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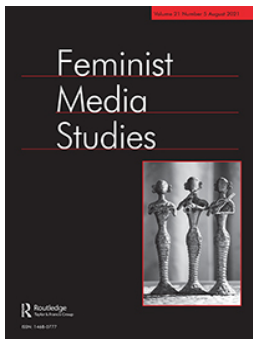
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## “Agents of Chaos: The Monstrous Feminine in *Killing Eve*”

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the central female characters of the television series *Killing Eve* gain power by accessing and enacting forms of violent “otherness”. By rejecting traditional conceptions of femininity, including passivity, maternal nurturing or caregiving, and empathy, Villanelle, Eve, and Carolyn weaponise the cultural narratives used to relegate women to the margins. Their subversions are frequently located in bodily terms, relating to appetite, fashion, sex, and behavioural quirks, but are also intellectual and metaphorical, explicitly addressing gendered anxieties about women, authority, and performance. Indeed, the series turns on the possibilities of transformation, realised via the physical styling of self, for example, as well as the play upon literary and poetic devices such as adaptation and the villanelle. In focussing on various notions of metamorphosis, we contend that *Killing Eve* offers an ambiguous vision of empowerment, arguing that while it resists the reduction of women to docile bodies forced into compliance, it also equates female power with abnormality, disorder, and abjection. In its mobilisation, subversion and parody of elements of the monstrous feminine, *Killing Eve* is only partly successful in empowering its female characters but, nonetheless, makes a significant contribution to a culture in which sophisticated feminist tropes are increasingly prevalent.

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### Women who kill: on female monstrosity

Violent women are a staple of popular crime fiction: from the classic works of Agatha Christie and Shirley Jackson to the contemporary detective thrillers of Steig Larsson, Gillian Flynn, and Oyinkan Braithwaite, the genre is replete with female killers who murder spouses, lovers, rivals, and children. As Tiina Mäntymäki (2013) notes, the depiction of these protagonists has conventionally aligned with a series of stereotypes relating to a vision of evil monstrosity, often in line with the “scheming and overtly sexualised” femme fatale (441), signifying the corruption of an idealised femininity. As representations of female violence increased from the 1970s onwards, including changing conceptions of femininity provoked by second- and third-wave feminism, more complex, and agential, imaginings began to appear. Emily Temple (2017) suggests that while the taboo nature of the female murderer remains rooted in an anxious reversal of behavioural archetypes, for

“female readers and consumers”, there is also a “very delicious sense of power seized—power, specifically, of the *body*, of which women in [Western] culture are so frequently deprived” (n.p). Importantly, women who kill enter a powerfully symbolic landscape, as their behaviours function to critique gendered violence, and expose, often ironically, the machinations of patriarchy. As Mäntymäki argues, male power is “maintained by a hegemonic masculinist ideology which promotes violence as a means to recreate itself” (443).

By appropriating from masculinity and engaging in acts of brutality as an “agentive avenger” (Mäntymäki 443), the female murderer brings into question the stability of the social order, and the phallogocentric mythologies through which it is organised and defined. In *Transgressive Imaginations*, Maggie O’Neill and Lizzie Seal (2012), observe how the criminal woman inhabits an anomalous cultural position: “Not only does she transgress society’s legal codes, she also transgresses its norms of gender as the active flouting of rule and convention that criminality entails is perceived as at odds with feminine passivity” (42). The violent woman is thereby marked as “doubly deviant”, traversing not only the male/female binary and its regulating discourses, but also legal and social controls; as Laura Sjoberg and Caron E Gentry (2015) contend, “violent women ... are often thought of as not only *bad* but as *bad women*” (3) and have thus committed “two crimes” (2008, 7). The result is a profoundly troubling figure whose subversions threaten to “destroy the established boundaries of gender”, and in doing so, profoundly disturb the constituting limits of patriarchy (O’Neill and Seal, 42–44). Such a deviant is inevitably coded as monstrous, an abject being whose atrocities must be contained (or expelled) in order to recuperate her aberrance, and neutralise the danger posed to traditional structures of power. Indeed, Edward J. Ingebreetsen (1998) suggests, monstrosity provides an opportunity for catharsis, as well as a reassertion of “social regulatory systems”: “the monster—located, decried, and staked—confirms the virtues of the normal for those who, from time to time, need persuading” (25).

In popular television series in the last decade, representations of the abject woman-who-kills, focalise female murderers and assassins who seem progressively invested in explicitly, and self-consciously, exposing the violations of patriarchy. Furthermore, while these behaviours are an appropriation of the masculine (and frequently ambiguous and problematic), the turn in which violent women are celebrated within popular culture—rather than maligned as monstrous—aligns with broader social movements that signal a powerful rejection of, and resistance to, the dominance of male power. As Tania Modleski (2019) argues, it is no surprise that narratives centred on female killers might find appeal “at this moment in history”, a period during which campaigns such as #TimesUp, #MeToo, and the Harvey Weinstein scandal galvanised a retributive energy insistent on justice and change. Indeed, these global movements not only signal the strength of a growing fourth-wave feminism built on digital culture and technology (n.p.), but as Emily Riebe (2020) notes, they are “rooted largely in the resistance of hegemonic ideologies about gender and sexuality in order to combat the patriarchal structures that disproportionately marginalize non-male identities” (1).

Certainly, in *Killing Eve* 2018–2020, based on Luke Jennings’ trilogy, *Codename Villanelle* (2014–16), violent women are framed in terms of an inherent monstrosity, but are also positioned, as this paper argues, as disruptive “others” with the potential to unravel regulatory systems of control. The narrative follows the psychopathic Villanelle, an

assassin working for an international crime syndicate known as The Twelve, whose ostensible, and appropriately abject, aim is the destabilisation of world order. A cat-and-mouse police procedural, Villanelle is pursued by MI6 agent Eve Polastri and spymaster Carolyn Martens, forming a unique triangulation in which male dominance is resisted, satirised, and challenged. Critically, the adaptation of *Killing Eve* into a highly successful screen series involves a distinctly feminist reimagining, re-coding the original—and profoundly sexist—novellas in more progressive, subversive, and provocative terms. As a result, the protagonists are associated with varying expressions of female power, and therefore also a heightened sense of difference and abjection. This paper explores how the central female characters of *Killing Eve* gain power by accessing and enacting (often extreme) forms of violent “otherness”, focusing in particular on the character Villanelle. By rejecting the norms imposed by traditional conceptions of femininity, including passivity, maternal nurturing or caregiving, and empathy, Villanelle, Eve, and Carolyn weaponise the cultural narratives used to relegate women to the margins. Their subversions are, significantly, frequently located in bodily terms, relating to appetite, fashion, sex, and behavioural quirks, but are also intellectual and metaphorical, explicitly addressing gendered anxieties about women, authority, and performance. Applying Mäntymäki’s argument, staged as “conscious exaggeration and ironic display” (444), these women mobilise the objects, costumes and paradigms normally used to oppress in order to subvert, drawing upon masquerade to demonstrate ways of being which confront the conventions of dominant culture.

Yet *Killing Eve* is not without its problems, at times failing to rewrite or successfully parody the patriarchal metanarratives which repeatedly frame powerful women in abject terms of corrupt or misaligned identities. In a discussion of Patty Jenkins’ film *Monster*, B.J. McCann (2014) observes that because “the prerogative of violence in civil society remains decidedly masculine, any broad-based politics of gendered resistance must develop a vocabulary for countering those that extract the violence of feminised and queered subjects from their origins in the structures of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism” (16). *Killing Eve*’s strategies focus on various notions of metamorphosis, particularly those of parody and of repetition with difference, to develop its own “vocabulary” of gendered resistance. However, we contend that *Killing Eve* ultimately offers an ambiguous language of empowerment. While it resists the reduction of women to docile bodies forced into compliance by re-figuring the gendered dynamics of the gaze to focus on the changing and often gender fluid visual economy, it also perpetuates myths of monstrosity and, to a significant extent, equates female power with abnormality, disorder, and abjection. Therefore, in some instances *Killing Eve* is complicit in patriarchal metanarratives during the very moments it attempts to parody and subvert them.

### **“You are the darkness”: the bad seed and ravenously abject *femme castratrice***

As a psychopathic assassin, Villanelle presents a provocatively troubling image of femininity, one defined by a transgressive refusal to comply with the imperatives of patriarchy. Significantly, the narrative suggests a genetic basis for the horrors perpetrated by the charismatic killer, playing upon notions of the primordial “bad seed” as well as a lineage of *femme castratrice* whose deviance breeds only further monstrosity. In *The Monstrous-*

*Feminine*, Barbara Creed (1993) observes the centrality of the mother to the construction of the killer child, manifested in terms of maternal perversity, as well as possessive, domineering behaviours. The “monstrous mother” terrifies not because she is castrated, per Freud’s theorisation, but is, rather, the active castrator, a powerful entity whose desires and ambitions threaten the stability of the symbolic order, and whose progeny is inevitably corrupt (139). Villanelle is initially presented as an orphan, an aberration without history or bloodline whose pleasure in gruesome violence provides the only source of genuine emotion. Her difference is framed as innate, a trait since birth; her handler, Konstantin, remarks on the peculiarity of Villanelle as a child, for instance, offering a vision of an anomalous, otherworldly creature with a nod to phrenology: “I’ve seen a photo of you. Very strange head. Bulbous, unnatural” (2020, 3:3). The eventual discovery of Villanelle’s mother, the profoundly “mean” and controlling Tatiana (3:5), sustains a misogynistic logic that frames evil as a distinctly female form of inheritance. As Eric Ziolkowski (2001) argues in the context of ideas about monstrous children, “wicked persons must descend from a wicked source” (183), a rationale that evokes an anxiety of the maternal as a source of pollution.

By associating the psychopathy of Villanelle with the monstrosity of the mother, *Killing Eve* maintains the correlation between subversive women and the presence of evil. On returning to the family home, for example, Villanelle is once more rejected by Tatiana, whose systematic bullying, familial dominance, and emotional indifference is ironically highlighted by an insistence on the atrocity of others: “You do not belong here. You are not bringing your darkness into this house”. In line with Konstantin’s description of the abnormal infant, Tatiana asserts “you were bad from the beginning. You didn’t cry as a baby”, whilst Villanelle suggests such deviance is part of a maternal lineage defined by violence, apathy, and cruelty: “You have always been the darkness . . . I could see what you are . . . like me . . . I am my mother’s daughter” (3:5). That Villanelle’s murder of Tatiana prompts a psychic collapse reveals the power of the mother, yet also exposes the signification of the maternal, via an overwhelmingly patriarchal symbolism, as a form of possession or consumption in which the self is lost, and which must therefore be destroyed in order to preserve or regain the integrity of the subject. As Konstantin notes of the killing: “Everyone’s mother deserves it” (3:6). Importantly, however, while the source of Villanelle’s monstrosity is located within the mother, framing acts of criminal violence as a result of faulty female DNA, it is neither pathologised nor regarded apologetically. Alternatively, the assassin comes to regard the “darkness” not as an affliction but as a state of being that is, in fact, natural rather than aberrant. It is a notion underlined, too, by the gradual “corruption” of the moralistic Eve, whose own potential for monstrosity develops in the interests of destroying the omnipotent power of The Twelve. In a concluding scene, for instance, in which Eve and Villanelle confront their eroticised obsession with one another, deviance is portrayed as complex and relational, but also a critical trait of women who seek to defy the borderlines: “I think my monster encourages your monster” (3:8). The suggestion is one of repossession, a re-situating of the transgressive “other” in intricate, if not ambiguous, new terms.

In seeking to re-code the imbrication of women and monstrosity, *Killing Eve* thus plays upon the cultural anxieties associated with the *femme castratrice*, often by literalising fears of the female psychopath. The result is a parodic iteration of the ways in which women are villainised for failing to comply with gender norms, in part realised via darkly comical

rituals of control and revenge. In performing as the monstrous feminine, for example, Villanelle does not have sex with her prey, but rather literally castrates a series of male victims and ostensibly preserves the severed parts, evoking the imagery of the *vagina dentata* or toothed vagina: “She chopped his knob off” (2018, 1:5). Other iterations provide less verbatim adaptations: a sex-trafficker is knifed in the femoral artery (1:1); an Italian mafia boss is pierced through the eye with an Oedipal hairpin (1:1); and the testicles of a military hacker, under the ministrations of Villanelle as fetish nurse, are crushed with medical forceps (1:3). The *vagina dentata*, as Creed notes, points “to male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces” (106). It is a narrative which positions the female body as a source of threat, as well as suggesting the “duplicitous nature of woman, who promises paradise in order to ensnare” (106), signalling the importance of Villanelle’s masquerades as prostitutes, nurses, and wide-eyed naïfs. Creed observes that each iteration of this idea is accompanied by a resolution that asserts dominance over the devouring creature, thus ensuring the *vagina dentata* is “put to its proper use” (106): “The breaking of the vaginal teeth by the hero, accomplished in the dark and hidden depths of the vagina, is the exact equivalent of the heroic journey into the underworld and the taming of the toothy hell-hound Cerberus by Herakles. Darkness, depth, death and woman—they belong together” (Wolfgang Lederer qu. Creed, 106). Yet Villanelle resists and evades punishment in order to embody notions of devourment as strength, delighting in her reputation as *femme castratrice*. The effect is a threat to patriarchy in both literal and symbolic terms, as the assassin refuses to be disciplined as a docile body and defies containment. When asked about what happens to the trophied penises, Villanelle responds: “The good ones, I pickle. The bad ones? You don’t want to know” (3:8).

The focus on dissection also offers a strategic appropriation and revisioning of the ways in which the bodies of women are contained, controlled, and dismembered as objects for consumption. In a killing in an Amsterdam brothel, Villanelle takes inspiration from *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*, a Renaissance painting by Jan de Baen which portrays the flayed and naked carcasses of Jan and Cornelius de Witt, who have been stripped of their fingers, tongues, penises and internal organs. As Villanelle gleefully declares: “They look like bacon!” (2019, 2:4). Dressed as a Harajuku-style femme-cartoon pig, Villanelle hangs the victim, and in what is mistaken as a mimicry of European performance art—“It’s realistic, isn’t it?”—disembowels him while his wife, who has commissioned the kill, watches on (2:4). The use of violence remains troubling for feminist scholars (O’Neill & Seal, 45), reflecting bell hooks’ (2004) argument that physical aggression is an inherently sexist and patriarchal mode of social control (64) and in a postfeminist context, Villanelle’s fetishistic snuff show could be read as “a patriarchal fantasy” encouraging what David Roche and Cristelle Maury (2020) argue is spectacle “under a feminist-ish veneer” (277). However, it is the tight focus on Villanelle’s extreme enactment of activism and resistance which we argue functions as critique via a series of strategic inversions involving a shared personal moment of advocacy. In the context of the de Witt murder parody, Villanelle adopts the role of an “agentive avenger” (Mäntymäki, 443), offering a repetition with difference—much like the poetic form her codename references. That is, this act powerfully reverses the power of the male gaze: enclosed within the brothel window, spectatorship is not granted to the exhibition and violation of the female body, but to a scene of retribution. Moreover, the intimacy of looking/being looked upon does not occur in terms

of a conventional patriarchal arrangement of man-to-woman, in which the latter is symbolically devoured as a passive sexual object. Rather, it is an exchange between Villanelle and the female client, a moment of connection, perhaps even communion, that radically subverts and playfully puns upon the gendered dynamics of being “beheld”: the dangling body of the man, gutted and empty, is literally “being held” by the assassin as a powerful and enduring abject vision for consumption.

In the context of classic cinema—a frame that aligns with both the intra- and extra-textual structuring of the kill-scene—Casey Ryan Kelly (2016) contends that of all “iterations of the monstrous-feminine, the *femme castratrice* most directly challenges the sadistic male gaze . . . by inviting spectators to disavow the perspective of the male victim and identify across genders with the avenging woman” (2). Such a renunciation, in which the feminine is aligned with the castrating power of the signifier, is indicative of a profound cultural shift, echoing women’s assertion of agency, and the public calls for a reckoning, that are fundamental to the global #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. Tellingly, however, the performance, figured as entertainment and rewarded with awe and applause, is initially received as little more than a clever and unreal pantomime—to be filmed and photographed—revealing the norms of a culture in which the male self is more often revered than objectified as display. Indeed, the reception of this act exposes what Riebe argues is “The pervasiveness of the patriarchy and the normalization of maleness [which] driv[es] the rhetoric that . . . if a woman is perceived as exhibiting the same harmful behaviours [as men], they are always at fault” (2020, 4). The scene is thus profoundly political, imitating the deprecation of women as animals, and as flesh for purchase and devourment, heightened by the location of the murder at a site of prostitution. As Villanelle exits the gruesome diorama, she adorns the corpse with a pig’s mask, a final snuffing out of the victim as an individual (2:4).

As suggested by references to pickled penises and bodies as salt-cured pork, the *femme castratrice* is a woman who consumes, and often ravenously. Natalia Andrievskikh (2014) notes that metaphors of consumption function as “rebellion against restrictions imposed by society’s idea of womanhood . . . [and] disciplinary uses of food” (142) to “convey and shape concepts of sexuality, agency, and gender identity” (137). Villanelle, Eve and Carolyn are defined by their voracious appetites, often in relation to foods deemed inappropriate for the maintenance of a properly feminine self: sweets and pastries, pasta and curries, alcohol and meat. There is a refusal to resist hunger, and an insistence on eating as a link to embodying authority and strength; meeting Eve in a butcher’s shop, Carolyn urges the agent to “stay nourished. Get some chops”, for example, after being served a dinosaur-sized bone (1:4), while in a scene following a violent killing involving castration, Villanelle happily fries a pan of sausages (1:5). A conventional politics of feminine food denial is revealed when Eve is asked “do you eat cake?” (1:7), the semantics of which exposes, as Imogen West-Knights observes (2019), a social system of management in which the bodies of women are curbed or starved into smallness, and thereby neatly contained. Indeed, in *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo, (1993) examines the representation of female appetite as an act of transgression requiring correction, in part to ensure alignment within a heterosexual matrix, but also to properly condition the unruly female body. Importantly, Bordo notes, food is frequently equated in Western culture “with maternal and wifely love” (122), while female appetite is positioned as monstrous and threatening, a force demanding governance: women feed with



restraint, while men are fed and sated. *Killing Eve*, however, inverts the configuration and Eve's husband, Niko, for example, draws upon a domestic, feminised vision of food as a means through which to nurture, cooking consolatory casseroles, lovingly packaging lunches of leftover shepherd's pie, and relying upon the rituals of eating to soothe discontent: "Let's go and get a curry, and go home, and apologise with tea" (1:6). Alternatively, the villainous Aaron forcibly controls Villanelle's food intake, compelling either over-indulgence or deprivation via acts of surveillance which demand docility and evoke ideas about the taming of the terrifying *vagina dentata* (2:7).

For Eve, Villanelle and Carolyn, eating is correlated with expressions of sexuality, authority, and pleasure, centred on the appeasement of desire. It is worth noting that their consumption of food does not usually entail its preparation; rather, the kitchen is a space most often occupied by passive and temporary "others", such as guests and alienated husbands. Carolyn enjoys breakfast only when prepared by a casual lover; Villanelle demands dinner with Eve while she is held at knife-point, at the height of their erotically-charged cat-and-mouse game; Eve propositions Niko whilst eating take-away, titillated by the hunt for a psychopath; and Villanelle requests Niko's recipe for "the thing with the potatoes and the grey meat" (2:7) before killing his colleague. In such instances, and throughout the series, men are devoured, silenced, disappeared or rendered obsolete, as these women—ambitious, craving "man-eaters" who resist the motherly or wifely imperative to feed men—"threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male" (Bordo, 117). Eve, Carolyn, and Villanelle do feed one another, however, suggesting not only a series of relationships which exclude the male, but also a form of caregiving that transgresses the "ubiquitous configuration of woman-food-man", a "socially integrated" network of "heterosexual family and love relations" figured as redundant (Bordo, 126).

Significantly, via subversive acts of deviance and monstrosity which challenge patriarchal systems of control, the women of *Killing Eve* are frequently aligned with notions of abjection, of that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Julia Kristeva 1982, 4). While such an association is often traditionally weaponised to relegate women as "other"; as that which requires expulsion, abjection is positioned in *Killing Eve* as a further means through which the conventional delineations of femininity might be destabilised. Most explicitly, via a parodic performance of those rules which govern the tenuous boundaries of normative culture, Villanelle is, in Kristevan terms, "a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles", that "which does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal" (4). Villanelle's ability to contrive behaviours which align with the rites that define social cohesion, as evidenced by the endless capacity for masquerade, also demonstrates the perverse nature of abjection, which "neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (15).

In line with such perversity, Julia Kristeva argues that the abject "cunning" of the murderer whose crimes are premediated reveals and heightens "the fragility of the law", exposing how easily the system might become disordered and unstable. Operating within a curious space in which signifier and signified are endlessly confused, Villanelle is a "borderline subject" (7) and threatens to dislocate social illusions of control.

The assassin is thus a dissembling terror who speaks to the friability of the limitations and rules which regulate the contrivances of society, culture and identity. As an authority of The Twelve observes:

Do you know why I love you, Villanelle? Because you are an agent of chaos. And I love chaos. It rips apart and starts again. It's like a forest fire. It burns, it clears. It's monstrous but it's beautiful (3:7).

The signifying of powerful women as destructive is also most obviously articulated in relation to death and the “utterly abject” corpse, which, as Creed argues, “signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution—the body without a soul” (10). Certainly, while the victims of Villanelle present an explicit evocation of the monstrous-feminine in terms of a refusal to disassociate the “clean and proper body” (Creed, 13) from that which threatens the subject—that which must be “permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva, 3)—the female protagonists of the series are also aligned with waste in terms that explicitly challenge ideas about the boundaries of the self. Carolyn, for example, extols the virtues of a moisturiser “made of pig’s placenta”, which “costs a fortune and smells like arse, but it is exceedingly effective” (2:2). Similarly, and in a further declaration of appetite, Eve dismisses concern about the potentially dubious ingredients of takeaway fried chicken, revelling in the suspect meat and announcing, “if it tastes this good, grind up an orphan and fry it in crack” (2:4). Drawing upon dark humour as well as violent, vengeful metaphors of power and death, the women “invoke pleasure in breaking the taboo on filth” and use it as a vehicle to challenge the constrictions of traditional femininity, exulting in matter treated “with disgust and loathing” (Creed, 13) rather than seeking its extrication. Whilst it might be argued that such a strategy confirms cultural myths that align the female body with abject monstrosity, the result is a breakdown in meaning in which the distinction between self and “other” is radically compromised. Importantly, this creates the space (albeit liminal) for alternative ways of being a woman, through subversive challenges to patriarchal definitions and binaries.

### **Dressed to kill: fashion and masquerade**

In the second episode of *Killing Eve*, Villanelle wears a diaphanous, oversized, poufy pink Molly Goddard baby-doll dress to her psychiatric assessment. Described as “assassin chic” (Hanh Nguyen 2018, n.p.), costume designer Phoebe de Gaye fashioned a look for Villanelle that is a subversion of the stereotypes of femininity, nympholepsy and women’s madness. This “fashioned body”, a term prioritised by Joanne Entwistle (2015), is linked to identity in the way “fashion and dress articulate group identities, in particular, how they are deployed in order to mark out distinctions between classes and groups of people” (115). Villanelle’s outfit in this scene is a travesty of the social expectations of femininity. She is fashioned as “perverse” ballerina whose appearance transgresses the limits of containment and control: her messy hair escapes an orderly bun, while black Balenciaga boots replace delicate

ballet shoes. This is one of the ways Villanelle is depicted as weaponizing femininity on her own terms. Villanelle is portrayed as taking feminine tropes of oppression and reclaiming them as a source of empowerment.

Villanelle's penchant for fashion and obsessive brand naming is a significant part of Jennings' *Codename Villanelle* trilogy:

Villanelle is wearing a silk Valentino dress and elbow-length Fratelli Orsini opera gloves ... A spacious Fendi shoulder bag hangs by a slim chain ... She looks glamorous, if less showy than the socialites in Versace and Dolce & Gabbana (2014, 26)

Dressing Villanelle in haute couture, Jennings' descriptions, however, are crafted from an omniscient, often fetishistic, male gaze. Indeed, shortly after the opera assassination, Villanelle has "brief and savage" sex in the Valentino dress with the nephew of her victim, revealing an oppressive phallogentric fantasy as she holds a "Rutger throughout" (40). In the adaptation of the books for the small screen, the force of the male gaze is critically exposed and undermined; in the process, men are outwitted, and women are empowered. Furthermore, in *Killing Eve*, men are hampered by their need for pleasure in spectatorship, as their attempts at objectification are subverted by women who are aware of the heterosexual male narrative and use it to their advantage. As Delia Harrington (2019) observes, by exposing "male power posing" via a series of mockeries focussed through the female gaze, gendered hierarchies are rendered visible rather than able "to hide as a false default" (n.p.). The episode entitled "Beautiful Monster" (3:7), for example, sends up the idea of the monstrous feminine, while demonstrating Villanelle's understanding of social constructions of gender. On a golf course in Aberdeen, extravagantly dressed in Gucci trousers and a green fur-trimmed Charlotte Knowles' jacket—another parody, this time of golfing attire—Villanelle calls over an obnoxious American she plans to kill for his excessive vulgarity. Playing into gender stereotypes and the patriarchal fairy tale narrative, she asks him to help find her ball, because she is afraid to go "into the woods" alone. A conversation ensues where Villanelle demonstrates her knowledge of the dominant patriarchal "script":

MAN: Some girls would stop themselves asking for help from a man these days. They do it as a matter of principle.

VILLANELLE: Not me. I was brought up in a family where men were men and women were women. And women like their men to be men.

MAN: Damn right and that's why I don't have a problem promoting women to my board, because your lack of know-how, gives me an excuse to feel heroic.

Moreover, the aesthetic mimics performed by Villanelle extend to the vocal, as she effortlessly transitions from the deep and guttural intonations of her native Russian to, in the instance above, a charming Scottish brogue. In addition to speaking fluent French, German, Italian, Spanish and Mandarin, regional Australian, American, and English accents are adopted with an uncanny accuracy, which is intrinsic to the process of costuming through an immaculate phonic "play". The assassin's linguistic dexterity and multilingual abilities are further demonstration of the unsettling ease with which multiple identities are co-opted and "worn",

presenting a form of “sonic spectacle” that challenges the constitutive “nature of voice as a marker of self, identity and place” (Tessa Dwyer 2018, 17). An important part of Villanelle’s metamorphosis involves choosing an appropriate accent or language in which to either perversely play with, or gain access to, the victim. While her vocal disguises are most often linked to her role as assassin, her choice to speak English and not Russian is reflective of her personal desire to disassociate from her troubled past and assimilate into Western capitalist society. Furthermore, through vocal affectations, Villanelle is also able to produce the intonations of a subservient femininity, for example, or the modulations associated with status or class, parodically exposing the performative nature of the social matrix in which subjectivity is controlled and defined. Indeed, Villanelle’s impressive multilingual fluency reveals the subversive potential of staged authenticity, displaying a form of embodiment that is not defined by fixity, but rather an unnerving and constant tendency towards the protean.

Certainly, in her self-fashioning, Villanelle is presented as often achieving emancipation from patriarchal oppression through masquerade. Moreover, her costumes explore an understanding of intersectional feminism where women in uniforms worn for low wage work are overlooked, while young women in designer clothes attract the male gaze. This class-based gender discrimination allows Villanelle access to what she wants. Harrington (2019) notes, “*Killing Eve* invests in the transgressive interplay of women, power, and visibility, asking us to question who and what is visible—whose work, which experts, which kinds of people” (n.p.), as the stylisation of the body functions as a complex coding of subjectivity, authority, and privilege. Disguised as a caterer, nurse, or sex worker, Villanelle repeatedly goes unnoticed in a patriarchal capitalist society and can kill without being seen. Indeed, the assassin enacts what Jill Soloway refers to as the “gazed gaze” (2016), a rejection of the male gaze by using it self-consciously or parodically as a strategy to regain control. As Soloway argues, “it’s the gaze on the gazers . . . It says, we see you, seeing us . . . [It] is a socio-political justice-demanding way of art making” (2016). It is, then, a form of knowing engagement that seeks to destabilise, made most evident when Villanelle wears the Bavarian dirndl to kill her victim in the red-light district in Amsterdam (2:4). Director Lisa Brühlmann states, “for me, [the dirndl] was always a bit sexist, because it’s so much about the woman’s body. So . . . if [Villanelle] is wearing it, she’s making fun out of it” (Laura Bradley 2019, n.p.). The parody is clear in the choice of the hot pink colour for the dirndl, the tutu-like petticoats, the “disconcertingly cute” pig’s mask, and in the choice of music, “Een Muis In Een Molen In Mooi Amsterdam”, described as “very light, very innocent, very childish” (Laura Bradley 2019, n.p.). Villanelle is presented as fashioning her own hyper-sexualised and hyper-feminine narrative, consciously acting as both consumer and consumable.

As a young, beautiful woman dressed in outfits such as a pink silk Rosie Assoulin pyjama top and William Vintage ballgown skirt adorned with Christian Lacroix earrings, she courts attention in flagrant, and performative, “fashion exhibitioni[sm]” (Anna Johnson 2020, n.p.) but importantly, she also controls the gaze. This is most evident when a female Instagrammer asks if she can take a photo of Villanelle for her account, and she responds: “no, of course not, that would be pathetic” (2:4). As an assassin, Villanelle does not want her image circulated on social media, but more

importantly she sees no personal gain in appealing to millennial Instagrammers. In these moments, Villanelle demonstrates her need to curate her own image on her own terms for her own audience. Angela Partington argues (2020):

In order to express preferences, women have had to become subjects of the (female) gaze while at the same time identifying with the objects of that gaze (goods) in order to fulfil a role as object of the male gaze (336).

The gaze in *Killing Eve* is, further, both queered and female; Villanelle is constructed not through male spectatorship, but as suggested by the enchanted Instagrammer and the obsessive attentions of Eve, largely via the viewpoints or examinations of other women. In describing the assassin to a male police officer, for example, Eve details Villanelle's "very delicate features ... Her lips are full, she has a long neck, high cheekbones. Her skin is smooth and bright. She had a lost look in her eye, that was both direct and also chilling" (1:1). Kate Granlund (2020) notes how such a "perceptive and idiosyncratic display of the female gaze" is sharply contrasted with the response of the constable: "Errr, so is that like a square face or an oval face?" (1:1). By repudiating the male gaze (both intra- and extra-textually), Villanelle is portrayed as a fantasy of female self-possession. There is thus a tension in *Killing Eve* between the power of postfeminist sensibility and the triumph of subjectification over objectification in the way she understands how her body and female sexuality work as a commodity for consumption in capitalist societies. Villanelle's enjoyment for fashion and beauty is empowering because when she is not working, she is dressing up for herself. As Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans and Alison Mackiewicz (2016) argue, "Postfeminist beauty work is not an objectification evaluated by the 'male in the head'; instead it is a process of subjectification because the transformation is understood as a practice of consuming oneself into being through the rhetoric of agentic individualism, choice, and empowerment" (98). Villanelle sends the young Instagrammer away because she does not require an audience to "like" her look to feel attractive or empowered.

While Villanelle's often flamboyant wardrobe is not the only expression of women's fashion in *Killing Eve*, it is conspicuous. Indeed, Eve's disorganised, chaotic ensembles lead Villanelle to fantasise about dressing her. As Joanne Entwistle (2020) makes clear, "ideas about 'femininity' are closely linked to ideas about feminine sexuality and this can be demonstrated by examining the ways in which the two are conflated in debates about women's dress" (171). Villanelle challenges this conflation in her attempted styling of Eve for her own desires. She steals Eve's luggage and replaces her clothes with designer pieces, including a tight Roland Mouret cocktail dress and stilettos—both a perfect fit—and "La Villanelle" eau de parfum. The intimacy of these gifts is evidenced by her knowledge of Eve's dress and shoe size without having formally met her and enacts a compelling form of seduction. It demonstrates that Eve has unknowingly been the subject of Villanelle's gaze: just as she has been forensically studying the assassin, Villanelle has been quite literally sizing her up. As Valerie Steele (1996) argues, "Fashion is a symbolic system linked to the expression of sexuality—both sexual behaviour (including erotic attraction) and gender identity" (4). Significantly, Villanelle dresses her next victim, Frank Halleton's corpse, in the Mouret dress before castrating him and positioning the body suggestively on the bed. There is a double objectification here as Villanelle first objectifies Eve in the dress, followed by Frank—Eve's boss when she worked for MI5—however the assertion of power resulting from such treatment is not equivalent. While Eve

is unharmed, Frank's castration both relieves him of his masculinity and also parodies it, evident when the scene cuts to Villanelle cooking sausages. These scenes expose and challenge the way that "practices of dress evoke the sexed body, drawing attention to bodily differences between men and women that might otherwise be obscured" (Joanne Entwistle 2020, 135). Frank's desecrated corpse questions the ease of such a distinction.

Villanelle is presented as a fashion maven and a consumer in *Killing Eve* and her victims often underestimate her strength and aptitude for violence because they are seduced by her beauty and assumed passivity. This is demonstrated in Villanelle's choice of a poisoned hairpin and toxic perfume—stereotypical tools of femininity—to kill. Before he is stabbed in the eye with a hairpin, mafia boss Cesare Greco believes that Villanelle is a sexual present for his anniversary, outfitted in one of his wife's dresses. Perfume mogul, Carla De Mann, assumes the assassin is one of the caterers at a political fundraising event before she is killed. Notably, Villanelle approaches her in the women's toilets after having contrived that she has her period and needs to change her tampon, weaponizing the bullet-shaped plug. Finally, Villanelle's fashion extends to her perfume. Rather than smelling of a conquering Roman centurion (3:3), in Jennings' book, the fictional perfume is described as "the favourite scent of the Comtesse du Barry. The perfume house added the red ribbon after she was guillotined in 1793" (25). Perfume is a powerful symbol of sexuality, which Entwistle argues, "illustrat[es] how the body, even without garments, can still be adorned or embellished in some way" (411). When Villanelle gifts Eve a bottle of her perfume, she is subversively asking Eve to cover herself in her scent, overwriting her identity.

### Villanelle as villanelle: a poetics of killing

Although the connection of Villanelle's name to a well-established and complex poetic form has not been much discussed, it is worth examining as a way of further developing the ideas of repetition and reiteration that characterise *Killing Eve*. Jia Tolentino (2018) has observed that "[i]n poetry, the villanelle is a contained, repetitive structure—a rhyme-sandwich (aba) format, first popularized in the nineteenth century" (n.p.). Tolentino adds that the *Killing Eve* series "corresponds, in a rough way, to the villanelle's basic framework: the show is about the iteration of a recognizable pattern, its pleasures emerging in the internal twists" (2018, n.p.).

The villanelle has its origins in European poetic experimentation during the Renaissance. Jay Parini (2006) states that "[o]ne of the first examples of the [now accepted] form was written by the French poet Jean Passerat" in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (836) but the villanelle as we know it today was not established in France until much later when "in 1878, Joseph Boulmier published an entire volume of 19-line villanelles on the Passerat template" (Julia Kane and A.L. French 2016, 386). Parini notes that "English poets [also] generally ignored the form until the late nineteenth century" (836). The form not only follows a strict rhyme scheme but is mainly constructed in groups of three, not unlike the threesome formed by the characters Villanelle, Eve, and Carolyn in *Killing Eve*. This is to say that the first five stanzas of this six-stanza poetic form are in tercets (stanzas of three lines each).

Like the television series, the villanelle form is both recursive and varied, possessing closely repeating patterns and ideas that also develop and shift within the overall construct. The Academy of American Poets provides an excellent summary of the main formal features of the villanelle, demonstrating the way this form promotes complexity within a predetermined overall design:

The first and third lines of the opening tercet are repeated alternately in the last lines of the succeeding stanzas; then in the final stanza, the refrain serves as the poem's two concluding lines. Using capitals for the refrains and lowercase letters for the rhymes, the form could be expressed as: A1 b A2/a b A1/a b A2/a b A1/a b A2/a b A1 A2. (n.p., n.d.)

The intense focus of the villanelle on a particular subject and limited preoccupations, and the use of repetitive but progressively (and subtly) recontextualised tropes, is characteristic of the form. A further characteristic is introducing new material as the villanelle proceeds, while regularly returning to the main themes and statements—which are then often further reiterated in the poem's final quatrain. *Killing Eve* has these same general hallmarks in its deployment of its three main characters and their obsessive relationships with one another; and also in terms of its use of variations on a carefully delimited set of recurrent tropes centred around ideas of power and subversion. This series may be the closest thing to a villanelle that we have yet encountered on television.

In terms of language and playfulness—noting that the villanelle form foregrounds the poet's linguistically self-conscious and playful manipulation of repeated poetic lines—it is pertinent to note that villanelle puns on the word “villain”. In the spirit of such punning, *Killing Eve* is sometimes mordantly playful and funny, employing a variety of jokes and witticisms as it proceeds, both visually and in the language of its main characters. Even the title *Killing Eve* references and then annihilates the one-dimensionality of the first woman in origin literature, to suggest something far more complex about women. Each member of the triad of main female characters makes comments that frequently draw attention not only to the metadramatic nature of the program, but also to the empowerment of women. For example, Eve's comment, “God, it's amazing how efficient things are when you're a dick to people” (1:8) figuratively references the usurpation of the phallus for success, while Carolyn's observation, “Divorces are easy. It's marriages that are impossibly hard” (3:1), is a rejection of the patriarchal institution of matrimony.

This highlights the program's form as a subversive and dark thriller-comedy that simultaneously embraces and undercuts many of the generic features it employs. The fast-paced plot and emphasis on action, for example, deploys many obvious features of the thriller genre, but the series simultaneously sabotages its various conventional features—most obviously through its focus on female lead characters and their superior physical and intellectual prowess. The result is a debunking of male and female stereotypes; a new order is asserted that is broadly feminist; and many patriarchal tropes and ideas are deconstructed and demolished. As Kathleen J. Waites, (2021) argues, “*Killing Eve* upsets the applecart of the male-dominated spy thriller genre, deconstructing the virgin/whore duality that has defined women for millennia, and exposing it as a ruse and product of self-serving patriarchal discourse”



(167). This is also evident in the creation of the character of Carolyn Martens, head of the Russian desk of MI6, for the television series. She does not exist in the novella because Eve's boss is a man.

This leads us to propose that the series represents a kind of poetics of killing. We use the term "poetics" advisedly and broadly to suggest that *Killing Eve* posits the postmodern idea that through invoking-while-subverting, satirising, reversing roles within, and playing with and re-inflecting, established genres (sometimes in shocking ways: if taken at face value the apparently conscienceless killing undertaking by Villanelle is horrific) a television series may make a constructive and entertaining contribution to the re-evaluation of social mores and gender roles. Every time *Killing Eve* subverts conventional assumptions associated with the genres it employs—and it does this constantly—it asks its viewers to reconsider or recalibrate their own assumptions. In this way, and as we have discussed above, this sometimes chaotic and often violent series represents a liberation from the idea that women will usually be the—often unnamed—victims of patriarchy, suggesting that there are other ways of constituting the world. In such a light, the killing in *Killing Eve* is nothing less than a trope signalling the possibility of *reconstruction*, despite the violence and emasculation the program employs. Indeed, emasculation as a symbolic trope offers the possibility of female empowerment, something that *Killing Eve* insists on even as it invokes the monstrous and the abject.

## Conclusion

*Killing Eve* repurposes ideas that belong to patriarchy and history: that women who kill are mad, scheming and/or corrupted; that good behaviour and a harmonious social order rely on women remaining subservient to men; that, where horrific violent crimes are committed, women are usually the victims; and that the male–female binary is meaningful and stable. The series playfully, seriously and parodically critiques such ideas and posits the notion that powerful women—however strange and damaged Villanelle herself may be—may not only do to men the very things that men do to women, but they may also do it with great flair and style. In this respect, *Killing Eve* makes a significant contribution to the increasing and changing representations of female violence that have occurred over recent decades, incorporating insights associated with second-, third- and, now, fourth-wave feminism.

As the program turns the masculinist and heteronormative assumptions of the thriller genre on its head, so it asks its viewers whether the sometimes confused and tumultuous world it depicts may not, after all, make just as much sense as the world in which we live. The depictions of extreme and psychopathic violence become, in this context, a way of abolishing the safety of conventional norms and of projecting the viewer into a dramatized poetics of violence and death which grants priority to female agency, intelligence and power in salutary forms. In this way, *Killing Eve* exemplifies how popular feminism is increasingly being informed by sophisticated critiques of the gendered dynamics of the gaze and by sometimes confronting creative re-figurings of such tropes. Although sometimes complicit in established patriarchal metanarratives, the series explores possibilities for reconceptualising the "feminine" and the social order and debunks stereotypical and limiting constructions of women.



## Disclosure statement

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