanelle's sense of humor is big and surprising, rooted in spectacle. The show's use of humor is freeing in a way that directly addresses a question posed by theorist Luce Irigaray in an epigraph to Rowe's *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*: "Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from asecular oppression?" (Rowe 1). For a serious show, there are unexpected moments of physical comedy that would verge on slapstick were they not produced in the era of prestige television. The women in *Killing Eve* are refreshing characters because they defend their agency and do so with as much style and aplomb as male characters like Walter White and Tony Soprano—and the audience applauds them for it. Combined with excellent writing and character development, *Killing Eve* deserves the critical accolades that it received for its first season and the promising work that is to come.

In the context of the observations made by Irigaray, Rowe, and Atwood, it is significant that much of the humor in the show is at the expense of men. Throughout the first season, Eve and, particularly, Villanelle, subvert and mock expectations assigned to them because of their gender. One exchange with a target Villanelle is about to assassinate is particularly enlightening. The target, Frank Hallett, begs for his life, saying "We can do a deal. I have a lot of money," hoping to use that as leverage; Villanelle is unmoved, replying, "So do I." Desperate, Frank then makes an emotional appeal: "I have children;" Villanelle laughs and replies, "I don't want your children" (*Killing Eve*). Pleading, Frank asks, "Are you going to kill me?" and, still unmoved, Villanelle says, "Mmm. But first I'm going to use you for sex," and she pauses at the shocked look on his face and laughs again, saying, "It's just a joke" (*Killing Eve*). After rejecting Frank's appeals and what they communicate about his expectations of what he assumes she—and, by extension, every woman—wants, Villanelle finishes the job and shoots him, cleanly and dispassionately, a consummate professional. This passage is also telling because of Villanelle's rejection of the desires that are so often ascribed to women: financial security provided by a man, sex, and also family; that this scene is executed with humor underscores the significance of Villanelle's refusal. Not only does she kill him, she also mocks him—which is perhaps the more damning indiscretion. The dynamic between Eve and Villanelle is captivating because they are both fully-realized characters who, even though they are pitted against each other in a high-level chess game of assassination and espionage, respect each other, both as professionals and as women. One bond they share is they recognize each other as intellectual equals and worthy opponents. In one noteworthy monologue in the pilot episode, Eve defends her theory about the unknown assassin being a woman while acknowledging the criticism she's exposing herself to: "...she certainly has style and I don't know who or what is behind her, but I don't think she's slowing down and that just interested me, I guess. But it makes me a fantasist and completely on my own" (*Killing Eve*). Eve's superiors at MI-5 remain skeptical, and in her exasperation with the bureaucracy that is slowing her down, Eve snaps and says that perhaps a woman with Villanelle's skill deserves to remain at large: "And you know, frankly, I don't give a shit anymore. She is outsmarting the smartest of us, and for that, she deserves to

do or kill whoever she wants. I mean, if she's not killing me, then, frankly, it's not my job to care anymore" (Killing Eve). This forthright mutual respect Eve and Villanelle have for each other deepens as the first season progresses and each woman violates personal and professional standards, as well as the law, in an effort to best the other, though their admiration remains intact.

Though there are several common threads connecting the female characters driving these contemporary television dramas, the most pervasive and acutely felt is anger. Though these women--June, Wendy, Eve, and even Villanelle--generally present themselves as placid, non-threatening (until they're not), and even friendly in their daily lives, a closer look at any one of them reveals that the light within is often incandescent fury: at their circumstances, at injustice, and, more often than not, at men. More significantly, their anger is justified. Gone are the days when viewers see characters like Skyler White as being irritating obstacles to their husbands' success at a criminal enterprise, women to be suffered--or not (because wouldn't it be easier if she was just out of the way?) (Gunn). The criminal women in today's dramas claim agency within the narrative, and they are never overshadowed by the machinations of men. In series like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Ozark*, and *Killing Eve*, at least, there has been a major shift in how these stories are being told. Women are the beating heart of these narratives, which tap into--and sometimes even respond to--the momentum created by the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements. The dialogue generated between television drama and the audiences who consume these stories has resulted in art that urges not only a cultural response but also--if we believe Margaret Atwood--an urgent call to action.

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