

“I didn’t think you could be any more butch”: Gender Performance, Expressions of Masculinity and Rape in *Veronica Mars*

By Chelsea Bergen

Introduction

Though it accumulated critical praise, developed a cult fan following, and has become hugely relevant in American pop culture,¹ there is a general lack of scholarship delving into the teen drama and modern noir *Veronica Mars*. While this lack of academic analysis is disappointing on many fronts, the absence from narrative studies of gender is especially glaring as *Veronica Mars* is rich with complex and contradictory constructions of gender. The most prominent of these paradoxes can be seen in the titular Veronica Mars— a high school student and part time private investigator— who often straddles gender norms, performing femininity while also rejecting it. Though female bodied and feminine in appearance, easily read as a perky blond, Veronica is also fiercely independent, assertive, and at times aggressive— traits commonly associated with masculinity and the heteronormative male identity. While these traits are helpful to Veronica in her work as a PI and as a means of distancing herself from personal trauma, they also isolate her peers, making the formation of healthy relationships and community difficult.

This case study seeks to situate *Veronica Mars* among television studies and scholarship on constructions

¹ 11 years after the cancellation of the show a fan-funded Kickstarter campaign was able to raise over \$5,700,000 for a *Veronica Mars* feature film, shattering numerous Kickstarter records in the process.

of gender on mainstream television. Focusing primarily on the third season of the show, Veronica's gender performances are examined in terms of physical appearance and clothing, dialogue, and verbal/non-verbal interactions with other characters. While at times the use of ironic or self-reflexive performances of femininity allow Veronica to undermine male dominance, genuine femininity—which is to say, unaware or non self-effacing femininity—is consistently framed as a liability. By playing against her assigned gender and exhibiting qualities associated with masculinity, Veronica is able to gain autonomy and agency. However, no performance of masculinity is able to help her evade the vulnerability of her female body.

“Under That ‘Angry Young Woman’ Shell There Is A Slightly Less Angry Young Woman”²

Central to the construction of Veronica Mars as a character, and key to her expressions of gender, is that prior to the events of the series she was sexually assaulted. As the audience learns via flashback in the pilot episode, Veronica was drugged and raped at a party in her sophomore year of high school. This event is framed as stripping her of her innocence and pushing her toward the conclusion that the world is a dark and grimy place. In the harshly lit flashback Veronica wears a white dress, a key signifier of purity and femininity; in the present any suggestion of purity is gone, replaced with an abrasive attitude and a grueling stare. The very look of Veronica changes in the aftermath of her assault—her hair becomes a choppy bob, dresses are traded for jeans and a tee shirt, smiling turns to a stern expression. As Alaine Martaus notes in her essay “‘You get Tough. You Get Even’: Rape, Anger, Cynicism, and the Vigilante Girl Detective in *Veronica Mars*”, “By pairing a scene of an innocent Veronica with one of the

² Thomas, Rob. “Pilot.” *Veronica Mars*. UPN. 22 Sept. 2004. Television.

now-disillusioned detective Veronica ... the show emphasizes the centrality of the rape in creating Veronica as the vigilante girl detective" (74). Essentially, there is no 'Veronica Mars: heroine and hardboiled detective,' without the violent destruction of 'Veronica Mars: wholesome young girl.' The audience does not get a great deal of information about pre-rape Veronica, but her depictions in flashbacks tend more toward naive. Veronica's transformation in attitude and sartorial sense are unmistakable coping mechanisms. If Veronica as virgin and female is weak and fragile, vulnerable to assault, her most viable route for self-preservation is to become antithetical to her former self— strong, biting, and masculine. As with many heroines before her, performances of masculinity allow Veronica to become outspoken (Harper 514). Veronica's assertive, unyielding nature— traits often rewarded in male gender performance— gains her no social cache. Rather, these performances of masculinity and rejections of privilege are considered by her peers to be a break from the natural order, furthering her status as a pariah for disobeying social norms (Dowd 5). In the Pilot episode, Veronica watches her former friends laugh and enjoy themselves at lunch while she sits alone.

Veronica's gender performance is never so transgressive as to include cross-dressing or any outright denial of her female gender assignment, instead she utilizes exaggerative performances of femininity as a tool in her work— playing the dumb blond or love struck girl (Martaus 80). As Weevil notes of Veronica after she uses an overtly feminine head tilt as a means of getting what she wants, "There you go with that head tilt thing. You know, you think you're all badass, but whenever you need something, it's all [mimics Veronica's head tilt] 'Hey.'" To which Veronica responds, "You're lucky I don't hair flip. I'd own you" (Ruggiero "An Echolls Family Christmas"). Veronica is well aware of the power of feminine performance and body language— it is one of the many tools in her P.I. toolbox. Such performances are a means to an end, discarded when Veronica has gotten what she wants. As Veronica might say,

though she looks like a duck, she doesn't quack like one.

“You Want to Know How I Lost My Virginity? So Do I.”³

Rape and the weakness of femininity continue to haunt Veronica, both in the form of emotional trauma from her own assault and in recurring sexual assault plot lines. As Andrea Braithwaite notes in *Triple Threats: Young Female Detectives and the Crimes of Postfeminism*, “founding moments [of sexual assault] linger in the chick dicks’ consciousness, recurring throughout the series in ways that suggest such moments haunt and inform the protagonists’ investigative work” (25).⁴ Indeed, while sex crimes are littered throughout the series, never are they so prominent and influential in Veronica’s life and work as in the third and final season. The major storyline for the first nine episodes of the season find Veronica at Hearst College, alongside a serial rapist who doses women with GHB (the same drug used in Veronica’s own assault), assaults them and shaves their heads to leave them with a physical signifier of the attack. While Veronica may have believed that the transition to college might provide a respite from the torments of high school, these rapes reaffirm the previously established “gendered dynamics of sexual and social power” that exist in the world around her (Braithwaite 21). Whatever differences women might have, be they social, economic, or otherwise, they share a similar vulnerability to physical and sexual trauma.

Indeed, in college femininity seems even more closely linked to vulnerability as fraternities seek out intoxicated girls to score points on— as in episode 3.02 “My Big Fat Greek Rush Week,” when Veronica discovers that the Pi Sigma Sigma (Pi Sig) house has a “point system” for its members, wherein female sexual conquests are assigned

³ Thomas, Rob. “Pilot.” *Veronica Mars*. UPN. 22 Sept. 2004. Television.

⁴ See Braithwaite 21-27 for a more extensive investigation of rape in the female P.I. narrative.

a point value based on physical characteristics— including extra points for a handicap⁵— and the sex acts performed. Simultaneously, girls are attacked in their own bedrooms while a serial rapist evades both campus security and local police. Dick Casablancas, a member of the suspected rapist Pi Sigs defends the house and the fraternity system at large against the accusation, arguing “why rape the cow when you’re swimming in free milk?” (Ruggiero and Elen). While Dick might have intended to illustrate that there are no shortage of consenting women and thus no need to assault someone, his metaphor better demonstrates a clear misunderstanding of the aggressive and controlling motivations behind sexual assault (as opposed to a strong desire to ‘get laid’), as well as the conquest driven attitude dictating the relationship between men and women on campus. Whether assaulting or ‘scoring points,’ both scenarios resemble an animal hunting for prey, positing women as antelopes to be picked off as soon as they stray from the herd.

From the start of season three, Veronica is positioned as inherently interested in the assaults— a fact which draws her into the purview of the rapist as a threat and potential target. In the season’s first episode, “Welcome Wagon,” Veronica accidentally walks in on her classmate Parker having sex in a darkened bedroom. Veronica quickly excuses herself— only to later find that Parker was actually being raped. As Veronica laments in voice-over while Parker is interviewed by police, “the thing about being roofed and raped— you might not remember the who, where, and why, but you definitely remember the what” (Ruggiero “My Big Fat Greek Rush Week”). Her words seem to suggest a kind of camaraderie, a connecting experience of shared

trauma. Indeed, the assault survivors of Hearst College, and their allies, do form a kind of community in the wake of

⁵ “My points are in order, courtesy of Miss Bonnie Capistrano. Her curvature of the spine is hardly noticeable, but I still got the handicapped bonus.” - Dick Casablancas (Ruggiero “Lord of the Pi’s”).

violence— an alternative sorority — but Veronica remains on the outside. Parker goes so far as to suggest that her assault is Veronica’s fault, and expresses disgust after Veronica helps to clear the Pi Sig fraternity from being held responsible for the rapes (Ruggiero “My Big Fat Greek Rush Week”; Ruggiero and Elen). Veronica faces similar criticism and scrutiny from other women on campus as well. As noted in Diana Blaine’s binary categories, women and the feminine are associated with community and dependence, but in divorcing herself from the feminine Veronica is positioned as failing in her feminine duty to other women. In contrast, though the masculinity Veronica performs is associated with clarity and control, as a woman she can never fully embody these qualities (Blaine). Veronica occupies a contradictory space wherein she is unable to appropriately perform femininity or masculinity.

Though Veronica’s own rape— and the anger she felt in response to it— is framed as catalyzing her to take control of her self image and “re-creating herself in contrast to her former innocent victim self,” the Hearst rape survivors are not framed as withdrawing from femininity or developing masculine fronts in the same way (Martaus 84). In part this difference of response may be due to the fact that the Hearst assault survivors attacks are recognized as legitimate— in contrast with Veronica’s assault, which was ignored by authorities. ⁶In earlier season, Veronica attempts to convince female peers to adopt a more aggressive and commanding presence to protect themselves, saying, “you get tough. You get even” and that “if you want people to leave you alone, or better yet, treat you with respect, demand it, make them” (Wallington; North). Yet none of the other women of the show follow Veronica’s lead or adapt in the same way. Perhaps

⁶ After reporting her rape in “Pilot” the local sheriff coldly asks, “Is there anyone in particular you’d like me to arrest, or should I just round up the sons of the most important families in town?” This ties in with the fact that— though it is outside the purview of this discussion— class is a factor constantly at play in *Veronica Mars*.

Veronica's peers lack a desire to subvert their femininity—a tool which has had mixed results for her. Unfortunately the interior lives of the other assault survivors are largely lacking from the show, making it impossible to examine alternative methods of adapting after trauma. Parker is the only survivor given any significant screen time, but she is largely written off by Veronica because of her overt displays of femininity.

Veronica's own discomfort with feminine gender identity appears to often inhibit her from forming significant and personal relationships with other women. Rather, Veronica is constructed as the perpetual defender of the fallen woman— a relationship that favors problem solving over intimacy. Veronica's quest to help sexually exploited women can be read as an attempt to make up for the women who failed her⁷ and an expression of the masculine imperative that one protect dependents (Dowd 34). This same protective imperative is displayed by Veronica's boyfriend, Logan— particularly when, after Veronica refuses to stop investigating the rapes, he hires a bodyguard to protect her without her knowledge. When Veronica finds out and confronts him, Logan asserts, "I don't give a rat's ass if it's right or fair. I don't care if you're angry. I care that you're safe." To which Veronica responds, "that's all sweet and great, but it doesn't really work that way" (Ruggiero "Lord of the Pi's"). There is a definite parallel between the unrequested 'help' Veronica receives from Logan and the relationship between Veronica and the Hearst rape survivors. While when referring to her investigation Veronica might say that "my nose kind of belongs wherever I decide to put it," she does not extend that imperative universally. Having divorced herself from the feminine for anything more than playacting, for Veronica passivity or indirect action are not viable options. Veronica does not care that the women of Hearst are angry,

⁷ In "Pilot" after being raped Veronica finds the word 'Slut' emblazoned across her car, written by a female classmate.

she cares that they are safe.

“I’m just taking what you would have happily given; that’s hardly a crime.”⁸

The Hearst rapist, an ancillary character named Mercer Hayes, continually evades Veronica and even tricks her into helping him get out of jail with a fake alibi. Although there is little evidence that Mercer is smarter or more cunning than Veronica (or any of her previous foes), he bests her repeatedly. Using Blaine’s binary categories as a lens through which to examine Veronica’s relationship to Mercer, one can see that while Veronica usually occupies the side of the binary associated with power and masculinity, when faced with Mercer she is forced to the other side of the binary. While Veronica may be able to perform masculinity, she is not a ‘real man’ and is therefore vulnerable to men like Mercer, who firmly occupy the positions of the masculine— invulnerability, agency, and mind. Veronica, on the other hand, is allocated the roles of the feminine— vulnerable, victim, body, naked (Blaine). The other rape survivors embody these same feminine weaknesses, but none are so apparent as in Veronica— given her usual behavior. While when performing masculinity Veronica is able to defend herself against “verbal attack and physical threats,” being female bodied means that she remains susceptible to sexual violence (Martaus 75). The degree to which Veronica is vulnerable is apparent in episode 3.09 “Spit & Eggs” when Veronica confronts Mercer in an attempt to stop him before he can assault another woman. Throughout the series Veronica’s Taser proves to be a useful tool, allowing her to defend herself against various (male) assailants. However, when she attempts to use the Taser on Mercer he hits her, knocking the Taser from her hand and out of her reach. As in a scene from a horror film, Veronica crawls under the bed, groping for the Taser as Mercer grabs her legs and

⁸ Mercer Hayes in “Spit & Eggs.”

pulls her out. She goes on to stab him in the leg with the horn of a porcelain unicorn— throughout the series Veronica is associated with unicorns many times, a symbol of exaggerated femininity that makes a humorous contrast with her hardboiled attitude— but the injury fails to stop Mercer in his pursuit. Ultimately, Veronica is only able to avoid being drugged and raped for a second time because Parker rallies a crowd after hearing Veronica blow one of the rape whistles handed out on campus. Parker, the picture of femininity, fulfills her feminine duty in the way Veronica could not and prevents a further assault. For women, there is only safety in numbers.

Conclusion

The transformative role of rape in *Veronica Mars* is a complex one, and is situated in a narrative tradition which positions rape as a catalyzing occurrence. The surface narrative of *Veronica Mars* supports Veronica's rejection of femininity, framing masculine qualities as a means of gaining power and control, yet upon closer inspection it is clear that masculine performance also comes at a great cost to her, eroding her relationships and ability to connect. Future analyses would benefit from examining Veronica's relationships— especially her romantic entanglements— as they are directly influenced by both the experience of her assault and the coping mechanisms she develops in the aftermath. A refusal to fit cleanly within the confines of her assigned gender is a major source of conflict in Veronica's relationships. For Veronica, her rape is a transformative and driving event, one which some might argue brings her to a place of self-actualization and ultimate empowerment. However, to directly associate assault and empowerment is both simplistic and problematic, especially when one account for the fact that even an 'empowered' Veronica is still yoked with the feminine weakness of the body. Whether or not the narrative allows for other ways in which Veronica might gain agency without divorcing herself from femininity remains open for discussion, but no

alternative is immediately apparent. Though performances of masculinity benefit Veronica on many fronts, they ultimately never allow her to gain the full spectrum of male privilege or invulnerability to sexual violation.

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