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Revenge by Castration: Breaking the Narrative Thread of Rape in Maria-Antònia Oliver's Fiction

Abstract

Inspired by the feminist demonstrations of the late 1970s in Barcelona, Maria-Antònia Oliver responded to the crime of rape by incorporating the slogan that appeared following these protests, *contra violació, castració* (against rape, castration) in "Fils trencats" (*Broken Threads*), written in 1984 and published in her 1989 collection *Tríptics* ('Leaflets'), and in *Estudi en lila* (*Study in Lilac*, 1985), the first installment of the Lònia Guiu detective fiction trilogy. Since they distrust the police and the legal system to punish their assailants, the rape victims in these two narratives take justice into their own hands, removing the male body part that was used to victimize them. In "Fils trencats," however, we witness the transformation of the victim into avenger, which we will analyze here, a process given visibility only at the end of *Estudi en lila*. Doubling as both victims and criminals, Oliver provides the narrative space for these victims to tell their respective stories and allows for an alternate form of justice to triumph. Using feminist scholarship that has concentrated on the rape-revenge film, such as that by Jacinda Read and Sarah Projansky, as well as criticism on literary representations of female violence by Helena González Fernández, this article will emphasize how Oliver tackles this lack of female victim visibility, and ushers in a new era for fictional responses to rape.

Keywords

Maria-Antònia Oliver, *Tríptics*, "Broken Threads", gender violence, sexual assault, rape-revenge, feminist protests, *Estudi en lila*.

Revenge by Castration: Breaking the Narrative Thread of Rape in Maria-Antònia
Oliver's Fiction

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In 1977 and 1978, the Coordinator of Women's Groups in Barcelona organized a series of campaigns and protests that took place on Barcelona's streets to mobilize women against gender violence in Catalonia.¹ Multiple demonstrations were organized throughout other regions of Spain at the same time to create a larger protest, according to Maria Ángeles Larumbe (*Las que dijeron no* 'Those who said no' 153-60). These large-scale street protests were an answer to the daily threat of violence against women in the domestic and public spheres as well as a way to call attention to the inability of legal institutions to punish perpetrators effectively. Following the death of Franco in 1975, the second wave feminist movement in Spain advocated for victims of gender and sexual violence and would continue to address a legal system that was still markedly adverse to female victims of sexual violence, despite reforms passed in the 1978 Constitution (including the legalization of contraceptives and the decriminalization of adultery) and the Divorce Law of 1981. Larumbe points out that the feminist movement came together not only to denounce any form of physical and sexual assault, but also to openly criticize the legal system's failure to punish abusers and rapists, even claiming that these institutions openly protected victimizers instead of victims (153). In fact, in her 1991 study on gender violence in Spain, *Violencia contra la mujer* ('Violence Against Women'), Lidia Falcón estimated that between two hundred thousand and two million women were abused each year in Spain (36), and Linda Gould Levine cites a 1992 study by the Institut Català de la Dona (Catalan Institute for Women) that claimed that at least ten percent of the Catalan female population (330,000 women) were considered habitual victims of gender violence (66). Levine highlights that despite the fact that feminist groups and women's associations insisted repeatedly that legislation was needed to specifically address gender violence and abuse, it was not until 2004 that comprehensive legal protections against gender violence in Spain were approved, due to both the rise in violence against women and the high profile given to these cases in the media (67).

In the late 1970s, however, there was really only one journal, *Vindicación feminista* ('Feminist Vindication'), that took it upon itself to give visibility to the victimization of women in an effort to both eradicate gender violence and promote a sense of solidarity among women who ascribed to feminist ideals. While it only lasted three years, *Vindicación feminista*, which was headed by the lawyer and founder of Spain's Feminist Party, Lidia Falcón, gave prominence to female victims of male assault through articles, letters, and reports, starting with its first issue in

1976 (*Las que dijeron no* 153). *Vindicación* reported gender violence that the mass media of the time ignored unless it resulted in the victim's death (154). For its second issue, in fact, Falcón analyzed all the reports of violence against women in the first six months of 1976 in Barcelona under the headline, "Cada día puede morir una mujer" ('Every Day a Woman Can Die'), thus providing readers with a real picture of the type of female victimization that was occurring on a daily basis (154). *Vindicación* would continue this work in all of its 1977 issues, calling for women to organize and form part of the movement. As Margaret E. Jones explains,

it made a significant contribution to the feminist cause. Its pages offered a counterdiscourse to the rhetoric and policies that were a legacy of the Franco regime: its treatment of uncomfortable or forbidden topics broke the silence of historical and cultural taboos. *Vindicación feminista* dealt directly and unapologetically with issues (politics, civil law, working conditions, women's rights) affecting women in post-Franco Spain. (311)

With *Vindicación feminista* spearheading a revolution in regard to female victim visibility, it became clear that it was time to move these protests from the written page to the streets.

Larumbe draws attention to one particular protest that took place in Barcelona on May 14, 1977, given the rise in sexual assaults against women and children in Catalonia. Women took over the center of the city as the protest started out in Portal de l'Àngel and continued on to Fontanella and Ronda Sant Antoni until they reached Passeig de Gràcia (*Las que dijeron no* 157). As part of their efforts to take back Barcelona's streets and to ensure that their message was received by the general public, these protesters painted slogans such as "Basta de violaciones" 'No More Rape' in red on the city streets and displayed signs conveying messages such as "Basta de agresiones y violaciones machistas" 'No More Sexual Assaults and Rape' and "Machismo y fascismo es la misma represión" 'Sexism and Fascism are the Same Repression' (157). One of the most provocative slogans that also appeared following these protests was "contra violació, castració" 'against rape, castration' in lilac-colored graffiti on Barcelona's buildings, which became a call to action against male rapists (*Una inmensa minoría* 'An Immense Minority' 181).² According to Shelley Godsland, these demonstrations were organized "to highlight [women's] situation as victims of male violence and to petition for changes to legislation in a bid for heightened protection" (28). These protests also stressed that if the country's legal institutions would not adequately prosecute male sexual aggressors, a new kind of gendered justice would have to prevail and replace a system that was unfriendly to women.

Authors in Spain, especially female writers, have been employing crime fiction since its boom during the Spanish transition to democracy to draw attention

to the problem of violence against women and to give visibility to the often forgotten victims of gender violence. Inspired by the feminist demonstrations of the late 1970s, Maria-Antònia Oliver, the creator of Spain's first female detective series, the Lònia Guiu trilogy, incorporated the slogan "contra violació castració" 'against rape, castration' in "Fils trencats" (*Broken Threads*). This story was written in July of 1984; first appeared in Kathleen McNerney's anthology, *On Our Own Behalf: Women's Tales from Catalonia* (1988); and later was included in Oliver's collection of short stories, *Tríptics* ('Leaflets') (1989).³ A similar rape revenge story would also form part of *Estudi en lila* (*Study in Lilac* 1985), the first installment of the Lònia Guiu novels, but unlike the novel, which is filtered through the perspective of the female sleuth, in "Fils trencats" we witness the transformation of the victim into avenger, which we will analyze here. In both works, the victimized rebel against their aggressors, taking away the weapon, the body part, that these men have used to hurt them, but with "Fils trencats" we observe the process by which the nameless rape victim enacts her vengeance, a process given visibility only at the end of *Estudi en lila*. Since they distrust the police and legal system to punish their assailants, these women take justice into their own hands, doubling as both victims and criminals. By giving visibility to rape and its aftereffects in both texts, Oliver provides the narrative space for these victims to create their own feminist form of justice by telling their respective stories.

Responding to the same lack of victim visibility addressed by the feminist protests of the 1970s and 1980s, Oliver's crime fiction presents us with a new inscription of the female body in the genre, marking a transition to a de-eroticization of the woman character. As Godsland and Nina Molinaro have previously suggested, Oliver's revisions to the genre would also rely on theories of rape and victimization from the 1970s and 1980s that problematized the idea that "Rape is held to be a natural behavior, and not to rape must be learned" as stated by Susan Griffin in 1971 (27). Defining rape as an "act of violence," Griffin also considers that "rape is a form of mass terrorism, for the victims of rape are chosen indiscriminately" (35). Susan Brownmiller would later add to this argument in 1975 by claiming, "From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (15; emphasis in original). While both Griffin and Brownmiller were highly influential in redefining rape as a crime of violence that subjugates all women, later theorists like Catharine MacKinnon in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989) would emphasize the sexual nature of rape:

If sexuality is central to women's definition and forced sex is central to sexuality, rape is indigenous, not exceptional, to women's social condition. In feminist analysis, a rape is not an isolated event or moral transgression

or individual interchange gone wrong but an act of terrorism and torture within a systemic context of group subjection, like lynching. (172)⁴

What rape demonstrates, according to MacKinnon, is that women are not in control of their sexuality because male dominance depends on the sexual, on their access to and domination of the female sex (127). For this reason, MacKinnon states that “[f]rom women’s point of view, rape is not prohibited; it is regulated” by the state and its legal system (179).

This idea that patriarchal institutions allow rape to happen is echoed by Molinaro in her study of contemporary female crime fiction in Spain. As Molinaro makes clear in her analysis of *Estudi en lila*, “Oliver’s novel participates in the feminocentric detection of deception, all the while characterizing rape as a crime of violence. Rape is a crime committed by men against women, because the former consider it their right and because they assume that they can get away with it” (113). In a similar fashion, “Fils trencats” responds to the crime of rape through a narrative of revenge, providing what would later be the basic framework of the story of the elegant antiquarian, Elena Gaudí, in *Estudi en lila*. In this novel, Gaudí hires Lònia Guiu to find three men under the pretext that they gave her a false check for some artwork. The truth, however, is that Gaudí is looking for these men so that she can castrate them as her form of revenge for gang-raping her. Unlike *Estudi en lila*, the first-person narrative is focalized through the rape victim in “Fils trencats,” beginning with the obsessive search for the three men, followed by the cold and methodical act of castrating her victimizers, and ending with a letter where she justifies her crime because she is protecting all women from these particular offenders. Helena González Fernández argues that fictional women who respond to gender violence with violence are motivated by a desire to change the law, and so their violence cannot be studied as an individual response, but must be thought of as a sociopolitical response on behalf of a community of women—a response that comes from and must be analyzed from a feminine perspective (34). Both Gaudí and the nameless protagonist of “Fils trencats” make certain that the three men who gang-raped them can never rape again, something that the justice system would be unable and unwilling to do for them and for potential future victims. To understand female violence, María Xosé Agra Romero suggests that we study it as a rupture from traditional conceptions of women as pacifists and nurturers, and instead, recognize women’s capacity for action (55). By presenting castration as an alternative form of punishment for rapists, Oliver casts an incriminating perspective not on the female castrators, but on the police and the legal system’s ineffective handling of cases of gender violence, bringing visibility to unjust and deficient social responses to crimes against women just as *Vindicación* had done in a non-fictional format.

The rape-revenge narrative, which became quite common in films of the 1970s and 1980s and coincided with the rise of the second-wave feminist and anti-rape movements, “feature[s] both a rape (or many rapes, or an attempted rape) and an act of revenge. At its most basic level, a rape-revenge film is one whereby a rape that is central to the narrative is punished by an act of vengeance, either by the victim themselves or by an agent (a lawyer, policeman, or, most commonly, a loved one or family member)” according to Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (3). While the rape does not necessarily have to be shown, for “intensity and centrality do not automatically translate to visibility,” the crime of rape “must be the core action that provokes revenge” (4). Since the legal system is considered inefficient in its prosecution of rapists, this, as Heller-Nicholas demonstrates, “in part provides the premise for many rape-revenge films: a rape survivor (or her agent) often takes justice into her own hands when the law proves incapable or unwilling to punish the criminal responsible for her suffering. Arguably, revenge is rarely ever more complicated than when triggered by rape” (7). There are basically two types of rape-revenge movies according to Sarah Projansky—those that center on male avengers and those where the female rape victim takes revenge on her rapists. Projansky emphasizes that “[t]he films in the second category, however, can be understood as feminist narratives in which women face rape, recognize that the law will neither protect nor avenge them, and then take the law into their own hands” (60).⁵

Beyond showcasing how these female victims punish their rapists, the successful rape-revenge narrative should also underscore “women’s experience of post-rape trauma” (Projansky 58). What is significant, as Jacinda Read points out, is “the rape-revenge film’s emphasis on the transformation of the heroine from victim to avenger” (8), for “one of the most obvious gaps the rape-revenge film opens up is that between the (feminine) victim and the (feminist) avenger and the way in which the films negotiate the transformation from one to the other” (12). It is for this reason that Read asserts that “rape-revenge is best understood not as a genre, but as a narrative structure, which has been mapped on to and across not only a whole range of genres, but a whole range of historical and discursive contexts” (25). For the purposes of demonstrating the crisis of female sexual victimization, Oliver appropriates and maps the rape-revenge structure onto “Fils trencats” as the transformation from victim to avenger is detailed in this first-person narration. We witness how the protagonist moves beyond the trauma of the violence that she has experienced and decides to take action not only for herself, but for all potential victims.

Although in the first part of “Fils trencats” we are unaware as to why exactly this woman is looking for these three men, we already imagine something quite sinister as her need for vengeance is explained and justified:

Ara tenia la força de la rancúnia, el desig poderós de venjança. Llavors només tindria la desesperació de la impotència. A més, deixar-ho córrer em costaria tant de temps i tants d'esforços com portar a terme el meu pla. I, en una situació com la meua, jo sabia, coneixent-me com em conec, que la immobilitat em seria més anguniosa que l'acció. M'havien estafada, m'havien enganyada, m'havien maltractada. M'havien deixada tirada com un drap brut, inservible, i havien desaparegut sense preocupar-se de les conseqüències. I jo, tota sola, m'havia d'enfrontar a tot. (95-96)

Now I had the strength that hatred gave me, the powerful desire for vengeance was on my side. Later on, I would only have desperation and impotence. And, furthermore, letting it go would cost me just as much time and effort as carrying out my plan. And in a situation like mine, I knew, knowing myself as I do, that immobility would be more difficult for me than action. They had deceived me, they had tricked me, they had abused me. They cast me aside like a dirty rag, no longer useful, and had disappeared without worrying about the consequences. And I had to face it all, alone. (129)⁶

The protagonist makes it clear that she needs to carry out her revenge now so as not to be overcome by victimization and stagnation. Her planning is systematic, calculating, and even obsessive as she quits her job in order to focus solely on finding her abusers. Her narrative of revenge, therefore, consists of reframing or “rethreading” her rape, and the way to do so is to (re)connect her rapists, Albert, Pere, and John, to the crime. More than just a rape-revenge narrative, then, “Fils trencats” is a story about how to narrate the experience of rape and its consequences, for as the narrator/rape victim underscores from the start, rape affects all of those involved: “els comptes ens afectaven a tots quatre i els havíem de passar plegats. Era una qüestió de principis” (96) ‘the consequences affected all four of us and we had to settle accounts together. It was a matter of principle’ (130). The irreversible nature of the crime of rape is likewise emphasized from the beginning, which is precisely why she opts for castration as the punishment for her rapists. As her planning evolves, she even goes to a doctor to gain an understanding of what the castration procedure will entail—how much blood and pain will occur as a result—but also to confirm its irreversibility. With the doctor’s confirmation, she thinks to herself, “Millor. I si no ho hagués estat, d’irreversible, ja m’encarregaria jo que ho fos” (96) ‘So much the better. And if it hadn’t been irreversible, I would make sure myself that it was’ (130). The crime of rape merits an irremediable consequence for the perpetrator.

Looking to carry out this punishment, she becomes a woman on a mission: “No tenia altra cosa a fer: només trobar-lo. I després d’ell, seguir el fil fins als altres

dos” (96) ‘I had nothing better to do: just find him. And after finding him, to follow the thread to the other two’ (130). She begins with one of her rapists, whom she remembers seeing at the Pub Clau in the Passeig des Born in Palma, Majorca prior to the assault because she was initially attracted to him. It was two weeks after she saw him at the bar that he and two other men raped her, and thus, finding him represents the start of her rape-revenge narrative. Returning to the pub where she first saw him, she stakes it out in hopes of seeing him again, and when this does not work, she goes to the police to see if she can trace him back to the car where her rape occurred. In a commentary on the way police handle rape reports, she imagines what she would have told the police had she reported her rape:

Miri, senyor, era un R14 vermell . . . , no, no he tingut temps d’anotar el número, però del PM de Palma sí que n’estic segura, sí. Sí, un es deia Pere, però no sé si era el propietari. Un altre era un ros ben plantat que fa un temps havia vist al Pub Clau del Born. Amistat? Home, no ben bé . . . Sí, fa molt poc temps, mitja hora més o manco. Sí, he vingut directament a la comissaria per fer la denúncia . . . , que no veu com vaig de macada? (100)

Look, sir, it was a red Renault 14 No, I didn’t have time to get the number, but I’m sure about the PM for Palma. Yes, I’m sure. Yes, one of them was named Pere, but I don’t know if he was the owner. Another was a good-looking blond I saw at the Pub Clau on the Born a while ago. Were they friends? Not exactly. Half an hour more or less. Yes, I came directly to the station to report it, don’t you see how bruised I am? (134)

Having the reader fill in the blanks with what the police would have said to the protagonist, the narrative has us recognize that reporting the assault would not have helped the rape victim, since they would have doubted her account of the crime and merely filed her report away (100). Even though the short story does not go further in depth regarding the ineffectiveness of the police in dealing with sexual assault, we are reminded of one of the slogans of the feminist movement in Spain that warned women about reporting the crime of rape to the police: “Mujer, si eres violada no acudas a comisaría, allí puedes encontrar al violador” ‘Woman, if you are raped do not go to the police station, you may find your rapist there’ (*Las que dijeron no* 157). Failing to get any information regarding the car’s owner from the police, the protagonist realizes that her form of justice requires working outside legal boundaries.

The narrative details the protagonist’s relentless scouring of department stores, offices, and city streets, as she reflects, “Aquella percaça s’havia convertit en la raó de la meva vida. Una raó desenraonada: no em podia aturar. . . . encara que aquella recerca hagués de durar tota la vida, no ho podia deixar estar; perquè

sense aquells tres homes la meva vida no tenia sentit” (102) ‘The chase had become the reason for my existence. A reason beyond reason; I couldn’t stop myself. . . . even if that search lasted a lifetime, I couldn’t abandon it; because without those three men my life had no meaning’ (136). Rape has redefined her, given her a new purpose, and so the search for her victimizers becomes, in her words, a pilgrimage that she begins again each day: “tornava sortir de casa i recomençava el pelegrinatge. Una vorera, tots els cotxes aparcats, tots els bars, totes les botigues, totes les cares d’home. Després una altra vorera. I després un altre carrer, i un altre, i un altre No sé els dies que vaig passar així” (103) ‘I left the house and began my pilgrimage all over again. A sidewalk, all the parked cars, all the bars, all the shops, all the men’s faces. Then another sidewalk. And then another street and another, and another I don’t know how many days I spent that way’ (137). The narrative encircles us in what she calls an absurd obsession, in the persistence of the search that has taken over her life (103). Like the victim, we too feel trapped, searching for a way out of the aftermath of rape as we find ourselves witnessing the protagonist’s compulsive pursuit of her attackers as part of how she experiences trauma, which will later manifest itself in the form of insomnia and flashbacks of her rape.

As Cathy Caruth explains, “trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). The reason for the return and repetition of the event is that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4; emphasis in the original). In “Fils trencats,” the protagonist’s experience of trauma becomes apparent as she describes being accompanied only by her insomnia, feeling so lonely that she comes to the point of feeling nothing at all because she has lost all her friends and refrains from any sort of social interaction. What trauma teaches us, according to Caruth, is that “[w]hat returns to haunt the victim . . . is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6), for a characteristic of trauma is the inability to take full stock of the event as it occurs (7). During this first part of the story, it becomes clear that the protagonist experiences the full and lasting impact of her rape as her trauma unveils itself in varying forms—as insomnia, as detachment, and as we will see further on, as flashbacks.⁷

The obsessive search, which is directly related to how she is experiencing post-rape trauma, reaches a climax when she finally reencounters her blond rapist at the pub, the one she has been searching for this whole time (103-04). Knowing what she has to do, “Una idea es destrià, lluminosa i insolent, de les altres: com devia ser, despullat?” (104) ‘One thought stood out from the others, luminous,

insolent: what would he be like, naked?’ (138). It is the same thought she had when she first saw him, prior to the rape, and now again as she is about to reenact her revenge. This time, however, the scene between them takes a different tone as she consents to a sexual encounter to obtain the information that she needs from Albert:

Se m’acostava, nu, i em començava a desembotonar el vestit rebregat i brut de no sé quant temps de dur-lo nit i dia. Em vaig sentir avergonyida i em vaig desvestir amb una esgarrapada. M’acaronava un mugró, que jo sentia com si no fos meu. M’hauria agradat poder gaudir, sense partit pres, sense altra feina a fer, d’aquell cos i d’aquella tendresa tan insòlita, tan inesperada. Calia esperar, però. Ja havia trobat el fil i calia esperar perquè si frisava massa el fil que el lligava als altres dos es podia trencar. (105-06)

He came up to me, naked, and began to unbutton my dress, wrinkled and dirty from I don’t know how many days of wearing it night and day. I felt ashamed and undressed hurriedly. He caressed one of my nipples and I felt as if it were not mine. I would have liked to have been able to enjoy—without taking sides, without another job to do—that body and that tenderness so unusual, so unexpected. But I had to wait. Now I had found the thread and I had to wait because if I got too impatient, the thread that tied him to the other two could break. (139)

This encounter details the extremes to which this character goes to obtain her revenge even though she does not castrate Albert during this episode. The protagonist subjects herself to playing a role with him in which she struggles between finding him attractive and recognizing him as one of her rapists. In fact, as the scene advances, she also experiences flashbacks from the night of the rape, reliving what one of her rapists said to the other: “Cony, no m’atabalis, Pere!” (106) ‘Damn it, don’t rush me, Pere!’ (140). In this scene, we experience along with the protagonist how “trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (Caruth 2). What Oliver demonstrates in this story is that the protagonist’s story of trauma, as Caruth claims about trauma more generally, lies somewhere “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). It becomes clear that the protagonist’s trauma is clearly interwoven with her current story of survival and revenge.

Moreover, the effects of her trauma are heightened as she forces herself to engage in a sexual encounter that she does not want, and so she battles “[e]ntre el seny de continuar d’incògnit i el desig de donar-me a conèixer. I de sobte em vaig sentir cansada, plena de fàstic. I li vaig dir imperiosament: —Vine, vine!” (106) ‘between the sensible idea of remaining unknown and the desire to announce who

I was. And suddenly I felt tired, full of disgust. And I told him imperiously, “Come, come!” (140). There is no denying the internal conflict that she experiences during this episode, but she decides to wait to enact her revenge upon Albert so that she can connect her other two rapists to the crime. The protagonist’s desire to discover what joins the men to one another suggests a search for the truth that converts her into a detective or investigator of sorts. As Barbara Wilson emphasizes, the transformation from woman-as-victim to taking “the role of investigator means to open the doors upon silence, to name the crimes, to force the confessions, to call for justice and see justice done. And even, sometimes, to take justice in one’s own hands” (222). Following the same trajectory that Wilson plots out for the woman investigator, Oliver’s protagonist begins her story as a victim, but this conversion into an investigator activates her, and so she now seeks justice, but with the added component of revenge.

Seeing a photograph in Albert’s apartment, she recognizes another one of her rapists, who happens to be Albert’s brother-in-law, Pere. In contrast to her encounter with Albert, she goes to Pere’s house under the pretext of preparing a report for a company that she has made up under the assumed name of Julia. She is able to seduce Pere quite easily, and they decide to meet later that evening. The episode with Pere takes on a very different tone as he confesses from the beginning that he likes expensive whores and liberated girls who do not charge for sex (110). Disgusted by this man, she takes great pleasure in demeaning him:

I jo encara no estava del tot despullada que ell ja havia fet el seu fet, davall la seda. I es va sentir tan satisfet la seva virilitat tan demostrada, que jo no vaig poder aguantar el riure. . . . I no era que tingués ganes que aquell cretí em fes l’amor, sinó que m’agradava bufar-li els fums, esbucar-li la peanya on s’havia instal·lat ell solet. (110)

And I wasn’t even completely undressed when he did his thing on the silk. And he felt so satisfied, his virility so obvious, that I couldn’t keep from laughing. . . . And it wasn’t because I wanted that moron to make love to me, but because I enjoyed making fun of his pretensions, knocking him off the pedestal where he alone had placed himself. (144)

The protagonist, therefore, mocks Pere’s pretensions of virility, his idea that ejaculating prior to having sex emphasizes his masculinity. Clearly, she reads his quick ejaculation as precisely the opposite and begins ridiculing him. More than just enacting her revenge, this scene plays with misogynistic views of sex and female pleasure, as we will continue to observe as the episode unfolds.

In fact, the entire scene with Pere deconstructs *machista* attitudes towards sex as she continues berating him while he remains in bed naked, now covering

himself in embarrassment. The protagonist makes it clear to him that “—La força sexual d’un home no es calcula pel gust que pot sentir ell, sinó pel gust que pot fer sentir a la parella. No ho sabies, això?” (110-11) ‘The sexual prowess of a man isn’t based on the pleasure he can feel, but on the pleasure he can make the couple feel. Didn’t you know that?’ (145).⁸ Feeling satisfied with how she has ridiculed him, she drugs him, and as he lies there sedated, “em vaig posar els guants i em vaig tornar acostar al llit. La sang gairebé em va marejar, i el fàstic va estar a punt d’impedir-me acabar la feina. Però la vaig acabar. I ell dormia com un infant” (111) ‘I put on my gloves and went back to the bed. The blood almost made me ill and the disgust nearly kept me from finishing the job. But I finished it. And he slept like a baby’ (145-46). While the castration act is not detailed explicitly as the narrative refrains from giving graphic descriptions of violence, her berating of Pere has set the stage for her ultimate vengeance, and with this first castration, we enter into the next phase of the story, whereby she must link the third man to her rape so as to complete the threading of her narrative.⁹ By uncovering how all three men joined together to victimize her that night, the protagonist retakes control over her narrative so that she can choose her new ending where she is no longer a victim, but an avenger of rape.

Thinking that this third man will show up at the clinic where Pere has been taken, she soon realizes that “el fil s’havia trencat. L’havia trencat jo perquè no havia sabut esperar. Si no m’hagués apressat tant, podria continuar mantenint el contacte amb en Pere i, amb una mica de temps, localitzar el tercer, que de no tenir no tenia ni nom” (113) ‘the thread had broken. I had broken it myself because I hadn’t been able to wait. If I hadn’t been in such a hurry, I could have stayed in contact with Pere and, in time, I could have found the third, who didn’t even have a name’ (147). This idea that the thread has broken has already led her to consider hiring a detective: “¿Però, què li diria? Cerqui un individu així i així que tal dia a tal hora anava amb aquests dos, en un cotxe vermell. Bé, potser sí. ¿Però, qui m’assegurava la discreció del detectiu, quan relacionàs els accidents?” (113) ‘But what would I tell him? Look for an individual like this and like that who on such and such a day at such and such an hour was with those two in a red car. Well, maybe so. But what would assure me of the detective’s discretion when he put the “accidents” together?’ (147). While this victim elects not to involve a detective and does not even consider the possibility of contracting a female sleuth, *Estudi en lila*’s Gaudí does just that—she hires Lònia to find her three rapists because she does not trust the police to handle her case effectively. Moreover, Gaudí confesses this to Lònia during their last exchange as she is about to castrate her final rapist. In this novel, Lònia weaves together the threads of Gaudí’s victimization and sets the stage for Gaudí’s rape-revenge to take place, whereas in “Fils trencats” the victim feels compelled to find this last man herself. The short story’s protagonist concludes that

it is up to her to investigate and solve her own rape case, thus taking responsibility for how her rape-revenge narrative concludes.

From this point forward, the short story advances quickly as she follows Pere's wife and another woman to a restaurant, where they have lunch with the man she recognizes as her third rapist. With the three "threads" tied together, she opts to wait on enacting her revenge against the third man and decides to punish Albert for his part in the crime. Once again, the act of castration is hardly described: "Em va saber greu. Però la sang ja no em va marejar" (115) 'It was a shame. But the blood no longer made me ill' (150). Castration has become mechanical for her, a way of operating. After castigating Albert, she is able to force open the red car where she was gang-raped and waits there in order to castrate her third attacker, whose name, she has discovered, is John. With John, she has a conversation about the night of her rape, reminding him that he assaulted her that night: "I quan li vaig contar els meus encontres amb els altres dos, l'acolloniment va esdevenir terror. — Jo m'hi vaig trobar . . . , jo no volia. . . —Però prou que te'n vares aprofitar, per no voler-ho. . ." (117) 'And when I told him about my meetings with the other two, his surprise turned to terror. "I was just there—I didn't want to—" "Well, for someone who didn't want to, you certainly managed to take advantage of the situation"' (151). Through John, the protagonist pieces together the final version of the story of her rape. As the rape narrative is reconstructed, she is able to regain power over her attackers, recuperate what she lost during the night of the rape, and make one of her victimizers experience the fear and trauma of being attacked.

Like the others, the final castration is mechanical and is narrated without detail. Not even the blood is mentioned in this instance: "Li vaig descordar la bragueta i el vaig capar d'un sol tall. Sense treure'm els guants, vaig baixar de la muntanya conduint assenyadament, sense saltar-me ni un semàfor. . . . Vaig trucar des de la cabina de la cantonada i vaig tirar la bossa de plàstic amb les pellerines dins la paperera que hi havia al costat" (118) 'I undid his pants and cut it with a single stroke. Without taking off my gloves, I drove down from the mountains very carefully, without running even a single light. . . . I called from the booth on the corner and threw the plastic bag with the scraps of skin in it into the trash can next to it' (152).¹⁰ Having punished her third assailant, she watches as they take him into the emergency room and mails three letters that justify the castration of each man. More than revenge, she explains that "També volia impedir que poguéssiu tornar forçar mai cap dona, tots tres plegats o un per un" (118) 'I also wanted to make sure that you could never rape another woman, the three of you at once or individually' (153). She has constructed a new story for herself by breaking the narrative thread that her rapists had written for her as a victim, rewriting herself as a protector of women. This moment also emphasizes the solidarity that our narrator clearly feels towards fellow women. Recognizing that these three men could potentially violate other women, our protagonist brings to life the slogan *contra violació, castració*

‘against rape, castration’ as she becomes her rapists’ prosecutor and judge. Oliver’s victim-turned-avenger not only carries out a new form of justice, but also accomplishes what an ineffective legal system would have been unable to do for her. Thus, she circumvents the judicial apparatus to create justice for herself, but also in solidarity with other potential female victims.

This nameless woman serves as a sort of everywoman or every victim. While her rape is not visually represented, we experience the aftermath of her assault and understand the need to punish these offenders. As she explains at the end of the letter that she sends to her rapists, “Una vegada vaig ser jo la perdedora, i això que no havia entrat voluntàriament en el joc. Ara he imposat les regles jo i, naturalment, he guanyat. Fins mai,” (119) ‘Once I was the loser even though I hadn’t entered voluntarily in the game. Now I’ve made the rules and, naturally, I’ve won. Until never,’ (153). Using the metaphor that is employed throughout the narrative, (re)making the rules means to break the threads of victimization and the trauma that rape has caused. Put differently, through this victim-turned-avenger we witness the power of rewriting victimization and revising trauma in order to survive and overcome rape—a rewrite of the rape narrative.¹¹

Even though *Estudi en lila* employs a similar rape-revenge narrative with Gaudí as our female castrator, we do not witness Gaudí’s transformation from victim to avenger. Instead, we follow the trajectory of the woman sleuth, whose feminist awakenings and feelings of solidarity towards victims of gender violence lead her to carry out an alternate form of justice. In the end, Lònia allows Gaudí to get away with her crime, becoming the victim-turned-avenger’s accomplice because she comes to understand the pervasiveness of the crime of rape. Lònia’s feelings of camaraderie toward Gaudí compel her to allow Gaudí’s rewrite of her rape narrative through a final act of castration. Like the protagonist of “Fils trencats,” Lònia effectively preempts the judicial system in solidarity with current, but also potential, female victims of sexual assault and rape.

In *Estudi en lila*, Lònia with the help of her partner, Quim, investigates two cases simultaneously—that of a Majorcan teenager, Sebastiana, who has disappeared in Barcelona, and another brought to her by the elegant antiquarian, Elena Gaudí, who has hired her to find three men. Though the cases involve two women of different social classes, we learn that the crime that binds them is that of rape committed on Barcelona’s streets. Whereas Sebastiana commits suicide in Lònia’s bathtub, Gaudí, as Lònia comes to find out, has castrated two of her rapists as her form of vengeance. The female sleuth catches up to Gaudí when she is about to castrate her final assailant and asks her what she hopes to accomplish through the act of castration. Gaudí responds by describing her gang rape: “—El dia quinze de maig aquests tres homes em varen fer entrar a un portal i em varen violar. Un darrera l’altre. . . . I jo he decidit capar-los, un darrera l’altre. . . . jo no tenia interès que morissin. Volia que recordessin tota la vida que m’havien violada” (180-81)

‘The fifteenth of May, those three men forced me into an entryway and they raped me. One after the other. . . . And I decided to castrate them, one after the other. . . . I didn’t want the other two to die. I wanted them to remember all their lives that they had raped me’ (149). In this moment, Gaudí paints a picture of her rape by the three men in the plaça de Sant Jaume, the heart and institutional center both of Barcelona and of Catalonia, and confesses that her intention was to castrate each of them as an irremediable punishment for rape, similar to the protagonist of “Fils trencats.” For her part, Lònia allows Gaudí to complete her rape-revenge narrative on behalf of all three women—Gaudí, Sebastiana, and herself—because in searching for Gaudí’s attackers, the female sleuth has also been beaten, groped, and nearly assaulted.¹²

We are reminded that the title of Oliver’s novel, *Estudi en lila*, is also a play on *A Study in Scarlet* by Arthur Conan Doyle, in which we are first introduced to Sherlock Holmes. In a reference to the title, Holmes calls his investigation of the murder “a study in scarlet” when speaking to his sidekick, Doctor Watson. As Holmes explains to Watson, “there’s the scarlet thread of murder running through the colorless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it” (71). In the epilogue to *Estudi en lila*, the explanation Lònia gives to her colleague—the detective Lluís Arquer from Jaume Fuster’s series of detective novels and thus another intertextual reference—about her case has a similar tone, except that a study in lilac is a study not of murder, but of rape. Lònia meets with Arquer to “sell” him the portion of the case that does not deal with Gaudí’s rape, but with the international arms and sex trafficking. As Lònia points out to Arquer, “—No has vist mai cap pintada color lila d’aquelles que diuen *contra violació, castració* violació castració?” (191) ‘Haven’t you ever noticed the graffiti done in lilac saying “Against rape, castration?”’ (155). Here, Oliver invokes the previously referenced feminist campaigns and the lilac-painted slogan on the walls of Barcelona buildings. In Conan Doyle’s novel, there is a clear and direct association between scarlet and blood (or murder), but in Oliver’s novel “lila” could be understood in two ways: as the color of rape or as the color of the feminist discourse about sexual violence, since the color lilac has been traditionally associated with the feminist movement. When Lònia refers to the color of the painted slogan, the implication is that the people who wrote those words are feminists who would perhaps argue in favor of the kind of justice that Gaudí, like the protagonist of “Fils trencats,” has tried to obtain—*contra violació, castració*. Thus, the title of the novel suggests both a study of sexual violence and a study of feminism.

Gaudí’s rape in the plaça de Sant Jaume reinforces the notion that women continue to be victims of the patriarchy and that rape is both “repeated and ritualized,” as Molinaro asserts, which is precisely “the social disorder” that Lònia confronts and takes action against (104). According to Molinaro, “rape happens

because the societies reflected in the novels are organized to facilitate it happening” (110). This, I believe, is the disillusioning realization that Lònia reaches at the end of the first novel of the trilogy: her society has also become a victimizer of women, an aid to rapists by allowing them to remain in the shadows. As Lònia discovers, justice is not possible, for there is no way within the legal order to avenge the crime of rape. For this reason, “Lònia supports a personal justice,” and in so doing, “refuses to reestablish the status quo,” leaving open for debate the question of whether there is “a proper response to rape” (Vosburg 67).

Oliver’s answer to rape in “Fils trencats” and *Estudi en lila* is to allow the female victims to tell their story of victimization and violation, to retake control over their narrative, and to break with the narrative that rape has imposed upon them. In doing so, these rape-revenge narratives transform any potential spectators into witnesses, for as Eleni Coundouriotis explains, “Witnessing, in fact, entails an emotional involvement in what one sees,” for whereas the voyeuristic spectator “colonizes what it sees” by othering, the witness “yields testimony” and is forced to engage on a subjective level (125). Though Suzanne Keen claims that “fictional worlds provide safe zones for readers’ feeling empathy without experiencing a resultant demand on real-world action,” Oliver’s answer to this is to create a space for an act of witnessing to occur (4). Similar to Lònia, we are forced to ask ourselves if the legal and social responses to rape are adequate and fair to victims, or if the extremes that these characters have gone to are in some measure justified because there is no suitable punishment for rape. In both rape-revenge narratives, Oliver places us in the uncomfortable position of problematizing our reactions to rape and identifying with victims of sexual assaults, whereby we must question what kind of justice we wish to see upheld. In an era of protests against femicide and gender violence, such as *Ni una menos* ‘Not One Less’ in Argentina, Mexico, and Peru or #25NFeminista in Spain, we must ask if we are mere spectators to this sort of victimization or if we will rebel against a system that continues to be complicit with victimizers instead of aligning itself with victims.

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Notes

1. For more on this group, see <http://www.feministas.org/presentacion.html> as well as both texts by Larumbe listed in the works cited below.
2. The color purple (and thus, lilac as a lighter shade of purple) has traditionally been associated with the feminist movement.
3. While best known internationally for her Lònia Guiu series, the Majorcan-born Oliver has worked with various genres and is highly regarded as a translator as well (see Cortés and Escandell). The private eye Lònia Guiu first appeared in the 1983 story “On ets Mònica?” (*Where is Monica?*), part of the crime fiction collection titled *Negra i consentida* (‘Hardboiled and Spoiled’) by the Ofèlia Dracs literary group, where the detective protagonist investigates the disappearance of Mònica at the hands of her husband, Víctor. The topic of female rape forms an integral part of the Lònia Guiu series beginning with this short story as Lònia discovers that Mònica was being raped by her husband.
4. For more on the different theories of rape, see Burgess-Jackson.
5. Barbara Creed also talks about the figure of the female castrator in rape-revenge films, explaining that she is “usually a sympathetic figure” and “is rarely punished” within the film (123). Regarding rape trials, Projansky notes that they have been considered by feminists “as *second rapes* or *re-rapes* of women who feel that they—rather than the men who raped them—are on trial,” and so, in the rape-revenge narrative, they are avoided since they are ineffective (9; emphasis in original).
6. All translations are by John Dagenais.
7. The way the protagonist experiences the impact of trauma shares similarities with Caruth’s explanation that “[t]he story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality . . . rather attests to its endless impact on a life” (7).
8. A more accurate translation would be ‘the pleasure he can make his partner feel.’
9. According to Shelley Godsland and Anne White, “Oliver’s novels force us to rethink the logistics of the fetishistic violence which is one of the hallmarks of the hard-boiled genre, by confronting readers with the results of aggression” (224). I

believe that the same applies to this short story, and for this reason: the crime of rape and the acts of castration are not represented.

10. A more accurate translation would be ‘I undid his pants and castrated him.’

11. I am reminded of what Susan J. Brison proposes regarding narrating traumatic memories, suggesting that this “enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma. Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self” (71).

12. For more on the private eye as victim, see Aramburu.

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