



DIVERGING THE POPULAR, GENDER AND TRAUMA AKA THE JESSICA JONES ANTHOLOGY

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#Kilgraved: Geek Masculinity and Entitlement in Marvel's Villains

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The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is one of the most powerful contemporary examples of the mainstreaming of so-called geek culture, with record-setting sales that make it “the most lucrative franchise in film history” (Hutchinson 2016). With the films’ immense success and influence comes great responsibility: the titular male heroes of the franchise films offer iconic, hyper-masculine role models for a generation of consumers. They are strong, funny, and, most importantly, intelligent. While in eras past, the masculinity defined by Hollywood was of a vibrant physicality, the new man, as shown in the MCU, often relies more on his brain than his brawn. In *Iron Man*, Tony Stark—most recognizable through Robert Downey Jr.’s portrayal in the MCU—is a perfect forerunner for this new definition of masculinity, which takes the privileges of power and authority and subsumes them under a veneer of trauma and loss. This new man has suffered hardships and can often be painted as the underdog in his own story, fighting against oppressive forces using his ingenuity and unique skills. The depiction of masculine superheroes and villains within the MCU builds on a range of tropes, as Derek McGrath (2015) notes: “They are bonded by their individual understandings of the constraints of their masculine behaviors, marked by their ambiguous relationship to being human” (149). However, with the exception of a few minor characters (Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Wasp), there is no feminine equivalent of these representations: The MCU is decidedly centred on masculinity writ large. The first break from this trend came not from within the core MCU itself, but through an offshoot show on Netflix, *Jessica Jones*.

Compared to the other MCU properties, *Jessica Jones* is part of a set of shows produced with a more mature audience in mind: while it acknowledges the main narratives of the MCU, it is mostly self-contained, introducing superhero turned private investigator Jessica Jones, a sarcastic, bitter, heavy-drinking woman with superpowered strength and healing abilities. As Brown (2016) argues, “the basic formula at the core of most superhero narratives is an allegory for adolescent puberty and a male wish-fulfilling fantasy of becoming a pinnacle of hegemonic masculinity, but *Jessica Jones* breaks with genre conventions to construct an allegory for physical and psychological abuse” (58). Jones is shown not only as an adult within the story but as someone who is dealing with the very salient consequences of her relationships and history.

However, the character who truly rejects the typical wish-fulfillment narrative of superhero-dom within the narrative is not actually Jessica Jones but, rather, the show’s supervillain, Kilgrave, who presents the most meaningful challenges to hegemonic masculinity. Kilgrave is not a traditional supervillain. He is not after totemic objects of power in a universe where nearly every other villain is obsessed with the Infinity Stones, which represent various forms of control and mastery. He is not seeking wealth or fortune—he can acquire those things at a moment’s notice, which makes them meaningless to him. Instead, he is particularly obsessed with Jessica herself, and presents the viewer with a chilling and compelling model of a superpowered stalker. In a unique take on the villain, Kilgrave is interested in completely possessing and subsuming another person under his control, and he has focused this intent on a woman who managed to exhibit the one trait he did not desire: independence from him.

Kilgrave is the ultimate example of a toxic geek man: his presence is a repudiation of comic fanboys and a critique of existing fan gender discourse, which heavily favours masculinity while othering women as outsiders and “fake geek girls.” His methods even mirror those wielded with such effectiveness by geek men in recent outbreaks of cultural conflict, such as Gamergate, a dispute over what some men saw as the attempts of “social justice warriors” to diversify gaming; Sad and Rabid Puppies, a set of campaigns aimed at “reclaiming” the Hugo Awards for “real” science fiction fans; and ongoing disputes over conventions, cosplays, and other traditionally male-dominated spaces of fandom. Much like the members of these movements, Kilgrave paints himself as a valiant hero fighting against injustices imposed upon him

by outsiders. Thus, *Jessica Jones*, as a show helmed by and primarily starring women, inevitably became a contested media object for its representations of gender within the superhero space. In this chapter, then, we examine the reactions to *Jessica Jones* and its portrayal of entitled, suave villain Kilgrave in terms of geek masculinity.

Toxic Geek Men as Villains

The geek villain emblematic of toxic masculinity has made several appearances on screen over the last few years. In the *Ghostbusters* (2016) remake, a reboot widely criticized by male fans of the franchise who saw the all-woman cast as a betrayal of the original, the isolated and awkward Rowan North brings terror to New York City by getting ghosts to attack those who have rejected him. In a mockery of Rowan's angst that simultaneously reinforces hyper-masculine norms, a dead Rowan possesses the body of Chris Hemsworth (best known for his portrayal of Thor within the MCU) and remarks that he definitely should have spent more time at the gym while alive. The movie even includes a self-referential scene in which a video of the team encountering a ghost is posted on YouTube and draws hateful misogynist comments such as "Ain't no bitches gonna hunt no ghost." Rowan is cast as a fan turned villain: he owns a copy of the book written by the two professors on the *Ghostbusters* team, which he uses to plan his attacks. The movie is an emblematic example of gendered conflict, with male-identifying reviewers consistently downvoting the film on IMDB even before its release (Hickey 2016). The campaign against *Ghostbusters*, which particularly focused on Twitter harassment of star Leslie Jones, is the perfect example of entitled male outrage over the perceived violation of traditionally male institutions—even though, in this case, the institution is fictional. The decision to cast a white male geek as the villain of the narrative is clearly intentional, and a marked departure from the original film's narrative, which did not include any active human agent as a villain.

Ghostbusters is not the only iconic geek franchise to acknowledge the toxicity of white male geek villains: *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) features perhaps the ultimate example of a fanboy gone bad, Kylo Ren. Kylo Ren at first appears to be similar to Darth Vader, with an imposing mask and control over the dark side of the Force. But when his mask is removed, he is revealed to be an emo fanboy, and shown having a temper tantrum and destroying machinery to no productive end. He keeps the burnt mask of Darth Vader in a

disturbing shrine, and ultimately the narrative suggests that his combination of hero worship and father issues have led him to absolute darkness (which he demonstrates by killing his father, Han Solo). Critics have noted in Kylo Ren's descent a reflection of current geek masculinity: "the patriarchy's chief drone of the film remains on the dark side—Kylo Ren's arc and his struggles to conform to the dark ways of the Force are a spot-on metaphor for the toll of toxic, performative masculinity" (TMS Contributors 2016). Ironically, there is a powerful moment within the film, centred through this analytical lens, where Ren begins pounding on a wound to attempt to make himself stronger, a wound he gained through adherence to this ideal of a dark lord. This is shortly before he is defeated through an effort of co-operation and caregiving by the movie's protagonists.

There is increasing critical awareness of this form of toxic masculinity within popular media, but much of this discourse is still couched in terms that leaves room for denial, rather than clear support for a cultural dialogue. Kilgrave's presentation, however, leaves less ambiguity as to the creators' intent in adding a villain that matches these characteristics.

Kilgrave vs. Killgrave: Comparing Versions of Villainy

Jessica Jones's Kilgrave at first glance does not resemble these other villains: he is clearly an adult, not an arrested adolescent like Kylo or Rowan. His suave appearance and fondness for suits do not read so immediately as markers of geekdom, and his status as a fan is not so clearly marked. However, his association with toxic masculinity is even stronger, and reflects a dramatic change from his origin in the comics. Kilgrave's reimagining for streaming media includes several dramatic departures from his comic book predecessor, including the replacement of his trademark purple skin with more subtle, purple-themed accessories, and the iconic casting of *Doctor Who's* David Tennant. These changes play an important part in reinventing Kilgrave as a personification of the entitled, angry fanboy: throughout the series, Kilgrave's powers are focused on the mental manipulation and emotional abuse of a thoroughly modern predator simultaneously unable to see himself as the villain of the story.

The original Killgrave of the comics is known as Purple Man. He is a far cry from the suave character portrayed by David Tennant: most notably, he is actually a deep shade of purple, which stands out in a crowd and reflects the damage he sustained from his exposure to the same chemicals that gave

him his mind-control powers. The comic version also goes by a less subtle name (Killgrave, with two *ls*), and includes a horrific rape storyline in which he forces a woman he meets and takes a fancy to, Melanie, to marry him. They have a daughter, Kara Killgrave, who becomes a super girl who goes by several names, including Purple Girl, Purple Woman, and the apt Persuasion. In her first appearance—*Alpha Flight* vol. 1, no. 41 (Mantlo 1986)—a flashback shows the circumstances of Kara’s birth and Melanie’s horror when she realizes the powers have passed to her daughter after Killgrave released her from his mental hold. While Melanie’s trauma and fear over Killgrave’s potential return in their lives is occasionally shown, it is not emphasized in the narrative. Killgrave’s actions are portrayed as no worse than any other form of villainy.

In *Alias*, the Purple Man’s perversions and abuse are explored more fully through his relationship with Jessica Jones. However, the story unfolds very differently from the Netflix adaptation: as the superhero Jewel, Jessica Jones is under Purple Man’s thrall, and he sends her to kill Daredevil for him. However, the Avengers stop her, and Jean Gray implants a psychic control to allow Jessica Jones to resist Purple Man in the future. Unlike the Netflix version, Jones is now aware she can resist, and still decides to leave behind her previous life to become a private investigator rather than remain a superhero. She fights Purple Man later, but does not kill him, and Purple Man continues to be a threat through her relationship with Luke Cage and in a number of later storylines. *Alias* does not revolve around her relationship to Purple Man: only one section of the series, the Purple Man storyline (depicted in nos. 24–8), involves the confrontation.

Killgrave makes appearances in a few other adaptations of Marvel narratives, including an episode of *The Avengers: Earth’s Mightiest Heroes* (2010–12). In the 2012 episode “Emperor Stark” (ep. 2.19), Killgrave possesses Tony Stark, declaring, “For so long, I’ve been able to take anything I wanted. But I wasn’t enough. I should have been able to rule the world with my power! And through you, Stark, that’s exactly what I’m doing” (Kirkland 2012). The adaptation puts a similar emphasis on Killgrave’s compelling voice as the new Netflix series, calling on voice actor Brent Spiner (better known as Data from *Star Trek: Next Generation* [1987–94]) to play the role. The episode downplays the sexual nature of Killgrave’s compulsion, but keeps the emphasis on self-hatred and the potential for devastating trauma in the aftermath:

Purple Man: I want you to feel this. I want you to know exactly what I'm making you do!

[Iron Man turns his repulsor on Cap but tries to stop himself from using it]

Purple Man: You're mine, Stark, forever! No matter how hard you resist you'll never be free! The most you'll ever be able to do is wiggle your finger when I'm next to you! Now finish him! (ep. 2.19, "Emperor Stark")

Rather than embodying hyper-masculine tropes, Kilgrave in *Jessica Jones* represents a different breed of toxic geek masculinity. And the directors of the series have chosen the right actor to play this part. David Tennant is not only a skilled actor but one who is immediately recognizable as one of the big faces in geek fandom. Tennant's portrayal of the Doctor in the long-running series *Doctor Who* (1963–89, 2005–present) helped to bring that show worldwide success after its 2005 relaunch. Tennant himself is acknowledged by his peers for the unique perspective he often brings to his characters. Commenting on Tennant's work as an actor, Russell T. Davies, former *Doctor Who* showrunner, says, "I think what sets him apart from just about every other man on the screen, actually, is a lack of boring machismo with him. He skates over stuff, he dances over stuff, he's so nimble and light and clever" (National Television Awards 2015). Although Davies is not talking here about Tennant's acting in *Jessica Jones*, it is noticeable that when casting for the role of Kilgrave, the directors of the series selected someone who presents a very different type of masculinity.

The version of Kilgrave depicted in *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* sets the formula for Tennant's performance in *Jessica Jones*, but the latter character is decidedly updated for a different era. The presentation for the Netflix series is meant to blend in more subtly with the universe that the creators of the *Jessica Jones* series were building. As Tennant describes it, "This iteration of him . . . you wouldn't notice him walking down the street. He's very sharply dressed, but beyond that there's . . . nothing to give away what is ticking inside" (*Digital Spy* 2015). Building on the more recognizably human nature of the villain within the series, the characteristics that were chosen for Tennant's performance add further subtlety to the character. The Kilgrave of *Jessica Jones* is explicitly a fanboy. Indeed, at one point, in response to Jessica's

question about whether he seeks to model himself on the *Star Wars* character Obi-Wan Kenobi, Kilgrave answers in the affirmative, adding, “But cooler” (ep. 1.08, “AKA WWJD”). He enjoys having others see and appreciate the knowledge that he has cultivated. To him, Jessica is important for reflecting his worth at knowing this back to him in a positive light. Additionally, it allows him the ability to define his own identity and worth by then building on a positive impression of the fan character.

The show represents the relationship between Kilgrave and Jessica as being necessary for the villain to survive as a person. Kilgrave suggests that he is in desperate need of Jessica to serve as his conscience: “I can’t be a hero without you,” he says. Without her there to act as a mirror, he quickly loses control of his own actions and his sense of self. *Jessica Jones* even suggests that Kilgrave believes that he is in a love story:

Jessica Jones: You have been ruining my life—

Kilgrave: You didn’t have a life.

Jessica Jones: . . . as a demented declaration of love?

Kilgrave: No! Obviously, I was trying . . . to show you what I see. That I’m the only one who matches you. Who challenges you. Who’ll do anything for you. (ep. 1.07, “AKA Top Shelf Perverts”)

His romantic declarations are perverse but seem sincere: “You were the first person I ever wanted that walked away from me. You made me feel something I never felt before. Yearning. I actually missed you” (ep. 1.07, “AKA Top Shelf Perverts”).

One thing that remains salient about these interpretations of Kilgrave’s character is his inability to see people beyond the realm of things that will help or hinder his personal goals. People serve as chess pieces used to advance his desires in the physical realm, or as emotional mirrors to reflect what he sees as his strengths back at him with a sheen of admiration he clearly desires. Tennant, in a promotional tour for the show’s release, talked to Seth Meyers about Kilgrave’s power and how that shapes the character’s psychology:

He doesn’t think he’s a villain. No. . . . He’s got this thing where, from childhood, anything he says becomes fact. So he has no

way of knowing what's appropriate and what isn't. . . . Clearly he has done some pretty reprehensible things. But he doesn't understand that. He's locked in the curse of his own ability. (*Late Night with Seth Meyers* 2015)

This viewpoint helps to humanize the main villain, something rare in many comic book stories. Unlike the older Marvel villains, who could be defeated in an epic fight scene, the new villains are more like regular people. They might not act in ways that the audience considers appropriate, but they also do not deserve simple physical abuse because of their actions. This leads to a more nuanced engagement with what Kilgrave has done and what could be considered appropriate responses to his actions.

Reading Kilgrave as Men's Rights Activist

When *Jessica Jones* arrived on the scene, it followed in the wake of several controversies surrounding geek masculinity. These conflicts—such as Gamergate and Sad Rabid Puppies—centred on perceived ownership of geek content in the face of its growing mainstream popularity and the increasing visibility of diverse voices among both fans and authors. Similar online fights have emerged cyclically over the last ten years as geek-centred media has become accepted in the mainstream entertainment market and as Internet-enabled platforms have allowed for the formation of identity-based sub-communities focused on these media products (e.g., sites for feminist nerds, queer *Star Trek* fans, etc.). Common themes can be traced among these various conflicts, many of them tied to similar movements in the offline world, such as the rise of men's rights activism. In particular, the efforts of diverse authors and fans to “destroy” the presence of traditionally powerful social groups are invoked by many of these movements to support their arguments and tactics and to defend against the backlash that results from their actions. These are all themes that the writers of *Jessica Jones* have included and analyzed within the narrative arc of Kilgrave and Jessica's relationship.

One notable thing about *Jessica Jones* is its positioning in the timeline of these real-world events. Unlike the larger, big-budget movie presentations of the MCU, *Jessica Jones* allows for a more niche and overtly political discussion of present cultural tensions. The show's debut in 2015 allowed the creators to engage in social commentary within the framework of the show. As one writer put it, “Jessica Jones is our first identifiably post-Gamergate thriller” (Chu

2015). The reduced need to perform like a blockbuster movie meant that the show could delve into topics that were currently impacting members of the Marvel fandom and comment upon their morality and the impact they may have upon the lives of fans.

Through the lens of a serial drama, the writers could deconstruct the political conflicts happening within nerd communities and look at the motivations behind different factions' behaviour. Viewed in this context, Kilgrave presents an excellent character study of the type of mentality that can arise within geek spaces and lashes out in the type of gatekeeping and control seen during the events that preceded the show's creation. As Chu says about Kilgrave's status as nerd power fantasy: "Kilgrave's power is an analog, low-tech, 'meatspace' version of a power that some men in the Gamergate crowd seem to dream of having: the power to be anyone, be anywhere, and do anything without social repercussions. It's a power that, in our world, can be acquired by any determined troll with basic computer skills and an Internet connection" (2015). Kilgrave has the ability to be immediately recognized as a somebody. He is important and powerful and will receive the accolades that he feels he is due. But with this power, he also does not have to face the negative consequences of his actions. In a similar way, participation in online harassment provides the abuser with a sense of power and control over what their target does both on- and offline.

The character of Kilgrave has created an elaborate story about his life, and within it he has set Jessica up as both his inevitable love interest and his main antagonist. The writers were quite clever in having Kilgrave draw upon meta-commentary related to popular culture to serve as the base for his own story. As Nussbaum notes about Kilgrave's self-narrative in relation to Jessica,

It's a particularly effective form of gaslighting, since he has cast her in a popular narrative, one that shows up in many forms these days, in books and movies, and particularly in stories aimed at and embraced by female audiences. Is it really such a reach for Kilgrave to insist that Jessica will succumb to him in the end? Tweak Kilgrave's banter, and he'd be a wealthy vampire who desires Jessica above any other woman, a man who is literally irresistible, as in "Twilight." Wrench it again, and they'd be role-playing "Fifty Shades of Grey." (Nussbaum 2015)

Of interest here is not just the fact that Kilgrave draws upon these stories for inspiration, but also his insistence that he is really doing what is best for Jessica. It allows him to cast himself as the selfless victim if his advances are unappreciated by his target. He is giving her everything that popular culture says a woman really desires in life and love. Any rejection of him or his advances can be used to paint Jessica as heartless or cruel since she is ignoring the sacrifices Kilgrave has made.

While the writers did a thorough job of dressing Kilgrave in the signifiers that would lead to a sympathetic portrayal in other media, they do not support his decisions within the narrative structure, and indeed make efforts to show the monstrous impacts of his choices:

Throughout *Jessica Jones*, the audience is invited to sympathize with the survivors of Kilgrave's abuse, not with Kilgrave. Other than a couple short moments in which Kilgrave explains that he believes himself to have been abused and wronged, the majority of the show focuses on his crimes against others—about which Kilgrave feels zero remorse. We learn about these survivors' lives and perspectives; we see their support groups, their struggles. We don't see exploitative or romanticized depictions of rape or abuse; the show seems to have made the intentional choice not to display those scenes, focusing instead on the aftermath felt by the survivors. (Myers 2015)

This narrative rejection of Kilgrave as a sympathetic figure is a crucial counterpoint to the typical narratives of rape culture in popular media, where accused rapists (such as the infamous Brock Turner, who served a short sentence after raping an unconscious woman) are more likely to be shown in smiling swim team photos and graduation gowns than in mug shots, and where questions focus on their futures and lives rather than on the trauma and suffering of their victims (Zutter 2015). Or, indeed, the alternative, which plays up the vulgarity of the trauma that occurs to titillate audiences rather than express the horror of such actions.

Part of what makes Kilgrave such an intriguing villain is the inescapable nature of his interactions with Jessica. Using his abilities, he is able to integrate himself into her surroundings and habits such that, even if he is not seen by her, he is nearby. The show portrays this beautifully in the first

few episodes by having Kilgrave use those around Jessica to photograph her without her knowing. For the audience, this begins the conflict between the two by establishing both an existing history between the characters as well as Kilgrave's nebulous presence within Jessica's life. "But *Jessica Jones* isn't just about a survivor getting retribution for her rapist's crimes; it also presents us with her rapist, over and over, and his belief that he did nothing wrong" (Zutter 2015). With each interaction, Kilgrave refuses to show real awareness or growth regarding his relationship with Jones. Her responses are like those of real-world victims of abuse and harassment: she is looking to appease her attacker and take back some small measure of control over her life.

Kilgrave's deeply disturbing monologue in the final episode of the season suggests his need to be desired and to affirm his value, which goes hand in hand with his desire to see Jessica suffer:

Dear God, I would do anything to see the look on her face when she realizes she's helpless. I'd make her want me, then reject her. Devastate her over and over and over until she wants to die. . . . No, I won't give her that, either. She'd wither away like someone dying of thirst or starvation. Be a certain ring of hell, designed specially for her. . . . Or maybe I'll just kill her. (ep. 1.13, "AKA Smile")

Kilgrave's fixation on her, his replaying in his mind her torture and suffering, is a direct acknowledgement of his desire for control over her. To be able to rescind momentarily her pain or potential death, only to watch her suffer again and again at his whim, is central to how he sees himself. It is a nod to the power that he has while still framing the entire relationship as a result of her actions. It allows him to paint himself as the victim of a cruel woman who refused to acknowledge his personal needs.

Conclusion

The move within popular media to begin criticizing the negative consequences of male entitlement, and a portrayal of how that entitlement can play out in different subgroups, represents an opportunity for change within fan spaces. From Kilgrave's development as a character across the various Marvel media properties to his deliberate presentation in the *Jessica Jones* series, the audience is meant to understand the changing nature and threat that he represents, and to learn to identify those habits within their own environment.

Kilgrave represents some of the most toxic aspects of male entitlement and privilege found within geek and online communities. The particular characteristics he exhibits—his need to control Jessica, the nebulous nature of his presence in her life, his portrayal of himself as the aggrieved party—are all instantly recognizable as themes found in the different hate movements that have arisen within fan communities. While he is the villain of the story, he is not portrayed as totally heartless. Overall, his development shows how he could potentially make changes to improve himself and grow beyond the limitations of his current path. The show's creators allow for a clear damnation of Kilgrave's actions while still leaving open a chance for hope. In this portrayal, Kilgrave is not just the embodiment of entitlement—he is also something of a moral lesson, trying to show others the potential consequences of their harmful tactics.

The show does not let Jessica off lightly in the moral department either. “Ironically, Jones is only able to overcome Kilgrave by embracing her similarities to him, setting up an elaborate sting in the finale that is predicated on understanding his dark mental workings and being willing to sacrifice innocent people to his machinations” (Thury n.d., 6). Jessica herself even acknowledges the darkness of her actions: “They say everyone’s born a hero. But if you let it, life will push you over the line until you’re the villain. Problem is, you don’t always know that you’ve crossed that line” (ep. 1.13, “AKA Smile”). However, when Jessica ultimately snaps Kilgrave’s neck, we cannot help but see this as a moment of victory, as she throws his (and untold numbers of street harassers’) favourite line in his face: “Smile.” While the show is significantly more sympathetic to Jessica’s struggles as a victim, it also warns against using the same tactics against your opponents. The show presents Jessica with the same chances to rise above while cautioning the audience to take a more fruitful path.

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