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Agents of Destruction: Sexual Assault Realization in *Girls* and *I May Destroy You*

Two episodes of Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* and Lena Dunham's *Girls* are in conversation with each other regarding sexual assault: Season 1, Episode 5 "It Just Came Up" (2020) and Season 6 Episode 3, "American Bitch" (2017). Coel utilizes serialized storytelling and division of knowledge to indicate resolved conflict, while Dunham utilizes episodic storytelling and no division of knowledge to indicate unresolved conflict, thus subverting television audience's expectations of traditional narrative closure. Both writers utilize these contrasting modes of storytelling strategies to reveal both the diversity and complexity of women's experiences of sexual misconduct: from the assault itself, to the realization of their assault, to their actions and reaction prompted by their realization, and to the larger ramifications of their actions and reactions.

The two television shows share similarities in their thematic content, historical context, and distribution methods, all grounding them in fruitful territory for textual analysis. For both shows, the plot content and conflict focuses on a Millennial woman's struggle to "make it" as a professional writer. As lead writers and actors, both Coel and Dunham perform a fictionalized version of themselves on screen. Coel is a 33 year old British actress and writer, starring as Arabella, an aspiring fiction writer. Dunham is a 34 year old American actress and writer,

starring as Hannah Horvath, also an aspiring writer. Although both writers admit that their work is autobiographical in nature, Arabella is not Michaela, and Hannah is not Lena. Their fictional character and identity as writers are inherently intertwined but still distinct.

The plot of both episodes “It Just Came Up” and “American Bitch” are centered around the female protagonist’s confrontation of a male abuser’s inappropriate sexual behavior. Both women experience sexual violence at the hands of a male writer in a higher position of power than themselves, and they recon with the realization of the assault and its subsequent psychological impact. Both episodes discuss topics of consent, assault, and rape with great nuance. Through the subjective experience of their protagonists, Coel and Dunham reveal the widespread cultural confusion, ambiguities, and misunderstanding of what qualifies as sexual misconduct in the first place. Both episodes, too, are centered around the discussion of digital media power to empower survivors, to expose perpetrators, and to mobilize a widespread movement to “cancel” abusers.

*I May Destroy You* and *Girls* do not exist within a cultural vacuum. In addition to their own lived experiences, Dunham and Coel incorporate world events and news stories into the television content. These topics are timely and salient in the recent #MeToo era of 2017, in which a hashtag sparked a movement of widespread awareness of the magnitude of sexual misconduct in the creative and entertainment industry. Both shows are HBO originals, distributed on a platform that is known for its complex storytelling, uncensored imagery of sex and violence, and high budgets. Therefore, the limitation of visual and linguistic censorship allows for more raw creative expression. Coen and Dunham do not hold back.

Despite the thematic similarities in content, *I May Destroy You* and *Girls* utilize different narrative structures and devices, which impact the viewer’s sense of closure by the episode’s end.

*I May Destroy You* is a serialized show spanning one season. Therefore, the plot from each episode continues through to the next. *Girls* is also a heavily serialized show, spanning six seasons. However, the episode in question is an anomaly because it follows the rules of an episodic structure instead. The individual episode can stand alone as its own story with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Additionally, this episode is unusual not only in its narrative form but also because it is a bottle episode. The entire episode takes place in one location, fictional author Chuck Palmer's apartment, a set that has not been shown on any previous *Girls* episodes or any following episodes either. "American Bitch's" ability to stand alone is significant, as the episode's content holds more weight given its structural anomaly.

In *I May Destroy You*, Arabella experiences a realization of the sexual assault within the first five minutes of the episode, contributing to a sense of narrative closure by the end of the episode. The scene begins with Arabella fantasizing about her ex, Italian drug lord Biagio, before waking up next to her new romantic interest, Zain, a successful writer she met through her publisher. Zain is still sleeping while Arabella looks at him sadly, indicating that she wishes he were Biagio instead. The alarm sounds. Zain wakes. Arabella whispers, "morning" before kissing three quick pecks on the cheek. She wakes up looking put together, wearing her iconic pink wig and a matching plum lingerie set. She opens her phone to "Yoga challenge day 29," in which she attempts the backbend. This is an idyllic morning. She is in the zone, successfully accomplishing the challenging yoga pose. The sunlight is streaming in Zain's studio apartment, noticeably more luxurious than her own crowded bedroom. Zain joins Arabella for a flirty moment on the floor and they have the following dialogue:

"You're turning into a computer... gulping down ones and zeroes, going wherever they tell you to go. Where did you find this show?"

“On my phone.”

“So it just appeared on the screen?”

“Obviously not.”

“I was — I don’t know, I was looking for something and it just came up.”

“Exactly. One. Zero.”

It is notable that the title of the episode, “it just came up,” appears in Zain’s dialogue. Arabella did not necessarily choose the yoga challenge. Rather, the algorithms chose her. Likewise, the nature in which Arabella’s assault is realized “just comes up,” in part, due to algorithms. Zain continues his morning to take a shower while Arabella switches from yoga to a podcast instead. She swipes through the application under the category, “We think you will love,” a compilation of media that an algorithm is suggesting based on her online activity. Arabella settles on the seemingly random podcast titled: Tea and Two Chicks, episode “Condom Removal.” She puts in her headphones and the podcast hosts begin to speak. The woman says, “Then he secretly took off the condom. Like that’s so messed up. There are actually Reddit forums where men share tips and tricks and even phrases like he said to me, ‘I thought you knew. You mean you didn’t feel it?’”

Mid-sentence, there is a cut to an earlier scene in a previous episode in which Zain’s language directly mirrors the language of the woman on the podcast. After Arabella notices that the condom came off during sex, he says, “I took it off. I thought you..” After listening to the podcast, Arabella is hit with a moment of realization, that their condom mishap was not an accidental innocent mistake; it was a malicious act of violence, gaslighting, and manipulation. All these emotions of shock and horror are visible through her facial expressions.

The podcast continues, “I mean, it must have been sickening to realize you’d been played like that...” before the sound fades into the background. The audience sees Arabella’s stunned reaction and her moment of realization that the man in the shower who is offering to buy her coffee sexually assaulted her several days prior. Her freeze and flight emergency reaction is triggered, and Arabella leaves the apartment suddenly without a word. Arabella then leaves his apartment without saying a word. She walks down the streets of London barefoot, only wearing his button up. She stops in a used clothing store to purchase a pair of pants and shoes. The podcast continues, “What’s the look on their faces? Like what is going through their head, do you think?” Arabella continues to walk, her face stoic, an intentional decision to show Arabella’s face of shock in her own moment of realization.

However, while this is a moment of great shock value to Arabella, it is not a moment of shock to the viewers. The preceding episode established a division of knowledge between Arabella and the audience, in which the viewer sees Zain remove the condom during sex without Arabella’s consent while Arabella does not, due to the nature of the sex position. Arabella continues the walk to her hair appointment. Instead of getting the “regular,” she opts to shave her head. Her visual transformation in the course of five minutes is drastic. Arabella starts the episode wearing matching lingerie and pink hair. Once she realizes the nature of her assault, she wears mismatched pants and shoes and now has a bald head. This exterior transformation signals that she too has transformed on the inside.

In *Girls*, Hannah experiences her realization of the sexual assault in the last five minutes of the episode, contributing to a sense of narrative openendedness and unease at the end. After publishing on a niche feminist website criticizing Chuck Palmer’s sexual misconduct allegations among four young women, Palmer invites Hannah to his luxurious apartment to discuss the

writing. Hannah is nervous at first when she physically enters his dual domestic and professional space. She wipes the sweat from her armpits in the restroom and carefully lines up her shoes in the hallway. He intentionally intimidates her by flaunting a photograph with Toni Morrison and a personally signed Philip Roth book. He explains, "I'm not looking to get an apology from you. I'm looking to show my side of the story." Hannah listens to Palmer's perspective before pointing out the inherent power imbalance dynamic. He indicates that women seek sex as an experience so that they will have a story to write about, while Hannah contests that in reality, women agree to sexual acts so "they feel like they exist."

Despite their disagreements, the two seem to come to a sort of closure by the end of the episode. He compliments her as a writer, her sense of humor, and gifts her the signed Roth book. 21 minutes into the episode, he asks, "Hannah, Would you lie down with me for a moment. Just a moment. And I'd encourage you to keep your clothes on to delineate any boundaries that feel right to you. I just wanna feel close to someone in a way that I haven't in a long time. If you please." Hannah pauses. From her facial expression, she looks concerned. Things are about to take a worse turn.

Palmer then lies on the bed in a fetal spoon position on his side. Hannah lies down on her back, stiffly holding the book across her chest while staring at the ceiling. She says, "I'm sorry I wrote something about you that upset you so much without considering all the facts." He replies, "It's right. I'm not angry." He rolls over to his other side to face Hannah, unzipping his pants, revealing his penis. She looks down, pauses, then grabs it before releasing. Their dialogue continues, "Oh, my fucking God! I touched your dick. You pulled your dick out and I touched your dick. What the fuck and now it's still out."

This is a moment of great shock to both Hannah and to the television viewers. In contrast to *I May Destroy You*, there is not a division of knowledge in regards to the realization of the assault. The viewer witnesses the act of sexual violence as it happens to Hannah on screen. Thus, the attack of Hannah by extension, becomes an attack on the audience. The audience shares her horror, creating a moment of discomfort for the viewer. Sitting in this discomfort is important in order to both empathize with Hannah's trauma and to fully feel the emotional weight of this scene.

After Hannah has her moment of verbal realization, Palmer smiles creepily at Hannah before being interrupted by his daughter's arrival home. Off screen, we hear her voice say, "Hey Dad." Palmer replies, "Hi love. Hi honey," while still making eye contact with Hannah. As Hannah tries to escape the apartment, the daughter invites her to listen to a flute performance. Horvath and Palmer sit on opposite couches in silence, both their facial expressions on full display. For the final two minutes, she looks at him looking at his daughter, silently reconciling how this man can both be a good father and violate women.

Ultimately, she leaves the apartment and walks down the streets of New York City alone. The episode ends in a quiet moment of contemplation, reminiscent of Arabella's half-naked walk down the streets of London after realizing her assault. This quiet ending leaves the viewer to ponder many unanswered questions. Why did Chuck Palmer choose to reveal himself to Hannah? Was it a malicious act to prove his power as a move of intimidation? Will Hannah "use" this experience as writing material, or will she keep quiet? This quiet ending is unusual. Hannah never acknowledges this interaction with Chuck Palmer in any subsequent episodes. Although she writes about the alleged assault about other women such as Denise, she never speaks out about her own. It is ironic and somewhat counterintuitive that this episodic *Girls*

episode leaves things more open ended than the serialized *I May Destroy You* episode, which has more closure by the end of the episode.

Both writers explore the complexities of cultural misunderstanding of what qualifies rape and sexual assault. Coel and Dunham explore the messiness about sexual misconduct in their writing, how there are gray areas and not a universal understanding. Rape is not limited to the stereotype of violent penetrative vaginal sex by a male stranger onto a woman. Rather, it is more complex. In *I May Destroy You*, all characters confront the messiness of realization of assault, from Arabella's condom removal by Zain and her drugging at a nightclub by a stranger, to Terry's unknowingly prearranged threesome in Italy. Additionally, the legal understanding of sexual assault is not widely known or understood by the public. During the middle of "It Just came up" episode, Arabella goes to the police station to discuss the genetic evidence from her previous assault. She has a conversation with the police officer:

"So many different types of sexual assault. Didn't even know you could get raped in the mouth before this."

"You have no idea."

"Secret condom removal?"

"That's rape."

"It's very informative."

"Yeah, the problem is when people don't know what is a crime and what isn't a crime, they don't report it and then people get away with it."

*I May Destroy You* presents the topic of condom removal as rape in the UK. However, this legal definition of rape differs in other countries. In *Girls*, Dunham explores similar grey areas of sexual assault, including the sexual coercion of Denise's blowjob and Hannah's handjob.

Horvath and Palmer discuss the story of one accuser named Denise, who came forward after giving him a blowjob in a hotel room. Palmer laments, “I have never fucking forced anyone to blow me. That is not my style.” This quote highlights the blurry lines on understanding what qualifies assault, that force is not limited to a gun to the head, but can instead be more subtle in implicit power hierarchies between participating parties. The show leads the viewer to question the overlap between regretted sexual activity and sexual coercion. When Palmer exposes himself to Hannah, she knows that his actions are wrong but she cannot yet put words to these actions. There is not a neat way to label his behavior. Instead, she showcases all three reactions to danger: fight, flight, and freeze. First, Hannah freezes when she lies on the bed stiffly. Then, she fights in her moment of realization of this misconduct, screaming, “You didn’t even put it away. I can see your dick. It’s right there.” She then attempts to flee the situation before being convinced to watch his daughter’s flute performance. Like Hannah, Arabella also showcases these three primal responses, in a different order: freeze, flight, and then fight. Both variations in this sequence of response are legitimate, justified, and realistic responses to sexual assault.

The assault narratives in *I May Destroy You* and *Girls* call into question: to what extent are men in positions of power destroyed or ruined by accusations? The narratives implicitly argue that these men are not completely devastated by accusations, but digital media plays a powerful role in “cancelling” abusers, possibly to a greater extent than victims do. In the episode’s climax, which occurs in the final five minutes, Arabella gets on stage at the Writer’s Summit to read her novel in progress. Instead, she says:

“Zain Sareen is a rapist. He took a condom off in the middle of having sex with me He placated my shock and gaslighted me with such intention that I didn’t have a second to

understand the heinous crime that had occurred. I believe he is a predator. One woman has come forward and informed me of the same experience, so I'm not the first... He is a rapist, not rape- adjacent or a bit rapey. He's a rapist under UK law. If you're in the States, he's rape-adjacent. If you're in Australia, he's a bit rapey."

After publicly accusing Zain, Arabella turns away from the podium and walks away from the applause. The silhouette of her newly shaved head is highlighted amidst the blurred background of the audience. This verbal accusation is a moment of reclamation of her power, her delayed "fight" verbal response in reaction to her assault. In this moment, the episode achieves closure.

The very title, "I may destroy you" calls into question who is the agent of destruction and who is the object of destruction. Is Zain destroying Arabella, or is Arabella destroying Zain? The word "may," indicates that there is nuance in the act of destruction, that there is a possibility of negatively altering someone's reputation, but that one cannot be completely destroyed. Arabella has the individual agency to accuse Zain, thus beginning a spiral of his destruction. However, the ultimate agent of destruction is not Arabella. Rather, it is social media, an unpredictable virtual entity that feeds off of communal input, feedback, and engagement. As information online goes viral, social media holds more and more power to potentially destroy Zain's reputation.

For Arabella, her assault causes her psychological trauma and writer's block, but she is able to persevere after her trauma. Arabella becomes an instant microcelebrity and gains a large social media following after a recording of the event goes viral online. Soon memes surface, mocking Zain. After the accusation, Zain becomes a widely recognized villain, but he is not completely destroyed by these allegations, as he maintains his publishing contract, monetary, and literary success under pen name "Della."

In *Girls* too, there is explicit conversation between Horvath and Palmer over the role digital media plays as an agent in destroying a person's reputation. Palmer contends, "isn't that the crazy part about all of this? Like about being alive right now, that so much of your life, your world can be destroyed by something called Tumblr without an 'E.'" Palmer argues that these allegations ruin his reputation, which negatively impacts his daughter. He cannot eat or sleep and has failed to cope with juice cleanses, silent retreats, and therapy. Hannah contests that destruction is an "overstatement," pointing out that Palmer is doing fine despite the accusations; he has successful book reviews in the New York Times and the fancy apartment. Hannah continues, "That's why the internet is so cool because it takes all the voices that have been marginalized." Palmer responds, "some might argue it's a monster we've created that will ultimately kill us."

In *Girls*, the agent of destruction or cancellation is not necessarily the accuser. Rather, the agent of destruction is the technology platform itself that functions as a tool to allow the everyday person access to power and influence. Perpetrators are threatened by the technology which allows for issue advocacy and viral spread of information. Sexual assault and technology are inherently intertwined in the 21st century. Both Dunham and Coel are aware of this phenomenon and incorporate this discussion into their subsequent texts.

Dunham and Coel write two episodes confronting the niche but universal topic of women realizing their sexual assault and the psychological impact on both the accuser and the accused. They write complex stories with developed characters, and both narratives are complete with a beginning, middle, and end. What differentiates the two texts is their narrative and structural choices to either have the audience realize the assault before the protagonist realizes so or for the audience to realize the assault at the same moment the protagonist realizes. In *I May Destroy*

*You*, the audience realizes the assault before Arabella does in the first five minutes. In *Girls*, the audience realizes the assault at the same time Hannah does in the last five minutes. Even though Hannah and Arabella are living different experiences, one as a white woman in NYC and the other as a black woman in London, there is a universal vulnerability of both characters' attempts to process their sexual assault after the fact. There is great authenticity in both character's stories, in their efforts to make sense of their own confusion and to find closure from the trauma.