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"I'm telling you to stop': Staging the drama of rape, experiment and sexual consent in Ann Quin's *Three* and Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*

Nell Osborne

- 1 Literary counterculture of the 1960s was characterised by its preoccupation with subversive representations of carnality and deviance, particularly in the context of female sexuality. In French writer and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet's experimental 1966 film, *Trans-Europ-Express*, the brooding male protagonist Elias tells Eva, a policewoman posing as a prostitute, that he is not interested in sex. She asks, "What interests you then?" To which Elias's deadpan reply is, "Rape, only rape". Meanwhile, a film director, acted by Robbe-Grillet himself, and his entourage are depicted writing this storyline, according to the premise that it should be "something exciting, with fights, violence, rape, you know". At the end of the film, having discovered her fraudulent identity, Elias ties Eva to the bedframe in a manifestation of erotic dominance, and strangles her to death. Historically, the proliferation of depictions of subversive sexuality within avant-garde literature has been claimed as a politically useful challenge to bourgeois protocols (Glass 2006: 348). Acts or threats of rape enact a provocative offence to the sexual ideals of conjugality, intended to shock the moral sensibilities of audiences. Robbe-Grillet's film postulates the existence of a public hunger for dramatizations of sexualised violence that drives cultural (re)production. The film's viewer, the film playfully infers, may be the "real" rape fantasist. As Rita Felski writes, the ethos of "the avant-garde claims shock as its ultimate weapon, a strategy for confounding and astounding the dim-witted bourgeoisie, the credulous masses, the pompous prelates and guardians of culture" (2008: 110). However, Felski cautions against the historical "vanguardist belief" in "the emancipatory power of shock," (109-10) noting that where shock is "a cultural signifier drafted into service to connote [...] counter-cultural authenticity," (119) it is invariably women who are "hauled in to symbolize the miasmic terrors of unregulated desire" (125).

- 2 In 1970, Kate Millett suggests that modern literature's erotic interest in depicting violence against women constitutes a sexual politics that in turn helps to maintain the sexual hierarchy between men and women. This occurs through, in part, the public dissemination of male cruelty, contempt and the desire to violate the feminine; emotions that are most completely realised in the act of rape (Millett 2003: 44). In this way, feminist ideological critique dramatically contests the "radical" liberatory agenda of avant-garde culture's investment in, and attachment to, representations of transgressive sexual violence. Millett is also one of the first feminist critics to suggest, albeit tentatively, that the threat of male sexual violence is a feature of even highly civilised societies. This is a significant moment in the trajectory of feminist theory: five years later, rape is presented as a fundamental problem within radical North-American feminism's analysis of the reproduction of sexual control (Edwards 1987: 18-9). Discussing the consequences of mid-century avant-garde obscenity debates, Loren Glass claims that the centrality of themes of carnality within the literary consecration of modernist aesthetic value – debates in which women were "notably absent, except as characters in the novels under consideration" – in turn helped to shape, to catalyse, and to orient, the agenda of subsequent feminist critique (Glass 2006: 356). It is in this divisive context that experimental representations of rape, authored by women, have been vulnerable to multiple, contradictory, and sometimes anxious, standards of ideological and aesthetic judgement. This article considers whether experimental literary treatments of sexual violence can be read as historically situated instances of feminist theory. I consider experimental literary strategies alongside depictions of male sexual violence in work by two British women writers: *The Driver's Seat* by Muriel Spark, published in 1970 (1970), and *Three* by Ann Quin, published in 1966 (2001).
- 3 In Britain, the avant-garde literary culture of the 60s and 70s was perceived by some contemporary commentators to privilege "obscurity, obscenity and pretentiousness" (Mitchell 2019: 9), registers in tension with the urgency and accessibility that feminist activists prioritised in attempts to reach and mobilise a mass audience of women. Whilst avant-garde cultures' investment in provoking moral condemnation is presumed to register their antagonism to extant institutional structures, second-wave feminist movements saw many advantages in making their demands for workplace equality and sexual protection to the state in contractual terms (Pateman 2014: 31). In a consideration of Quin's neglect by feminist critics, Loraine Morley suggests it is the sheer difficulty of "pinning down Quin's vision" in relation to sexuality and intent that marks her writing as "politically ambiguous, and hence anti- or at least non-feminist" (Morley 1999: 138-9). Meanwhile, writing about the consistent lack of agency afforded to depictions of female characters in Muriel Spark's novels, Ian Gregson calls her "the least feminist of women writers" (2006: 107). James Bailey suggests that Spark's historical omission from anthologies on experimental writing by women can be, in part, attributed to a critical misapprehension of the feminist implications articulated by her complex writings (Bailey 2015). Arguments about social value that regularly orient discussions of "realism" and "experimentalism," themselves insufficient and contested taxonomies, are the focus of sharpened criticism in the context of representations of violence and sexuality. Writing about sexual violence in the fiction of British experimental writer Anna Kavan, Leigh Wilson notes that criticism has tended to focus "on the supposed unhelpful nature of her writing for any feminist project" (Wilson 2017: 329). Kavan, like Quin and Spark, belonged to a disparate group of British writers committed to formal innovation, responding to artistic ideas from the

continent and America (Mitchell 2019: 2). *Three* and *The Driver's Seat* share a number of notable features. Both are slim, disorientating novels that engage with themes of violence, rape and suicide, whilst deploying narrative strategies associated with the French *nouveau roman*. Protagonists Lise in *The Driver's Seat* and Ruth in *Three* are both positioned as sexually inhibited female characters who repeatedly and verbally articulate their non-consent by saying "no," but are ultimately subjected to male sexual violence anyway. By considering the drama of rape as literary experiment, alongside the feminist struggle to articulate and theorise women's restricted agency in the context of sexuality, I will suggest that late-60s and 70s British experimental writing by women can be read as a discursive catalyst for emerging feminist accounts of violence. I demonstrate how violent avant-garde aesthetic convention is negotiated through feminist anxieties and meditations on sexual violence and gender, in ways that register the irresolvable antinomies of the liberal formulation of consent.

- 4 Discussions of the legacy of the permissive 60s often focus upon people's increased freedom to say "yes" to sexual pleasure. However, Alice Echols stresses the "nullifying" function upon women's sexual determination of the "sixties assault on sexual uptightness" within liberation discourses in radical and countercultural circles (Echols 2016: 13). She claims that saying "no" "left one open to charges of everything from bourgeois respectability and prudery to counterrevolutionary tendencies" (13). Indeed, for Echols, the re-emergence of feminism as a radical ideology was partly motivated by the sexual and gendered fault lines that emerged in the wake of the decade's dogmatic commitment to sexual liberty. One such fault line was the relationship between sexual consent and the postulated consent of the individual to the liberal democratic state (Pateman 1989: 72). Feminist writings have demonstrated that liberal formulations of consent privilege a subject imbued with an "atomistic, disembodied, rational agency" (Drakopoulou 2007: 10) whilst failing to account for the social effects of gender or the operations of power upon subject formation. The Sexual Offences Act 1956, in place in the UK during the 60s and 70s, contained no statutory definition of consent at all. Instead, it advised juries that the word should be given its ordinary meaning, and that there is a difference between "consent" and "submission" (Herring 2018: 421). To consent is to give permission for something to be done. Real consent imagines a scenario in which the subject has yielded, when they had the power to oppose. Mere submission imagines a scenario in which the subject yielded, when they did not have the power to oppose a higher authority. The perceived difference between these two scenarios was therefore fundamental to the realities that could be established. This legal provision neatly sets out the terms of my own enquiry: to what extent can literary experiment complicate perception of the "ordinary" meaning of consent and the social context in which it operates?

***The Driver's Seat* (1970)**

- 5 *The Driver's Seat* by Muriel Spark narrates the days leading up to the death and rape of its histrionic protagonist, Lise, who leaves the ordered environment of her daily routine to travel alone to a foreign city. Lise provides a stark inversion of brooding Elias's deadpan "interest" in "only rape" in *Trans-Europ-Express*. As she fends off the sexual advances of a stranger she shouts, "I'm not interested in sex. I've got other interests and as a matter of fact I've got something on my mind that's got to be done"

(80). This "something", we gradually realise, is the elaborate staging of her own bondage-themed murder, albeit in such a way that will circumvent sexualisation of the fatal penetrative act by knife. Lise does not desire to commit violence but to consent to it, on the condition that there is no rape. As she instructs her murderer: "Tie my feet and kill, that's all" (106).

- 6 Lise shops for her own murder weapon, wears clashing colours to ensure she is memorable to future witnesses, and puts the X on the map where her own corpse will be found by police. Whilst Lise appears as the dynamic engineer of her own death, her motivations are difficult to establish. Lise's self-destructive mission is seemingly driven by a sense of her own destiny. When her colleagues wish her a good holiday, Lise replies, "I'm going to have the time of my life!", covertly referencing her impending death, whilst "hysterically" laughing and crying (9-10). When asked why she is going on holiday, Lise gaily tells a stranger, "I have my boy-friend! [...] I'm going to find him. He's waiting for me" (23). She proceeds to search the city for this hypothetical "boy-friend", encountering and rejecting potential candidates who are not her "type" (35) until she finds Richard, a vulnerable "sex maniac," (103) whom she coerces to kill her according to specific instructions. Everything goes according to Lise's bizarre plan, except that he rapes her "all the same," (106) before he stabs her to death, thereby sexualising the violent act. Robert Ellis Hosmer has read the novel as a theological parable through which the notion of human control is exposed to be illusory: only God is ultimately omnipotent (Hosmer 2017). However, this does not account for the ways in which *The Driver's Seat* frames the question of control within an explicitly sexualised and gendered context. Lise frequently, assertively, and theatrically, vocalises her disinterest in men's sexual advances: "You're not my type in any case, she screams" (81). In a retrospective overview of women's transatlantic 70s literature concerned with rape, which includes *The Driver's Seat*, Elaine Showalter claims, "These violent plots obviously reflect both the social reality of rape and women's intense concern with rape as a sexual problem" (1981: 163). This judicious formulation returns us, with a circular logic, back to the disjuncture between women's perception and a postulated objective reality. In this article, I will suggest that Spark's novel explicitly solicits the reader to consider if real consent, rather than mere submission, can be established, as it simultaneously enacts the sexist legal and cultural assumptions that structure that judgment.
- 7 *The Driver's Seat* employs techniques associated with the *nouveau roman*, which emerged from France in the mid-20th century, characterised by its rejection of linear narrative, psychologised characters and traditional plot, including dramatic progress. It combines an impersonal narrative tone with an excessive, often banal, attention to scopic detail and description. It was popularised by Robbe-Grillet who was equally known for his trademark themes of eroticised power play, sexual sadism, rape and violence, precisely the themes that would galvanize later feminist calls for pornographic censorship. My analysis follows James Bailey's convincing claim that Spark's engagement with the *nouveau roman* in *The Driver's Seat* demonstrates her recognition that its formal effects can be usefully deployed to illustrate the regulatory violence of patriarchal control (Bailey 2015).
- 8 Whilst the narrator uses rhetoric that reflects the qualities of balance and fairness associated with impartiality — Lise is described as "neither good nor bad looking" (21) — it employs an intense, corporeal surveillance of Lise's actions without any corollary

access to a psychological interiority. The surface of Lise's body becomes the privileged site for struggles about signification of intent. In the airport, the narrator tells us, "They look as she passes" (21). We are informed that Lise's unflattering aesthetic choices have singled her out for public judgment "as they also look at" feminine men "whose tight-fitting shirts are patterned with flowers or transparent," and "girls whose skirts are specially short" (21). Lise is thus linked to other socially deviant and sexually marked groups. However, what makes Lise's appearance signify as transgressive to the narrator is not bodily exposure but an outmoded sense of modesty: "the fact that Lise's outfit comes so far and unfashionably below her knees gives an extra shockingness to her appearance" (50-1). This observation contains a judgement about Lise's perceived resistance to the contemporary moment of miniskirts and to the permissive sexual attitudes that they symbolise. As a result, Lise "looks curiously of the street-prostitute class" (51). The narrator identifies Lise's "knee-covering clothes" as the cause of aesthetic shock (51). This creates a paradoxical situation in which perceived sexual resistance is itself erotically marked as transgressively sexual. This, I suggest, is precisely the trap that Spark identifies in Robbe-Grillet's formal technique: any resistance to domination is eroticised and reconstituted as the sign of textual desire.

- 9 Diverging from the conventions established by the *nouveau roman*, Spark employs shocking instances of prolepsis. As described by Mark Currie, "The narrative takes an excursion into its own future to reveal later events before returning to the present of the tale to proceed with the sequence" (Currie 2007: 29). At the opening to chapter three, as Lise is travelling outbound on holiday, the narrator reveals that, "She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie" (25). Through prolepsis, the narrator seemingly reveals the story's investment in eroticised submission. For Currie, prolepsis is useful because it demonstrates that "anticipation is structural [...] insofar as the present of fiction is lived in grammatical acknowledgement of the time of narration" (Currie 2007: 30). If anticipation is an emotion involving either pleasure or anxiety, it also has an epistemic and affective value: it knows what is coming. Whilst the drama of rape is archly suggested as "something exciting" in *Trans-Europ-Express*, Spark imagines a distinct formulation in which violent bodily threat is the precondition of a feminine anticipation of rape. Lise anticipates the threat of future sexual violence as the structural condition of her own existence. Lise is narratively projected into the future as a visual trope of eroticised victimhood, penetrated and bound. However, in a sadistic demonstration of power, the narrator's description of the event does not establish the type of crime that will have been committed: whether a sexual or merely violent crime. Anticipation becomes the defensive strategy through which Lise tries to evade the former possibility, pre-emptively and repeatedly stating her non-consent. Before killing Lise, Richard notes, "'You're afraid of sex,' he says, almost joyfully, as if sensing an opportunity to gain control" (103). For Richard, Lise's fear "of sex" presents an "opportunity to gain control," a strategy that allows him to reconfigure the power balance in his favour. In this way, Spark redeploys the drama of rape as the modified site of narrative transgression in order to dramatize the production of a fearful feminine comportment.
- 10 Writing in 1983 in "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence," Catharine Mackinnon suggests that, through its claim to objectivity, state jurisprudence both exercises and legitimates sexual violence. She critiques the

rhetorical disparities that structure liberal discourses of consent, suggesting that consent constitutes the façade of sexual power only:

Consent is supposed to be women's form of control over intercourse, different from but equal to the custom of male initiative. [...] Apart from the disparate consequences of refusal, this model does not envision a situation the woman controls being placed in, or choices she frames [...] (Mackinnon 1983: 655)

- 11 In *The Driver's Seat*, the idea of being in sexual control is parodied through the novel's many depictions of, and allusions to, the act of driving a car, an established metaphor for modern, sexual agency. Sexual consent both relies upon, and draws attention to, the fictionality of women's access to the ideal of the gender-neutral liberal (legal) subject who enacts his unencumbered free will in the world. Lise, as a driver, is rhetorically on equal terms with the other drivers, by the governing fictions of the free contract of liberalism. However, the car is also invoked as a specifically gendered threat to women. Lise and the elderly widow, Mrs Fiedke, are both "terrified" of "traffic" (55). Lise can drive but is "afraid" to do so because "[y]ou never know what crackpot's going to be at the wheel of another car" (55). Lise is repeatedly driven by men who want to use her sexually against her will. Only the subject in the driver's seat, Spark suggests, has the facility to decide when and where to stop. If the driver's seat is coded as the position of masculinist sexual power, the passenger seat is the corresponding site of a degraded, feminised subjection to power, namely: consent. Carlo, notably a mechanic, insists on taking Lise in his car: "The big man takes her hand and holds onto it tightly as if his grasp itself was a mental resolution not to let go of this unforeseen, exotic, intellectual, yet clearly available treasure" (78-9). In an attempt to prevent Carlo's unwanted sexual advances Lise says, "Stop at once [...] I don't want sex with you. I'm not interested in sex with you. I'm not interested in sex. [...] I'm telling you to stop" (80). Lise's self-reflexive act of "telling" is a gesture that make no difference, since Lise's comportment has already marked her as "clearly available". Ian Rankin writes that "Carlo sees the signs she is sending but misinterprets them [...] By now Lise has sensed that Carlo is not her 'type,' but she has given out too many signals" (Rankin 1985: 152). Rankin's unfortunate phrasing, which blames Lise's excessive production of "signals" rather than Carlo's misreading, reproduces the idea of culpable feminine sexuality that, I suggest, Spark's novel carefully elucidates and critiques through its treatment of the grammar of rape.

- 12 In her cultural and intellectual history of rape, Joanna Bourke documents the pervasive assumption that women who cried rape were lying (Bourke 2008). This concern is reflected in the legal apparatus that emerged to process rape claims. For example, in 1968, an English appellate Judge explained:

What the judge has to do is to [...] convey to the jury that in cases of alleged sexual offences it is really dangerous to convict on the evidence of the woman or girl alone. This is dangerous because human experience has shown that in these courts girls and women do sometimes tell an entirely false story which is very easy to fabricate, but extremely difficult to refute (R v Henry 1969: 153).

- 13 Here, it is women's testimonies that are "really dangerous," as potential threats to the process of law itself. False sexual allegations are anxiously imagined as feminine ungovernability: there is no reliable method through which to determine false accounts from true. However, as noted by Pamela Haag, it is precisely the vagaries of interpretation of what constitutes consent, combined with a limited notion of legible feminine victimhood, which has historically permitted accounts of sexual violation to

be both "derided and systematically represented as indications of the woman's own sexual licentiousness" (Haag 2018: xv). It is the double-edged function of ambiguity — what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick elsewhere calls "the epistemological privilege of unknowing" (1993: 24) — within contemporary cultural and legal interpretations of female sexual consent that Spark's text works to disclose. It is always the responsibility of women to consider, in advance, how their actions may be misperceived, not only by men they encounter, but by the supposedly objective gaze of the law.

- 14 Spark is grammatically attuned to the gendered hypocrisy that structures discourses of sexual testimony and comportment. However, in *The Driver's Seat*, as elsewhere in her work, Spark demonstrates a particular horror for what she derides as the "cult of the victim" (Spark 1992: 35-6). This concerns the way that literary realism, in particular, discursively reproduces powerlessness and victimhood within an economy of perpetrator and victim. Indeed, *The Driver's Seat* seemingly identifies the threat of victimhood, and its feminising effect, as a primary mechanism of oppression. Rosemary Hunter and Sharon Cowan describe the limited options that liberalism provides for consenting subjects in what they term the victim/agency debate:

Either they are conceived of as irrational, vulnerable victims and hence incapable of consent [...] or they can claim the status of atomistic, masculine subjects and are thereby, in the neo-liberal state, compelled to take full responsibility for the consequences of their private "choices" (Hunter & Cowan 2007: 2).

- 15 Sexual rights discourse imagines a paradoxical opposition between the autonomous subject and the defenceless victim. If "real" consent can be established, complicity and agency are legally conferred. Likewise, "real" victimhood confers vulnerability and passivity, attributes associated with femininity. Spark employs the antinomies of liberal philosophy, almost as a maze that maps onto the foreign cityscape that Lise navigates, to highlight its implications for thinking about women's limited recourse to sexual power. Lise "chooses" to become the story's consenting agent rather than its passive female (and by implication sexual) victim.
- 16 Understood from this perspective, Lise's interchangeably erratic, coquettish, and assertive behaviour has an internal logic that can be seen as a deliberate performance of herself as the responsible agent of her own destruction. Lise chooses the unwilling Richard as her murderer, a "sex maniac" (103) who has only recently been released from a psychiatric institution for stabbing women. Spark again invokes the antinomies of legal jurisprudence, which perceives lunatics as irrational and powerless non-subjects, incapable of real consent, with no authentic autonomous self. Richard is "trembling," his "eyes wide open with fear" (101). He "puts up some resistance," (101) until Lise mentions that she has "a car outside" and he "goes with her as if he is under arrest" (102). The passenger seat now represents his relative lack of control: his subjection to power. To the police he later protests, "But this one took me. She made me go. She was driving," (105) trying to convey his inability to resist Lise's greater but imperceptible authority. What is playfully evoked by this subject position is precisely the sense that one's own actions are constrained by forces working outside of one's self, but for which one is paradoxically accountable. Richard is subversively positioned as the legitimate feminised victim of the novel's inevitable violence. His testimony will be duly disregarded by the police and Lise is free to assume the vivifying mantle of victimiser, via a technical loophole. However, Spark soon makes it clear that this status of conferred authority is itself only a precarious, liberal fiction. Lise's final request before she is killed — "I don't want any sex," (106) — is blithely ignored. Once again,

the performance of sexual non-consent only illustrates the fictionality of its rhetorical power before what Spark suggests is structural violence. We are told, "All the same, he plunges into her, with the knife held high" (106). Despite her best pre-emptive machinations, Lise can never, ultimately, outmanoeuvre her self as the feminine object of the text's violence.

Three (1966)

- 17 *Three* by Ann Quin is a novel composed of formally distinct sections. It centres on the relations between a married couple, Ruth and Leon, in the aftermath of the sudden disappearance of their young lodger, S. *Three* draws upon the familiar tropes of detective fiction, establishing the probable death of S on the first page. If S is initially suggested as the text's anticipated female victim, Ruth is positioned as its detective, trying to discover the circumstances pertaining to S's disappearance. She asks, "how will we ever be certain Leon how?" (1). Ruth and Leon examine her presumed suicide by drowning, using the material evidence left behind: S's poetically fragmented audio recordings and diary entries. In the novel's present time a third-person free indirect narrator records Ruth and Leon's banal dialogue and gestural detail. The narrator's scenic description is sparse and impressionistic, tending to further disorient events. *Three* moves between distinct, textual forms including poetry, prose and lists, and between inter-subjective perspectives without speech markers. Published in 1966, S embodies the contemporary attitudes towards sexuality that characterise liberated 60s culture. She is a single and sexually uninhibited young woman who takes lovers and dances with working-class locals with "her legs spread out" (44). Ruth comes to signify her opposite: the unhappy, prudish wife. S circulates the novel's present tense as a fetishised absent presence. The disparity in sexual attitudes and freedoms between the two women compounds the fraught marital relations between Ruth and Leon. Ruth becomes increasingly suspicious that S and Leon's relationship had been sexual. This paranoia, rather than understanding the nature of S's absence, gradually becomes Ruth's primary, covert motivating obsession: "Hell hell if only I knew — knew..." (117).
- 18 In the course of an investigation of S's documents, Ruth and Leon discover that S had been conducting a meticulous, almost ethnographic, examination of their lives as an outwardly successful, middle-class couple. Of her portrayal, Ruth says, "Funny how she observed us quite honestly I would never have recognised ourselves from her description" (117). As a result, the object of the novel's enquiry is inverted, from the presumed dead but eroticised female body of S, onto the realm of Leon and Ruth's domestic intimacy. This enacts an uncanny reversal of the power dynamics of judgment and watching. *Three* is therefore staged as a Janus-faced investigation. In her diaries, S suggests herself as a "toy with subterfuges" (56). Another speculative note reads, "Those in their glass houses at the zoo. Asleep--dead?" (107). This idea of the glass house at the zoo goes some way to articulating the novel's particular vision of the dehumanising violence engendered by fetishised modes of looking and containment. Whilst it initially suggests that S saw herself as the disposable animal kept for pleasure in their marital home, the metaphorical glass house also institutes the potential for a threatening and punitive reversal of the gaze, whilst foreshadowing the uncertain status of S's death. Elsewhere in these diaries, whilst seemingly referencing her own investigative mission inside the bourgeois home, S writes:

Observe

To be observed. Period of self-emasculation necessary (25)

- 19 In order to become the object of observation, S suggests, one must first relinquish power, imagined as a male attribute. Quin knowingly plays on the double meaning of this word, as bodily castration and as a loss of male feeling, resulting in a loss of perceived confidence and power. The "emasculaton" (25) that S's diary identified as an effect of being observed is subsequently played out on Leon's undressed body, whilst in the bath:

Oh darling don't bite like that oh no Leon not now noooooooh. He drew back, brush held against himself. They gazed at the purple flesh protruding from the water. You always have to get sexy in the bath Leon. Sorry. Well you must admit it's hardly the time or place. [...] I said I was sorry love. He watched the tip disappear, swallowed up by the grey water (44).

- 20 In this scene, in which we surmise that Ruth rebuffs Leon's sexual attentions, the narrator's voyeuristic gaze registers Leon's penis as a grotesque protrusion: "purple flesh" that he "watched" getting smaller until it is eventually "swallowed up". The word "protrude" signifies an extension above or beyond a surface or boundary, but it also means to thrust forwards and is etymologically associated with the Latin word for "threat" as an expression of violent intent ("Protrude" 2020). It connects the idea of boundaries (of property and bodies) with violent force and transgression. Meanwhile, the descriptive imagery conjures up S's still-missing and possibly decomposing body, another possible iteration of "purple flesh protruding from the water". Whilst this links the spectacle of Leon's diminished sexual power with S's corpse, it also suggestively invokes the murky circumstances surrounding her disappearance, imagined as being "swallowed up by the grey water". The novel repeatedly invokes the gruesome spectre of S's barely submerged and spoiled body as a "return" that threatens the precariously repressed sexual aggression of respectable, middle-class culture. Indeed, this incrementally insinuates a scenario in which the novel's free indirect narrator is S herself, albeit disembodied, and returned from her watery grave.

- 21 Whilst Leon is preoccupied with securing the boundaries of his property against potential attacks from outside the home, Ruth's anxiety emerges around preserving her bodily autonomy from her husband's repeated sexual advances. Leon obsessively plans how to keep out the locals, thinking that "high wall with glass on top is the answer then perhaps an electric wire running along just above the ground" (11). In contrast to Leon and S, Ruth's motility is sharply delimited by the domestic space. It is the ominous structure of her containment. She "moves and moves about the house," (74) rarely venturing outside (74). Ruth's sense of her own sexual sovereignty is further complicated by the experience of reading S's diaries, which contain poetically fragmented sexual fantasies:

I want to fuck you on stairways, in telephone booths, in public places. Tie you up, and let them all see you, fuck you, do what they will, and whip you, lick you, and fuck you again (71).

- 22 It remains unclear who the "I" and who the "you" invoked here refers to. Desire is seemingly liberated from any particular subject and object, although it is structured by erotically dominant and submissive sexual positions. The implied coercion — or not — of this fantasy in relation to S's disappearance remains acutely uncertain amid the domestic atmosphere of cruelty and alienation. However, in a private journal entry of her own, Ruth admits that her husband "is concerned only with achieving his own

orgasm and I refuse absolutely to be exploited in that way" (124). Thus, Ruth begins to narrate her obligation to perform marital sex in the politicised language of sexual exploitation, claiming "my body felt like a slab of meat under his hands" (124). Discussing her inexperienced younger self, Ruth says, "God how young how passive I was then allowing you to dominate me like that" (8). Meanwhile, Leon is increasingly concerned with securing the perimeter of the house against the threat of invasion by shadowy figures in the outside world who, Ruth suggests, would "quite happily see us dead" (9). *Three* culminates in the depiction of a violent marital rape, revealing a form of violence that had always been internal, rather than external, to the secured boundaries of the domestic realm. Ruth tries to resist, both verbally and physically, saying "Not like this oh God Leon not..." (127) and "bringing her knees together" (127). In a detail that highlights the intensity of her attempted resistance, she "dug her nails in until her fingers were covered in his blood" (128). Despite this, she is ultimately overpowered by force. The dispassionate narrator records Ruth's violation as a sequence of spasmodic, bodily contortions, "Her body limp, head alone moved, twisted, came up, sank back, her mouth open, but no scream came" (128). This disturbing depiction creates yet another ominous echo of S's possible death by drowning. The association of the scene of S's imagined death with this act of marital rape intimates the existence of a shared history of, and bodily intimacy with, violence between the two women.

- 23 Ruth's "open" "mouth" but absent "scream" hints at the absence of a discourse through which she might articulate her suffering. Whilst sex outside of marriage became increasingly culturally and socially acceptable during the 60s, an Englishman could still rape his wife without repercussions until 1994, when it was finally criminalised (Williamson 2016). In *Three*, Ruth's sexual permission (to her husband's authority) was already legally implicit in the contract of marriage. After the rape, Ruth gets into her car and drives but, realising she has nowhere else to go, returns back to their marital home. As Jeffrey Weeks notes, the permissive changes enacted during the 1960s left numerous matters, including marital rape, "outside the bounds of intelligibility" (2012: 339–40). With its shocking denouement, *Three* gestures towards these illegible tensions between women's sexual liberation, the husband's conjugal right and his licence to privacy from state interference. Indeed, Leon's violent act functions symbolically to reinstate his "private" masculine access to, and ownership of, his wife's body: a matrimonial right enshrined by the state. In a comprehensive account of the law and politics of marital rape in England, Adrian Williamson demonstrates how, despite the tenacious indifference of politicians, the eventual criminalisation of marital rape must be situated in the history of British post-war feminisms (Williamson 2016). In their research on gender and violence, Wini Breines and Linda Gordon note that the prevailing representation of violence as a "breakdown in social order" obscures the way that violence functions as the sign of "a power struggle for the maintenance of a certain kind of social order" (1983: 511). In *Three*, however, the drama of rape is suggested, not as a transgressive challenge to institutional power structures, but as a disclosure of the extent of its patriarchal complicity; as "maintenance" of an extant "social order".
- 24 In the aftermath of Leon's depicted rape in *Three*, an alternative script for reading the novel emerges: one that suggests S as a victim of male violence rather than suicide. After violently raping his wife, Leon sits down and impassively "scanned the headlines"

until he finds the following news item, typographically indented on the page to denote its objective status as a news article rather than narration:

The unclothed body of an unidentified young woman, with stab wounds in back and abdomen was found yesterday by a lake near the Sugarloaf Mountain. A blood-stained angler's knife and a hammer were also found. (131)

- 25 The present time of Quin's novel ends abruptly here. As in *The Driver's Seat*, the image of the dead female body stabbed with a knife enters the text as a sign. This suggestively reconfigures S as the victim of murderous, and potentially sexualised, male aggression. S's diaries record that she had been planning to visit the mountain lake: "We'll go up there perhaps tomorrow" (104). Meanwhile, the suicide remains troublingly hypothetical, since her body is never discovered. S's diaries state, "all that's necessary is a note," (143) but there is no suicide note to corroborate her intent. An earlier scene showed Ruth tampering with, and burning, the contents of S's journals, as if to remove incriminating evidence. As Julia Jordan claims, the ambiguous status of S's death is a "means of keeping alive different strains of narrative potential" (Jordan 2020: 152). A surplus of textual possibility invites the reader to reflect upon the semi-submerged relations between violence, freedom and desire. S circulates the present time of novel as a powerful but ambiguously ontological entity, neither definitively dead, nor alive, whilst her evidence seems deliberately calculated to complicate attempts to separate out sexual fantasy and reality. None of *Three's* contradictory theories can ultimately be aligned, proven or, importantly, disproven. However, the prospect that S and Ruth are both subjected to Leon's sexualised violence asks the reader to consider women's broader, though not uniform, vulnerability to the violent effects of a patriarchal system.
- 26 *Three* is able to suggest an entangled vision of women's homosocial relations, which emphasises their shared vulnerability to physical violence. Erotic freedoms cannot be cleanly extricated from material and social realities. S is presented as a liberated and instinctive sexual risk-taker, who arrives following what would have been a criminal abortion at the time of *Three's* publication in 1966. However, when her subversive influence within the domestic sphere inspires Ruth's resistance to her husband's sexual advances, proprietorial boundaries must be dramatically reinstated. Quin's novel mobilises shock, engendered by a brutal depiction of marital rape, to foreground the banal and legitimate violence already enshrined by the legal apparatus. This connects the threat of infringement upon traditional familial privacy, male experiences of perceived emasculation and their subsequent (sexually) violent response. As *Three* illustrates, acts of bodily transgression often function symbolically to uphold, rather than to challenge or disrupt, the status quo.
- 27 One of the more provocative questions that *Three* stages concerns the relationship between an increased textual circulation of S's sexual fantasies and the subsequent depiction of marital rape. When raping his wife, we witness Leon reciting lines from S's erotic journals, "Going to fuck you fuck you fuck you...She screamed out as he went deeper in" (128). The echoic repetition of S's diaries segues into a description of the ongoing rape. Quin's use of ellipsis visualises a typographical connection between sexual fantasy and the real bodily suffering inflicted by rape, without presuming any explicit causality. Indeed, this ambiguous ellipsis seems intended to provoke feminist anxieties around the effects of an increased circulation of male sexual fantasy in the cultural realm. By the 1970s, representations of eroticised female submission were increasingly coming to signify, within certain feminist thought, as shorthand for

"victims of the male pornographic imagination" (Benjamin 1998: 80). Kate Millett's argument in *Sexual Politics* crucially pivots on the presumed stability of the relations between female victimhood and male sexual violence, as the primary way in which patriarchal power is upheld (2003). Trying to contextualise this phenomenon, Haag suggests that for 1970s feminist tradition in the US and UK, the corrective response to the perceived threat of pornographic fantasy was to create a definition of "violence" "beyond the realm of interpretation altogether" (Haag 2018: xv). Whilst Spark and Quin's novels register the boundary between consent and subjection as a fault line of keen interpretive anxiety in the context of female sexuality, they are not interested in proscribing or stabilising a blanket definition of consent as sexualised violence. In contrast, they employ techniques that aim to proliferate, rather than resolve, the vagaries of interpretation.

- 28 In ways that seem to anticipate the theoretical contradictions engendered by later anti-pornography debates about representations of violent sexuality, these novels deploy a modified vision of avant-garde shock and transgression, which seeks to destabilise the presumed relationship between feminine identity and victimhood. Whilst S's diaries record her claiming "I have become the victim now," (135) Ruth fearfully reports a sighting of S in the street: "Christ it was a shock suddenly to see — well to be confronted by someone you've thought dead..." (80). The dead female is anticipated, not merely as the text's victim, but as a vengeful and uncontrollable threat that must be reckoned with. In *The Driver's Seat*, Spark employs prolepsis as a device that proposes Lise's impending eroticised submission as inevitable fact, even before it happens. Lise's dead body is provocatively trussed with the iconography of eroticised domination in such a way that theatricalises the struggle of powers between male and female forces, symbolised by the woman's silk scarf and the man's necktie respectively (25). Spark presents us with a perfect tableau of women's victimisation before presumed male sexualised domination. However, as the novel continues in the present tense, the extent of Lise's belligerent connivance with her own ending solicits the reader to recalibrate the inferences of the previous visual spectacle. Lise transgresses the limited notion of victimhood and feminine identity that underwrites sex-negative critiques of rape culture and pornography. When Lise approaches a policeman, she asks him, "Do you carry a revolver? [...] Because, if you did, you could shoot me" (82). This is a redeployment of the grammar of liberal consent, which has been tacitly used to legitimate violence in the name of permission so many times before. The courteous tone of the request only sharpens the revelatory force of its reversal. When Lise's killer threateningly suggests that a "lot of women get killed," Lise casually replies, "Yes, I know, they look for it" (104). Richard, imminently to become her rapist and murderer, is piously scandalised by this suggestion. Consent is thus imagined as a modified site of textual transgression. The idea that women's consent to male violence is underwritten by their active desire can performatively destabilise the male fantasy of violation; to puncture its potency by ruining its pleasurable investment in the overcoming of anticipated resistance.
- 29 Ultimately, neither of the novels discussed here enable the reader to distinguish female self-destruction from the harmful effects of male violence and aggression. Loraine Morley refers to S's death in *Three* as a "murder/suicide," (1999: 131) whilst Ian Rankin refers to Richard as Lise's "victim-murderer" (1985: 154). In both instances, the coextensive possibilities of murder and suicide reveal the discursive limitations of victimhood itself. It's a gendered dualism that maps unevenly onto the victim / agency

debates that mark the ideological limits of the liberal fiction: the rational, gender-neutral liberal subject, bent on self-preservation. This works to overwhelm the reader's ability to establish definitive categorical difference between forms of violence, or to assign blame or victimhood. Spark and Quin employ experimental strategies to proliferate multivalent meanings at the nexus of self and society. Lise and Ruth's doomed struggles to maintain a traditional sense of bodily integrity and sexual autonomy are played out in the context of pervasive sexual threat. Lise justifies her dramatic aversion to sex by noting, "Most of the time, afterwards is pretty sad" (103). Both novels demonstrate the cavalier ease with which women's "no" can be reinterpreted as a "yes" by the objective standards of the law, which in turn reveals their "highly uncertain and ambiguous status as 'individuals'" (Pateman 1989: 82). As a result, Quin and Spark reject the governing fiction of liberal consent for a formulation of power that is much closer to subjection. In the context of consent's failure, staged amid depicted environments of omnipresent hostility and constraint, one solution that tentatively materialises is female suicide. Ultimately, these experimental novels refuse to resolve the tensions they highlight into any emancipatory schema. Finally, I suggest, the narrative tensions instantiated between suicide and murder seem to register a crisis of faith in the female consenting subject itself.

- 30 This article set out to explore whether experimental literary treatments of sexual violence can be read as historically engaged instances of feminist theory. It has attempted to expand the framing of late-60s and 70s British experimental writing by women, situating Spark and Quin's experimentalism alongside emergent feminist theory, as well as avant-garde culture's preoccupation with representations of subversive carnality and sexual deviance. An interest in restaging the drama of rape in the work of experimental women writers has previously engendered critical unease — anxiety that has in turn provoked attempts to stabilise or disavow an author's presumed feminist credentials. In contrast, this paper has suggested that experimental literary strategies work to proliferate and defamiliarise the "ordinary" meaning of sexual consent as discursive catalysts for emerging feminist accounts of sexual violence. Literary experiment becomes a generative strategy to theorise the antinomies that delimit the force and reach of sexual consent's rhetorical power. *Three* and *The Driver's Seat* solicit the reader to attempt to distinguish between scenarios of female consent and submission — a categorical distinction that would soon come to dominate feminist discussions about sexualised male control — in order to disclose the discursive limitations of female sexual agency and victimhood. This approach has significant consequences: it allows us to distance the texts' seeming interest in male sexual violence from masculinist, avant-gardist provocations without simplistically ascribing them as pro- or anti-feminist. I have suggested a reading of feminist anxieties as inescapable cultural ideas, as ways of conceiving of the self and its relationships to others, rather than as any avowed political alignment. As far as these two novels redeploy the familiar critical tools of the modernist avant-garde — shock, obscenity, sexuality — they equally register, and anticipate, emerging feminist meditations on sexual violence and gender.

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ABSTRACTS

This article considers experimental literary strategies alongside depictions of male sexual violence in work by two British women writers: *The Driver's Seat* by Muriel Spark (1970) and *Three* by Ann Quin (1966). It reframes these novels' particular interest in staging the drama of rape as literary experiment alongside the feminist struggle to articulate and theorise women's restricted agency in the context of sexuality. I consider how violent avant-garde aesthetic convention is negotiated through emerging feminist anxieties and meditations on sexual violence and gender in these texts. I will suggest that sexual consent emerges as a paradoxically useful site through which women's contingent and often precarious status as free and equal subjects is revealed. By staging narrative, temporal and affective experiment into the legal and cultural judgments that establish sexual consent, Spark and Quin deploy a modified aesthetics of shock and transgression, which helps to disclose the discursive limitations of both female agency and victimhood.

Cet article examine les stratégies littéraires expérimentales et les représentations de la violence sexuelle masculine dans des œuvres de deux écrivaines britanniques : *The Driver's Seat* de Muriel Spark (1970) et *Three* d'Ann Quin (1966). Il s'agit de replacer l'intérêt particulier de ces romans pour la mise en scène du drame du viol en tant qu'expérience littéraire dans le contexte de la lutte féministe pour articuler et théoriser le pouvoir restreint des femmes dans le contexte de la sexualité. Je me penche sur la manière dont la convention esthétique violente de l'avant-garde est traitée à travers les préoccupations féministes émergentes et les réflexions sur la violence sexuelle et le genre dans ces textes. Je montre que le consentement sexuel apparaît comme un champ d'action paradoxalement utile qui révèle le statut contingent et souvent précaire des femmes en tant que sujets libres et égaux. En mettant en scène l'expérience narrative, temporelle et affective des jugements juridiques et culturels qui déterminent le consentement sexuel, Spark et Quin déploient une esthétique modifiée du choc et de la transgression, qui aide à révéler les limites discursives de l'agentivité féminine et de la victimisation.

INDEX

Mots-clés: fiction expérimentale, expérimentalisme, fiction des années 1960, nouveau roman, viol, violence sexuelle, féminisme, fictions des années 1970, écriture féminine, consentement, choc, avant-garde, Spark Muriel, Quin Ann

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