Female “Lone Wolves”: The Anti-Social Heroine in Recent Television Series

CORNELIA KLECKER

In her late 2016 article, “What Does It Mean to Be a ‘Good Woman’?”, Emily Rapp marveled at Homeland’s Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), admiring the “strange, fantastical, beautiful mess that makes her terrific at her job as CIA station chief and an outright failure as a partner, a mother, a friend. . . . Her goal is singular: to be good at what she does, at all costs.” This kind of female protagonist, the “lone wolf,” who is single-mindedly focused on her profession and de prioritize personal relationships, is exceptionally rare. However, whether in literature, film, or television, the “lone wolf” has been a commonly used character trope when it comes to male heroes/protagonists. While it has by now become acceptable for female characters to have a job, excel at it, and even be in charge on occasion, not seeking a steady relationship and never wanting children still seem to be transgressions of norms, which may be tolerable for a villain but not for a heroine. In other words, being antisocial, not filling the relational roles (of a girlfriend, a wife, a mother, a sister, or a daughter) that female characters have been reduced to for so long, still appears to be too much of a gender defiance for female protagonists. Nevertheless, some recent changes in the depictions of female television characters might have paved the way for the occurrence of (if only a small number of) antisocial heroines in contemporary American television. Exploring how these antisocial heroines are depicted in specific television series that seem to attempt to approximate this
kind of lone wolf in female characters reveals a glaring double-standard. Unlike male lone wolves, whose lack of steady relationships tends to go unquestioned or to be considered as heroic sacrifices, the depictions of female iterations of this character trope focus on this antisocial behavior and almost uniformly portray it negatively. In other words, the series constantly undermine these heroines’ disinterest in relational roles and single-minded dedication to their jobs either by pathologizing the grounds for this behavior themselves or by punishing the characters who engage in it. This pattern is evident in many recent American, as well as British, television series, including some (such as Godless, Homecoming, and Sharp Objects) that have not yet received a lot of academic attention.

The character trope of the lone wolf is a hero (or antihero) who is resolutely focused on his mission to the detriment of his capability or willingness to have meaningful relationships, which makes him unattached and antisocial. As Tim Edwards explains in his “Lone Wolves: Masculinity, Cinema, and the Man Alone,” lone wolves are a “key figure” in cinema that are “historically located in the Western genre” (44) and a frequent major attribute “is their silence, rarely speaking of some unknown trauma they have suffered” (43). The fictional world has been filled with such Western cowboys riding into the sunset at the end of their films but also with Zorros, Sherlock Holmeses, James Bonds, Ethan Hunts (Mission Impossible), and Walkers Texas Ranger, with Dark Knights (Batman) and Michael Knights (Knight Rider). In the first decades of the twentieth century, Louis Joseph Vance even published a series of novels that centered on the character Michael Lanyard, a criminal turned private detective better known as “The Lone Wolf,” which also inspired numerous film and television adaptations.

As observed by critics and scholars alike, the latest golden age of television has been defined by the dramatic rise in complex antiheros and “difficult men.” This phenomenon is explored, for instance, in Brett Martin’s comprehensive study Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution, which discusses The Sopranos’s Tony Soprano, The Wire’s Det. James “Jimmy” McNulty, Mad Men’s Don Draper, and Breaking Bad’s Walter White. The antihero as an archetype is, in essence, a flawed hero who is morally ambiguous, has unlikable character traits and performs questionable actions. In her book, The Rise of the Anti-Heroine in TV’s Third Golden Age, Margaret Tally points
out that depictions of antiheroes explore masculinity within the historical contexts that these characters find themselves in and adds: “The qualities we find compelling in these characters are generally associated with masculine traits such as pride, violence or seduction” (6).

Tally further argues that these stereotypically masculine characteristics build the framework for an antihero, which is why it is rather challenging to formulate a clear definition for their female counterparts who have emerged in a noticeable quantity during the past few years. Tally proposes that the antiheroine is more varied and identifies different types and characteristics that do not always apply to all of them. She finds that some are indeed very similar to the male antihero in that they are portrayed as “difficult,” such as Piper Chapman in *Orange Is the New Black* and Amy Jellicoe in *Enlightened*, or in the way they actually embody stereotypically masculine traits such as aggression, as do Olivia Pope in *Scandal* and Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder* (7).

Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda, and Diane Negra, too, have observed a change in the depiction of women in recent years, particularly when focusing on series that offer a “female perspectival centrality.” They argue that, although the 1990s and most of the 2000s were dominated by postfeminist sentiments, post-2008 television series offer evidence that “some established protocols of postfeminist representation are subsiding.” One critical transformation is that, even though series such as *The Good Wife*, *The Honourable Woman*, and *Veep* still fixate on the issue of career-family balance, work is not automatically deprioritized, let alone completely eclipsed by family-related responsibilities. Another significant development Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra identify is the increasing willingness of female protagonists to sideline, to a certain degree, what would be considered stereotypically female desires for domesticity and a steady relationship. Just like motherhood no longer has to overshadow a woman’s work, romance is no longer automatically prioritized over it either.

However, these instances are relatively rare. Various studies have concluded that women in general have always been underrepresented on television, with only a slight upward trend until the number of female characters hit a peak with percentage points in the low 40s in the early 2000s, which has been give-or-take stagnant ever since (Lauzen, “Boxed In 2017–18” 2; “Where We Are on TV 2018–2019” 4;
Hunt et al. 16–22; Smith et al. 10). Only the two most recent annual studies both marked a historic high that, however, still underrepresents reality. According to Martha M. Lauzen, 45 percent of speaking roles as well as major characters on all platforms were female, though this came after detecting a two-percent decline to 40 percent the previous year (Lauzen, “Boxed In 2018–19” 2 and “Boxed In 2017–18” 2, respectively). The GLAAD Media Institute reported that 46 percent of all regular characters on broadcast primetime television were female (“Where We Are on TV 2019–2020” 7). Some of these studies also analyze the gender distribution as it relates to occupational status and found that, in this area as well, women are underrepresented, being less likely to possess an identifiable job or to be seen at a workplace actually working (Smith et al. 12; Lauzen, “Boxed In 2018–19” 13).

Despite these numbers, it has generally become acceptable for a female character to have a job, be good at it, and even occupy a leading position. However, completely refusing to fill the relational roles to which female characters have been reduced for so long appears to be too much defiance of gender roles for female protagonists to this day. Firstly, television series rarely depict female characters who defy these roles, and, secondly, in the rare case that a television show does feature an antisocial heroine, that character’s role never goes unquestioned. It is almost always made an issue, often a central issue— unlike in the majority of depictions of male lone wolves, who never face this type of scrutiny. Interestingly, even though the appearance of antisocial heroines is quite rare, these shows’ portrayals of their female protagonists already reveal certain patterns. Unlike male lone wolves, whose depiction tends to focus on their exceptional skills and their heroism, the storylines of most female iterations of this character type seem to challenge their life choices and even punish them for them.

The psychological thriller Homecoming, for example, centers on Heidi Bergman (Julia Roberts) and cuts back and forth between two timelines. One takes place in early 2018, when Heidi works as a counselor at Homecoming, an experimental Department of Defense program. The second occurs years later, when she works as a waitress and is approached by Thomas Carrasco (Shea Whigham), an investigator from the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General,
who is looking into an anonymous complaint about the since terminated program.

Heidi has never had a serious relationship and is not inclined to have one now. During her time at Homecoming, she ends her casual relationship with Anthony (Dermot Mulroney) the moment he gets too serious. When they meet and catch up years later, he is very surprised that she quit her job:

Anthony: You’re joking. You, you quit your job? The only thing you cared about?

Heidi: Anthony, that’s not true.

A: Well, that’s not how I remember it.

... 

A: It seemed like you didn’t care about anything except your job.

H: Okay.

A: Which, I understand how important that was for you, helping those guys, but it, it was hard for me.

(“Optics” 00:25:35-26:27)

Heidi did indeed pour all her energy into the job. During a memory flashback, the audience learns that Heidi was hired for the position at Homecoming because she promised complete and utter dedication to it, as she explained during the job interview: “You’re looking for someone who won’t hold back, who is willing to build their life around this work? That is me. That is what I want. I, I am ready to just put my whole heart into this and, uh, just give it everything I’ve got from beginning to end. Absolutely” (“Work” 30:00-20).

On the face of it, Heidi seems to be a rare example of a female lone wolf. She is not interested in finding a life partner but finds complete fulfillment in her work as a counselor helping to develop a groundbreaking protocol that should cure veterans’ PTSD. However, her dedication and commitment to this job turn out to be to the detriment of others and she ends up being punished for it. Eventually, Heidi realizes that the program “cures” veterans by not just erasing their trauma but their entire memories of the traumatic
experience including related events. When she reports this troubling outcome to her superior, he considers it a huge success. During the same conversation, she finds out that she was misled about the final goal of the program. She thought it was to treat the veterans in order for them to live healthy lives as civilians. In fact, though, the Department of Defense wants them cured so they can be redeployed. Bewildered by this news, Heidi absentmindedly enters the Homecoming building, where she runs into a new group of veterans about to start the program. She has difficulty talking to them, so a colleague offers to take over, whispering that she seems confused. Heidi responds with a stern “I’m fine, I wrote the script” and seamlessly launches into her welcome speech (“Protocol” 00:04:02-04:03). However, when her favorite patient tells her that he will return to a war zone, which he could never have done without her help, she decides to sabotage the program in order to shut it down. She also takes some of the drugs that cause memory loss herself in order to forget this ever happened and to punish herself for having let it happen. In light of this event, Heidi quits her dream job never to return. She moves in with her mother and starts working as a waitress at a local diner. Heidi’s selfless actions did not turn her into a hero but she was punished for them instead—she had to sacrifice all her ambitions to do the right thing.

Related to the notion of punishing female lone wolves is that of pathologizing them and their actions. In many of these more recent television series that feature an antisocial heroine appears an evolution of what Diane Negra identifies as “pathologizing single femininity.” She analyzed HBO’s Sex and the City in the context of the postfeminist idealization of women’s deliberate choice to withdraw from the public sphere and return, as it were, to the home, and explored the criticism of single career women as “selfish, emotionally stunted, and ultimately regretful about ‘forgetting’ their essential roles as wives and mothers.” Even today, this pathologizing of single femininity is not only still very prevalent but taken to an extreme in more recent shows.

One popular way of accomplishing this is the suggestion that if a woman is career-driven, she is destined to choose terrible partners. As, for instance, Eliana Dockterman observes: “It’s an emerging TV trope—a woman who excels at her job but for some inexplicable reason makes terrible choices when the man of her affection enters the picture.” Dockterman concedes that male characters, too, often
perform questionable actions for their romantic interest, but, when they do, those are deliberate and calculated risks taken in order to save the life of the person they love. This, in turn, paints them as brave and compassionate heroes. On the other hand, women’s choices, when it comes to their romantic interests, are presented as utterly selfish and self-destructive (Dockterman). Tally, too, stresses that Homeland’s Carrie fulfills the longstanding stereotype that a female character can only excel at her job by sacrificing her personal life while male antiheroes often have families (36). The actual issue here is not really that Carrie “can’t have it all” but that she cannot, or perhaps better—at least for four seasons—she does not want “it all.”

This is, in fact, one of the distinct and normally unquestioned traits of the lone wolf trope: the character chooses to avoid or reject meaningful relationships. However, in the case of Carrie, the fact that she does not want to settle down is portrayed extremely negatively. It is presented as a flaw and not as a character trait that is either simply accepted or explicitly appreciated given the demands of her profession. She is eventually confronted with an unwanted pregnancy and decides to have the baby. Nonetheless, she is determined not to give up her job but to leave her daughter, Frannie, with her sister, Maggie (Amy Hargreaves), instead. Of course, this is considered a mother’s and, therefore, a woman’s ultimate sin. Consequently, Carrie’s unwillingness to take care of her child is not just presented as such—as a woman who does not want to play the role of a mother and homemaker—but is taken a severe step further.

In episode two of season four, Carrie returns to the United States after working on a case abroad and visits Frannie at her sister’s place. Carrie is visibly uncomfortable holding her and keeps handing her back to her sister. Despite the long separation from Frannie, she does not want to spend time with her and is preoccupied with her work. Maggie becomes exhausted by Carrie’s behavior and eventually confronts her: “This is not what we agreed. You were going to take her with you to Istanbul. We were back-up. Fine. All of a sudden you’re off to a war zone, so she can’t come with you, and I . . . I’m just saying that you bring a life into this world, you take responsibility” (“Trylon” 00:21:48-22:05). Upon that, Carrie offers to take care of Frannie the entire next day. The following morning Carrie is alone with Frannie for the first time, feeding her, changing her diaper, going for a car ride, and finally bathing her. As she rinses the soap
off, the baby’s head briefly slips off her hand and under water. Carrie quickly brings the head back above the surface but then suddenly contemplates actually drowning her. She lets the head sink slowly further back into the water. In a point-of-view shot, Frannie looks up at her mother with bathwater already blurring her view. Shocked by her own thoughts, Carrie takes her daughter out of the bathtub and holds her close, trying to prevent herself from crying (“Trylon” 00:23:44-29:07). In other words, in this scene, Homeland essentially equates Carrie’s disinclination to serving her role as a mother with a desire to actually kill her daughter.

This trope of “the bad mother” stands in stark contrast to how fatherhood tends to be depicted in television. The Killing, similar to Homeland, portrays Sarah Linden as an utterly neglectful mother. She is shown as obsessed with her job as a detective and the murder cases she works on, which leave her very little time for her teenage son, Jack (Liam James). She is chastised by colleagues and friends alike and so, eventually, her son moves to live with his father in a different city. But this, too, is not portrayed as a sensible solution but as her personal failing. Sarah is explicitly characterized as a bad mother because only a bad mother would give up her child. At the same time, the father’s absence from his son for most of his life was never really deemed an issue and is only rarely commented on in passing throughout the show. The moment he decides he wants to assume the role of Jack’s father, the authorities are quick to grant him custody despite his long history of being completely absent. Noteworthy in this context is also that, according to Kim Akass, the issue of motherhood is depicted completely differently in Forbrydelsen, the original Danish version: “[Sarah’s] haphazard parenting style, continually putting the demands of the case before the needs of her teenage son, is never questioned.”

These shows “re-traditionalize” motherhood with their emphasis on bad mothers. Vicky Ball claims that shows such as Sex and the City, Ally McBeal, and Desperate Housewives re-traditionalize certain femininities, specifically in the way they present marriage as the natural and therefore only right choice for women by focusing their storylines on finding “the right man” (255). Ball points to Elspeth Probyn’s discussion of postfeminism and new traditionalism in connection with female-centered television shows of the 1980s, such as Who’s the Boss?, Roseanne, and Thirtysomething, in which she identifies exactly this illusion of choice for women: “Quite simply, new
traditionalism hawks the home as the ‘natural choice’—which means, of course, no choice” (Probyn 130–31). Similarly, shows such as The Killing and Homeland depict motherhood and the desire to be a mother as a given, as a natural choice. Therefore, if this choice is either partly or resoundingly rejected, this does not just make a bad mother but a terrible woman and human being altogether.

In some ways, Homeland and The Killing also suggest that the only logical explanation for a woman defying this natural choice must be a mental issue. This is another dominant theme in series that center on antisocial female characters. Homeland’s Carrie is bipolar, which is initially presented as contributing to the skillset that makes her an asset in her work as a CIA agent, but it also often makes her behave irrationally. As Anat Zanger puts it in her analysis of Homeland: “Carrie’s bipolar disorder enables the series’ creators to use ‘clinical discourse’ . . . in order to repeatedly neutralize her authority and her moral and intellectual superiority” (736).

In addition to this undermining of her heroism, this disorder is also implied to be the reason why she does not want a committed relationship. In the last episode of season four, shortly after Carrie’s father, who was also bipolar, passed away, her estranged mother Ellen (Victoria Clark), who simply left her family fifteen years earlier, unexpectedly seeks contact again. During a conversation, Carrie reveals that she always believed that her father’s mental illness was the reason why her mother vanished years before:

Carrie: He always said that you left because of him, because he was too impossible to live with.

Ellen: No. I mean, it wasn’t easy. It was a circus at times, you know that.

C: Yeah.

E: But I broke it apart. I got pregnant [an extramarital affair] and couldn’t face up to what I had done.

...  

C: I’ve always thought that being bipolar meant that you couldn’t be with people. Not for the long haul ’cause they’ll up and leave you soon enough.
E: No.

C: Well, that’s what I thought. All this time.

E: It’s not true. Please, believe that.

C: I don’t even know if that’s possible anymore.

E: It’s possible.

(“Long Time Coming” 00:42:58-45:15)

Carrie’s view about the reasons for her parents’ split is thus corrected, which lays the groundwork for Carrie’s settling down in Berlin that the audience learns about at the beginning of the next season.

Toward the end of season two of *The Killing*, Sarah Linden wakes up in the closed ward of a psychiatric hospital not knowing how she got there. She is told that she is there on a seventy-two-hour suicide watch. While the audience finds out that she was wrongfully committed in order to help cover up a crime, they also finally learn more about the fact that she was previously a psychiatric patient. Earlier episodes hinted at this troubling past, but the truth is only explicitly revealed in the ninth episode of season two, when Lt. Erik Carlson (Mark Moses) tells Det. Stephen Holder, Linden’s partner (Joel Kinnaman). Holder tries to get her released and therefore seeks out Linden’s closest friend, Regi Darnell (Annie Corley), to ask for help. She tells him that Holder should not be too convinced that Linden is well:

Regi: I don’t like it that she’s in there and she doesn’t wanna be. But I’ve seen what she does to herself. Who’s taking care of Jack [her son]?

Holder: He is in Chicago with his dad.

R [exasperated]: Work is the last thing that she needs right now. That’s why she got put in there in the first place. I’ve seen what happens to her when she neglects everything else in her life. When she thinks that she needs that case more than she needs sleep or food, more than her own son.

(“72 Hours” 00:08:06-:40)
Nobody but Holder believes that Linden was committed to the hospital under fraudulent circumstances, and so the psychiatrist decides to keep her. She is suddenly released since Holder managed to track down her former psychiatrist, Dr. Rick Felder (Callum Keith Rennie). What the audience finds out only in this episode is that he is an already familiar face. They met Dr. Felder not as Linden’s psychiatrist but as her fiancé, with whom she was set to move to San Diego at the outset of the series. Similar to Carrie, Linden, besides the issue of mental instability, additionally belongs to the category of female characters whose professionalism and commitment to their work is undermined by their choice of partner for a romantic relationship.

Another example of an antisocial heroine whose antisocial behavior is rationalized by depicting her with a mental issue is Detective Sonya Cross (Diane Kruger) in the remake of *The Bridge*. Even though this is never explicitly mentioned, it becomes apparent that Cross is on the autism spectrum, which is presented as the main reason why she is not only not interested in a serious relationship but also repeatedly puzzled about behavior and actions connected with dating and marriage. Two episodes in, her partner, Det. Marco Ruiz (Demián Bichir), with whom she is investigating the current case, briefly talks to his wife on the phone. He tells his wife that Sonya says “hello” and hangs up the phone:

Marco: My wife says “hi.”

Sonya: I didn’t say “hello.” I don’t know her.

M: Ah, you will meet her. She’s very curious about you.

S: Why?

M: She wants to know how we are getting along.

... 

S: Is that why she called?

M: No.

S: Doesn’t she know you’re working?

M: Yes. She just wanted to hear my voice.

[Sonya slightly nods, clearly perplexed.]

(“Calaca” 00:12:10-:50)
Not much later in the same episode, we see Sonya at a bar making eye contact with a man, who we later learn is called Paul (Jason Wiles). Paul comes over and asks if he can buy Sonya a drink. She declines and so he leaves. Sonya, puzzled again, follows him:

Sonya: Why did you walk away. I just didn’t want a drink.
Paul: Ah, okay.
S: Do you wanna have sex with me? We could go back to my place.
P: What, is this some kind of joke?
S: No. Why, you married?
P: No.
S: Wanna have sex, yes or no?
P: Yes.
S: Good.

(“Calaca” 00:28:19--56)

Clearly, Sonya’s pursuit of casual sex is linked to her mental condition. It is part of her pathology and not simply a woman’s right. In Homeland, too, Carrie engages in one-night stands time and again, which are never depicted as positive, or at least without any value judgement, but always presented as destructive. This behavior is also frequently linked to Carrie’s mental instability, as Alex Bevan observes: “Homeland repeatedly frames Carrie’s promiscuity as pathological because her one-night stands narratively coincide with periods of psychological distress. Her method of pursuing men . . . and her failure to remember exactly who she slept with are also colored as deviant” (146). This also means that, unlike Sex and the City, Ally McBeal, and Desperate Housewives, which de-traditionalized female sexuality (as argued by Ball), series with antisocial heroines appear to re-traditionalize it in that they portray the pursuit of casual sex as a symptom of the pathology.

Past and/or present trauma is also the reason given for antisocial behavior in three other very recent series that otherwise could not be more unalike: the Western drama Godless (2017), the psychological thriller Sharp Objects (2018), and the superhero adaptation Jessica Jones
Godless centers on the Western town of La Belle that has been inhabited mostly by women ever since a mining accident killed almost all the men. Therefore, some women had to adjust to this new circumstance by assuming more traditionally masculine roles. The most explicit example is Mary Agnes McNue (Merritt Wever), whose new-found independence is immediately signaled by her choice of clothing—men’s pants instead of dresses—when we first meet her in the second episode. She tries to negotiate with J. J. Valentine (Christopher Fitzgerald), who wants to buy the La Belle mine, now that there are no more men who can work it:

Valentine: So, tell me, Mrs. Cummings—

Mary Agnes: McNue.

V: Excuse me?

M: I’ve returned to my maiden surname. Albert’s dead. No reason for me to keep carrying his name about like a bucket of water. He’s got a brother in Missouri for that.

V: How independent of you [chuckles]. So, tell me, Miss McNue, how has the lovely town of La Belle fared these past two years without any men around?

M: We’ve done alright.

(“Ladies” 00:13:00-:45)

Mary Agnes and her husband were not able to have children, but she also confesses to Callie Dunne (Tess Frazer), with whom she has a romantic relationship, that she was not sure whether she even wanted any. When her brother Bill (Scoot McNairy) finds out about this relationship, he confronts her:

Bill: Jesus, Maggie.

Mary Agnes: I get lonely same as you, Bill. Where are you running to this time?

B: I ain’t running nowhere. I’m gonna help Marshal Cook bring in Frank Griffin.

...
B: Are my children gonna be alright with you?
M: Why wouldn’t they be?
B: Look at you. You know, you ain’t the same.
M: What’s different about me?
B: Well, you’re not maternal no more.
M: Maternal?
B: Well, yeah.
M: Bill, I loved my husband, may he rest in peace, and I love William and Trudy, too. But I’m done with the notion that the bliss of me and my sisters is to be found in childbearing and caregiving.

(“Ladies” 00:39:34–:40:50)

In many ways, Mary Agnes is depicted as a very strong and progressive female character. She even organizes and fronts the defense of the town when they are invaded by a gang of criminals. However, her strength and adoption of stereotypically masculine traits is, once again, pathologized. It is rationalized by the trauma she suffered from losing her husband and everybody else in the mining accident. Additionally, it is presented as caused by necessity, not by choice. She had to step up because of the lack of men. What is also notable is that, even in a series that is mostly set in a town inhabited by a vast majority of women, prominent male characters easily outnumber female ones. And Godless also focuses more on the former: The final showdown is between the male (anti-)hero and the principal male villain. Once more, it is the man who literally rides into the sunset leaving town.

In Sharp Objects, on the other hand, a woman, Camille Preaker (Amy Adams), is the clear protagonist. She is a dedicated journalist, who is put on an assignment in her hometown, where the investigation of a murder of one and the disappearance of a second teenage girl is underway. Camille is unattached and usually seen wearing plain clothes (dark jeans and long-sleeve shirts). In the third episode, she talks to her half-sister Amma (Eliza Scanlen), who came to her motel room drunk:
Amma: Do you have a boyfriend?
Camille: No.
A: Don’t you want one?
C: Sometimes, depends.
A: Kids? Don’t you want a little baby? Babies are so cute.
C: Well, I wouldn’t know the first thing to do with a baby.

(“Fix” 00:04:53-00:05:22)

What we eventually learn is that Camille is deeply traumatized by several events in her past. Several flashbacks reveal that Camille’s sister died when they were only children, which left her grief-stricken. She was also sexually assaulted by a group of high school football players. Furthermore, she has had to deal with a mother who constantly found fault with her. All these traumata led to Camille seriously self-harming, cutting herself so frequently and severely that now her entire body (except for her hands and face) is covered in scars. This, in turn, at least partly explains her choice of clothes and her disinclination to have a serious relationship. Both are designed to hide her physical as well as psychological condition. In the end, however, the societal norm seems to be restored: Camille is partly “healed,” as she assumes a maternal role taking in and caring for Amma after their mother is arrested, tried, and found guilty of the murders.

*Jessica Jones* bears striking similarities to *Sharp Object* in its depiction of the heroine. The title character (Krysten Ritter), a private detective with superhuman strength, initially only investigates small cases to make ends meet but winds up saving New York from the show’s villain, Kilgrave (David Tennant). The audience gradually learns that Jessica suffered multiple traumata in the past. As a child, she was in a car accident that killed her parents. Later, as an adult, she was in a forced relationship with Kilgrave, who has the power of controlling people with his mind. This caused her to suffer from PTSD after she finally managed to break from him. Since then, she has had no interest in any serious relationships—romantic or otherwise. A frequent source of income appears to be following cheating spouses, one of whom prompts her to think (which the audience can
hear in a typical film noir voice-over): “Cases like this remind me of why I’m single” (“AKA 99” 00:31:11-14).

As the series progresses, more details of Jessica’s past are revealed, not least due to the investigative efforts by her childhood friend Trish Walker (Rachael Taylor). In the first episode of the second season, Trish is adamant about Jessica confronting her traumatic past in order to be able to cope better with her still open psychological wounds:

Trish: Jess, Kilgrave isn’t the only ghost inside your head. But he cracked something open in you—

Jessica: And I’m recovering.

T: By drinking more, fighting more? More meaningless cases and more meaningless sex?

J: Hey, don’t knock meaningless sex.

(“AKA Start” 00:10:31-45)

Once again, “meaningless sex,” being a loner, and the refusal to fill relational roles (with the exception of her friendship with Trish) are pathologized, accounted for by Jessica’s psychological problems that stem from several traumata.

Given all these examples, it becomes apparent that what many of these heroines have in common is the fact that, as Alyssa Rosenberg among others remarks, “fictional men can get away with murder, while fictional women . . . still get punished for enjoying sex and prioritizing their careers over their families.” Why are one-night stands, if encouraged by female protagonists, pathologized while, as Edwards puts it, male promiscuity is traditionally portrayed “as merely playboy hedonism” (47)?

The Fall highlights and at the same time reinforces this very point in the second episode of the first season. Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson) is the lead detective investigating a series of murders and has the bad fortune to instigate a one-night stand with Detective Sergeant James Olsen (Ben Peel), who is shot dead shortly after their night together. Her sexual encounter with him is cross-cut with one of the serial murders, thus essentially linking these two acts on some level (Bevan 150–51). On the other hand, the hypocritical reaction of
her male superior, Matt Eastwood (Stuart Graham), is also criticized in a conversation between the two:

Matt: I’ve spoken with Assistant Chief Constable Burns. He tells me that Detective Sergeant Olsen visited you in the hotel room in the early hours of Monday morning.

Stella: That’s correct.

M: Can you tell me the purpose of that visit?

S: Sexual intercourse.

...  

M: We retrieved two phones from Sergeant Olsen’s body.

...  

M: Two of these are media messages. Can you tell me what he sent you?

S: I didn’t open them.

M: Why?

S: I didn’t want to.

M: Because he was a married man?

S: I didn’t know that at the time.

M: You didn’t think to ask?

S: He didn’t think to tell me. . .

M: When did you first meet Sergeant Olsen?

S: That’s what really bothers you, isn’t it? The one-night stand. Man fucks woman: Subject—man, verb—fucks, object—woman. That’s okay. Woman fucks man: woman—subject, man—object. That’s not so comfortable for you, is it?

(“Insolence” 00:49:93-51:37)

Another factor that might make audiences uncomfortable about anti-social heroines is that there is still this very strong expectation that
female characters are likable. And this likability can, perhaps, most easily be achieved by adhering to familiar relational roles. Following the storyline of a career-driven woman may be more palatable if the audience also sees her taking care of family members. Jason Mittell actually makes the case that persistent cultural norms are the reason for the low number of female antiheroes. He speaks of “cultural norms . . . where men are more likely to be respected and admired for ruthlessness, self-promotion, and the pursuit of success at any cost, while women are still constructed more as nurturing, selfless, and objects of action rather than empowered agents themselves” (150; also qtd. in Tally 101). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, though not in the context of television, has made similar observations about women in power:

We have been so conditioned to think of power as male that a powerful woman is an aberration. And so she is policed. We ask of powerful women—Is she humble? Does she smile? Is she grateful enough? Does she have a domestic side? Questions we do not ask of powerful men, which shows that our discomfort is not with power itself, but with women. We judge powerful women more harshly than we judge powerful men.

(25)

Interestingly, one of Jessica Jones’s antagonists refers to her as an “aberration” in an attempt to dehumanize her. Pryce Cheng (Terry Chen), a rival private investigator, repeatedly clashes with her and eventually attempts to sue her. However, Jeri Hogarth (Carrie-Anne Moss), who is a powerful attorney Cheng works for but who also frequently hires Jessica to do investigative work for her, declines to pursue this issue any further:

Cheng: You can’t drop the lawsuit against Jones without consulting the client—me.

Hogarth: Given that you work for me, I felt confident you would agree.

C: I don’t, so I’m hiring a new firm to take on the case.

H: Why are you wasting your time and money?

C: It’s not about money.
H: Everything is about money. Let it go. There's enough work in this town for both of you.

C: I'm not gonna compete with a freak show.

H: Oh god. You got beat by a girl. Deal with it!

C: She's not a girl. She's an aberration.

H: Makes you feel better about yourself, doesn't it? Calling her names, less than “other.” Making yourself feel superior. Well, you're not.

(“AKA God Help the Hobo” 00:10:28-11:07)

Due to her superhuman strength, Jessica is, of course, a much more explicit “deviant” since she does not just transgress social norms but breaks biological standards. Therefore, she is not just a powerful woman in a symbolic sense but in a literal, physical sense, which is all the more threatening to male characters. Perhaps, this perceived threat partly accounts for the fact that female lone wolves are still so rarely found in the current television landscape.

In conclusion, recent developments in television series have increased the number of female-centered shows and of female characters that are not entirely confined to the domestic space and to relational roles. The pursuit of domesticity and romance is not necessarily the main focus of female protagonists anymore, even though it still tends to play an important part in their storylines. However, while the trope of the lone wolf has been commonly used for male characters, it is still exceptionally rare when it comes to female characters. When creators do employ the trope, they usually depict female lone wolves quite differently than their male counterparts. For one thing, the heroines’ antisocial behavior is normally presented as an often central conflict of the series and is virtually never just considered “a given.” A common theme is that many of these characters’ actions and choices are pathologized and often used to undermine their heroism rather than elevate it. Therefore, many female protagonists who are the best at their job inevitably destabilize their own lives and sometimes careers by choosing the wrong partners. Those characters who are mothers but choose to prioritize their work over their children are commonly depicted as terrible mothers, and their failure as a parent becomes a main focus of the
motherhood is retraditionalized as it is presented as the natural, normal choice for a woman that, if not chosen or just deprioritized, makes the woman unnatural and abnormal—and most likely mentally ill. Severe psychological problems, such as bipolar disorder and PTSD, seem to be the common reason employed by these series as justification for the behavior of antisocial heroines and their rejection of fulfilling relational roles. Unlike the way male lone wolves tend to be portrayed, many of these television shows choose to emphasize the failures caused by the female protagonists’ antisocial behavior. Rather than concentrating on their heroism and the successes that stem from their single-minded focus on their profession and the tasks at hand, creators either punish female lone wolves or restore the norm of women fulfilling relational roles by series end.

Notes

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**Corinelia Klecker** is Assistant Professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, where she teaches American culture, politics, and the news media as well as American literature, film, and television. Her present research interests are diversity in scripted US-American prime time television series and contemporary US politics. She is the current treasurer and former secretary of the Austrian Association for American Studies. Her first monograph *Spoiler Alert! Mind-Tricking Narratives in Contemporary Hollywood Film* was published with Universitätsverlag Winter in 2015. Her other publications include “Symbolic Annihilation and Drive-By Misogyny: Women in Contemporary US-American Television Series” in *Transgressive Television: Politics and Crime in 21st-Century American TV Series*, “The Other Kind of Film Frames: A Research Report on Paratexts in Film” in *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*, “Authentica-
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