

## **‘Show gay people for the often-awful people they are’: Reframing Queer Monstrosity**

Thomas Brassington

The fifth episode of *Killing Eve*'s (2018-2022) third season, ‘Are you from Pinner?’ (2020) sees series main character Villanelle (Jodie Comer) discover what remains of her family. *BBC iPlayer*'s synopsis for this episode suggests it will help viewers understand Villanelle's origins, enabling them to understand how the show's fashionable, psychopathic assassin came to be. At the same time, the synopsis asks if ‘a new connection to her roots will give her back what has been missing in her life’, intimating that the episode promises some closure for the character and possibly an end to her murderous lifestyle (BBC, 2020: [n.pag.]). Villanelle meets her extended family, discovers her mother, Tatiana (Evgenia Dodina) is alive, and seems to enjoy her familial reconciliation in the rural Russian village of Pinner. That is, until a confrontation with her mother.

The tension between Tatiana and Villanelle centres around Tatiana's abandonment of Villanelle at an orphanage when she was a child, though Tatiana claims she only planned to leave Villanelle at this orphanage for one month. Tatiana then claims that the orphanage staff called her and told her that Villanelle died in her own arson attack on the orphanage. The confrontation scene begins with Villanelle cutting tomatoes in the kitchen and Tatiana coming downstairs. Villanelle slowly turns around, staring intensely at Tatiana with blood (actually tomato paste) running down from her eyes. Villanelle is replicating a prank she did as a child for Tatiana and her father that she believes made them laugh, which Tatiana flatly denies. Tatiana then wipes the paste off Villanelle's face and demands she leave Pinner. Villanelle refuses, comparing this demand to when her mother abandoned her at the orphanage, with the following lines exchanged:

V: Easier to carry a trusting little girl out of this house than it will be to carry me.  
Especially after the last two days.

[...]

T: [grabs Villanelle's face] You will not bring your darkness into this house.

V: You are the darkness. You have always been the darkness. He wasn't scared of me.  
He was sick of you. He knew I could see what you are.

T: What's that?

V: Like me.

[...]

T: You were bad from the beginning. You didn't cry as a baby.

V: Please. Some bullshit myth to make you feel better. I did cry. I *did* cry.

T: You ruined me. You took everything from me. You took him. You could control him. He would do anything for you because you had a darkness! This... darkness! He thought you would do something to us. To me.

V: I didn't mind that you took me there. [voice trembling] I didn't mind that you never came back for me. What I mind... is that you won't admit what you are. That I am my mother's daughter.

The scene ends with Villanelle and Tatiana staring at each other, then cuts to a montage where Villanelle lights the gas stove, pours gasoline around the house, leaves an envelope stuffed with cash with Bor'ka (Temirlan Blaev) and Pyotr (Rob Feldman) who sleep in the barn, followed by the house exploding. Villanelle then storms off, screams and the scene changes to her onboard a train out of Pinner, crying and dancing to music.

What is particularly striking about this scene from a queer perspective is how it simultaneously gestures to and evades certain conventions of queer narrative. There is a central tension to this exchange between Villanelle and Tatiana which correlates to a queer origin story. Villanelle believes that her mother is ‘like her’, intimating that Villanelle’s own psychopathy stems from Tatiana’s. Tatiana disavows this notion by stating that ‘the darkness’ is emergent and originary from Villanelle. Both parties mobilise a ‘born this way’ discourse: Villanelle’s mobilisation identifies a genetic and social component, whereas Tatiana’s statement identifies the darkness as an essential facet of Villanelle. Both mobilisations are, however, undercut within the episode. Since Villanelle is a psychopath, her narration of events is, obviously, unreliable. Viewers are reminded of this when Tatiana and Villanelle disagree on whether or not the bloody eyes prank was funny. Likewise, Tatiana’s unreliability is hinted at throughout the episode. She is needlessly cruel to Bor’ka, calling him a failure and embarrassment to the family for losing a baking contest at Pinner’s harvest festival, and has no reaction to Villanelle’s declaration that she will kill Tatiana. As well, leaving Villanelle at an orphanage for a month does not ring true, since such a specific detail would presumably be known to Villanelle. Visits might have been mentioned in Tatiana’s delivery of this information at least. As well, if we assume Villanelle to be accurate in her assessment that Tatiana is ‘like me’, then she too is a psychopath and therefore unreliable.

In undercutting their respective mobilisations of ‘born this way’ logics, ‘Are You from Pinner?’ maintains the murkiness of Villanelle’s psychopathic (queer) origins. In terms of *Killing Eve*’s queer veins, ‘Are You from Pinner?’ highlights Villanelle’s usefully uncategorisable characterisation—we will never know if she has always been bad (queer), or if something made her the way she currently is. The queerness of *Killing Eve*’s Villanelle lies in her usefully uncategorisable characterisation because, in not being able to pin her successfully to the conventional narratives of queer characters, her queerness becomes

mobilised in fresh ways. Villanelle provides a queer form of Susan Bordo's remark that '*Killing Eve* does go beyond—*everything*', which situates the show against texts like NBC's *Hannibal* (2013-2015) and Showtime's *Dexter* (2006-2013) and their respectively captivating killers (2021: 135). Bordo suggests that 'what we typically enjoy about these characters is the chill of pure evil', before arguing that Villanelle captivates differently (135). As a queer figure, then, the fact that it is 'impossible to figure her out', offers up a form of queer representation which flouts conventional televisual portrayals of queerness (136). Villanelle has a tragic backstory of familial rejection—a cliché component of queer biography—but it appears not to be a significant motivator for her psychopathy. She could be 'born this way', but those who can report on such a truism can only do so unreliably.

*Killing Eve* regularly defers Villanelle's killer origin stories in a manner which continually plays with audience expectations. The first season suggests that Anna (Susan Lynch), a language teacher who Villanelle had a relationship with prior to show's events, is this origin. Anna was married when she and Villanelle began their relationship, and, in a fit of jealousy, Villanelle killed and castrated Anna's husband. The show suggests this murder as the origin point for Villanelle's psychopathy, and as one that is neatly tied to her sexuality. However, *Killing Eve* undercuts this alleged origin point by first highlighting the relative insignificance of Anna to the show's main plot—her character only comes into frame because fellow assassin Nadia (Olivia Ross), who MI6 agent Eve Polastri (Sandra Oh) is interviewing as part of her hunt for Villanelle, does not wish to be traitorous in front of Konstantin (Kim Bodnia), an assassin handler for the Twelve ('Take Me to the Hole!' 2018).<sup>1</sup> Later, when Anna comes into frame, a longer violent history for Villanelle is established ('I Don't Want to Be

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<sup>1</sup> The shady organisation who pay Villanelle in *Killing Eve*.

Free' 2018), deferring the murder of Anna's husband in Villanelle's psychopathic biography from origin to another instance of violence.

Psychopaths are a contemporary monster with especially queer tendencies in Western culture, since at least Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948). In post-millennial television, this pairing of psychopathy and queerness has been represented in texts like NBC's *Hannibal* and FX's *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* (2018), alongside documentaries like Netflix's *Amanda Knox* (2016) and *Don't F\*\*k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* (2019). Often, though, psychopathy and queerness are paired in a manner where the two only become intelligible through each other: characters' psychopathy becomes ciphers for their queerness. This is not the case for *Killing Eve*. Throughout the show, Villanelle's queerness and psychopathy are not linked, and the show repeatedly plays with this notion by drawing on this convention and flouting how it collapses of psychopathy onto queerness and vice versa.

*Killing Eve*, this article argues, demonstrates a shift in televisual representations of the queer psychopath character, wherein these features are not coextensive, but components of a broader characterisation. To do this, I draw on research into queer monstrosity because Villanelle, as psychopath, most closely aligns with a monstrous figure. However, as Villanelle's queerness is underscored by an uncategorisable quality, her monstrosity and queerness become unlaced, neither being quite intelligible through the other. Rather than argue that this signals a new form of the monster queer, I assert throughout this article that Villanelle's capacity for queer representation is significant because of this unlinking. She is both monstrous and queer. When monstrosity does not provide a vehicle through which queerness becomes legible, queerness becomes expressed in different ways and is put to new work by the psychopath. To these ends, I present two subsections which explore how Villanelle expresses her queerness through her wardrobe and utilises her queer humour as a disarming tool.

## Unpicking Queer Monstrosity

First, though, it is necessary to establish a dialectic of queer monstrosity. A trademark of the queer monster character is that their queerness is intimately tied to their monstrosity. Such an intimate connection between queerness and monstrous characterisation has long been established, as demonstrated by foundational critical work like Harry Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet* (1997) and J. Halberstam's *Skin Shows* (1995). Both works establish a longstanding cultural theme wherein monsters act as ciphers for queer identities. This dialectic works because, as Laura Westengard argues in *Gothic Queer Culture*, 'the monster figures the excesses of a culture by representing those on the margins while solidifying those in the center and embodying simultaneous fear and desire' (2019: 103). In a cisheteronormative culture, queers are figured as cultural excesses, and so cohabit the same margins from which monsters emerge. In turn, monstrosity becomes a language through which queerness is intelligible. However, such a dialectic is rather static. It assumes that margins and centres are not mobile and that because of the permanence of their shared ground, where a monster is queer, that monster's queerness is only legible through their monstrosity.

One example of this ciphering relates to how queer monster often have tragic backstories, which feature a point when they become a monster. Under the monster queer dialectic, this effectively becomes a moment of turning queer. Viewers expect such an origin as a moment which explains away the monstrous behaviour of the monster. For Villanelle, viewers expect to learn exactly what transformed her into a psychopath. *Killing Eve* understands this lacing and continually draws on and confounds this dialectic. I demonstrated

this in the introduction through the example of her continually deferred monstrous/queer origins ('Take Me to the Hole!' 2018; 'I Don't Want to Be Free' 2018) up to a point where the deferral is lost to the unreliability of the text's narrators in 'Are You from Pinner?' (2020). The audience is never allowed to 'know' what 'made' Villanelle into murderous psychopath, and a definite site may not exist. This deferral represents one way that *Killing Eve* dismantles the extant monster queer dialectic, and in doing so Villanelle's queerness expresses itself through other avenues.

### **'I was trained to look devastating': Villanelle's Queer Style**

One such avenue is her style. *Killing Eve's* style overall is one of the show's cornerstones, but Villanelle's personal style captures popular cultural interest massively. Entertainment journalism provides the general public with tips so they can emulate Villanelle's style (Banks-Walker 2021; Hidalgo 2018); suggests her style's impact on the 2019 Oscars (Tang 2019; Cartner-Morley 2019; Finnigan 2019); and considers the overall impact of Villanelle's style (Rosseinsky 2018; Yotka 2018; Allaire 2020; Saraiya 2018; Cruz 2019; Zemler 2019). The show was even nominated for a Costume Designer's Guild Award for its looks (Weinberg 2019). In-text, Villanelle's love of fashion is plain to see in any given episode, with her 'style-over-comfort' remarks to fellow assassin Rhian (Alexandra Roach) in the episode 'Are You Leading or Am I?' (2020) being particularly telling.

Chic as it may be, Villanelle's lifestyle, particularly concerning her fashion sense, is ostensibly queer. From the pink tulle Molly Goddard dress she wore to a psychological evaluation ('I'll Deal with Him Later' 2018) to her array of suits ('Don't I Know You?' 2018; 'Smell Ya Later' 2019; 'Slowly Slowly Catchy Monkey' 2020), Villanelle's wardrobe spans

the futch scale, is often campy and evokes a discernibly queer style.<sup>2</sup> Dress' communicative properties are a given. How people dress 'expresses who we *are* and who *are not* as a means of expressing identity and a way of interacting and belonging to a particular culture' (Hancock II, et al., 2013: xi). Dress can communicate myriad aspects of a subject's personality or character, but does so with incredible ambiguity, as Fred Davis expertly articulates in *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (1992). It is this ambiguous articulation that renders clothing into an excellent vehicle for producing queer identities, since clothing's ambivalences permit 'the outward expression of the imponderable disorder of sex' acting as 'a necessary crack in the symbolic order of sexuality' (Geczy & Karaminas 2013: 17).

Villanelle's wardrobe largely consists of high fashion garments, fine tailoring and disguise pieces. Already, the dynamism of her wardrobe flouts conventional monster fashioning. Monsters typically have a rather static style as part of a generic visual language of the texts they inhabit. 'The teen-slashing mass murderer is recognized from his mask, the jock from his football jersey, and the monster from his attire', write Gudrun Whitehead and Julia Petrov (2018: 8). Though Whitehead and Petrov are focusing on horror literature and film in their work, their point carries over to monsters as they appear in other genres on television. Take, for example, Hannibal Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen) from NBC's *Hannibal*. Here is another stylish psychopathic killer, yet his wardrobe simply does not have the same range as Villanelle's, to the point that men's fashion magazines can provide an eight-point checklist to allow readers to copy his style (Shapira 2015). Conversely, with Villanelle, consumers are only able to shop individual looks, rather than emulate her overall style (Banks-Walker 2021). In Villanelle having a dynamic style, *Killing Eve* parses the monster queer dialectic by flouting

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<sup>2</sup> The futch scale is a popular meme that 'is a continuum model used by some in the LGBTQ community to identify where a lesbian sits on the spectrum between "Femme" an[d] "Butch"' (Adam, et al., 2015). Goddard was commissioned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art to exhibit at their 'Camp: Notes on Fashion' exhibition (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019).



an expectation for sartorial consistency on the part of the monster. In turn, her wardrobe variety enable a wider expression of Villanelle's queerness, since it is no longer being used in a way which imbricates monstrosity with queerness.

The three aspects of her wardrobe noted a moment ago all betray queer valences of her style to varying degrees. Her disguises are necessary for her work. To infiltrate and get close to her assassination targets, Villanelle must be chameleonic. Villanelle's disguise pieces—her workers uniforms, wigs, and various accessories in which murder weapons may be disguised—point most directly to the mercurial element of her wardrobe and concomitant expression of identity. This mercurial element—the fact that her wardrobe alters how she is read by others—is implicitly queer for its gentle nod toward open-secrets and queer sartorial communications. In her article exploring queer fashion, Annamari Vänskä draws attention to the historically queer practice of sartorial communication performed by queer people: 'gays and lesbians have indeed learned to speak about their sexuality by not naming it directly, but through their clothing, style and behavioral signifiers' (2014: 451). Vänskä is, of course, not talking about fictional disguises here, but about the coded systems by which queers communicate their identities in sociohistorical contexts that oppress queer identities. That said, this facet of queer experience causes a different attitude towards fashion and style, wherein the queer subject articulates themselves through coded sartorial messages, or loudly proclaims their queerness through clothing. Either way, an attitude towards clothing's capacity to conceal and reveal information, to alter perceptions according to another's knowledge, is a queer aspect of clothing.

Disguise, then, is an implicitly queer form of styling. In Villanelle's case, rather than offering a protective veil, her disguises enable her to get closer to her targets, to flit between social settings and environments. This requires a knowledge of social codes and how to render oneself legible as harmless and indistinctive. Rather than the usual politics of visibility that are

familiarly queer, Villanelle's disguises demonstrate the equal political potential of invisibility: the capacity to infiltrate and devastate from within. In tandem with a politics of visibility that is more present in her casual clothes, Villanelle's wardrobe draws attention to the notion that 'the politics of appearance is about the process of becoming, a statement that is politically and aesthetically charged' (Geczy & Karaminas 2013: 31). Villanelle's disguises challenge a truism of queer becoming, where invisibility and blending in is evocative of a queer 'reluctance, mild [or] militant to be at one with normalcy' (Geczy & Karaminas 2013: 28). Disguise, rather than being an emblem of queerphobic politics of erasure, expresses the power of invisibility and what it can be used for in a queer politics of representation.

A second queer aspect of Villanelle's wardrobe is her love for pink, voluminous dresses. She wears three throughout the three seasons that have currently aired, but the colour and volume combination is one of the few stylistic repetitions seen in Villanelle's outfits.<sup>3</sup> The first is the pink tulle Goddard dress she wears to a psychological evaluation and through the streets of Paris afterward ('I'll Deal With Him Later' 2018). The second and third appear in the episode 'Desperate Times' (2019) where one is an eerie pink dirndl disguise paired with a pig mask, and the other is a separate pink shirt and skirt she wears whilst writing a postcard to Eve. These pink repetitions suggest that it is one of Villanelle's favourite colours, whilst simultaneously evoking queerness through its historical association with LGBT+ identities and movements from pink triangles to the trans flag. Paired with volume, Villanelle's pinks draw attention to how 'queer celebrates flamboyance in and for itself, whereas the bourgeois ethos considers it intrusive, ostentatious—and treacherous' (Geczy & Karaminas 2013: 27). Meters of pink, flouncy fabric draw attention to the wearer in a flamboyant fashion. Of course, Villanelle is 'flamboyant and attention seeking, and instinctive, spoilt, and easily bored' in

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<sup>3</sup> Pink also appears as part of Villanelle's 'Billie' disguise: an American social media influencer with pink hair ('I Hope You Like Missionary!', 2019; 'Wide Awake', 2019; 'You're Mine', 2019), and as an embellishment on the trench coat she wears to meet Carolyn in 'Are You Leading or Am I?' (2020).

Eve's words, so it is not surprising that she is drawn to such a queer arrangement of colour and material ('Nice and Neat' 2019).

Villanelle's turn towards pink and flouncy is also a sartorial turn towards femininities. Phoebe de Gaye, the costume designer for the first season, describes the Goddard dress as Villanelle 'sticking two fingers up and saying, "Okay, I'm going to dress like a little girl and act like a mad little girl."' (Yotka 2018). Villanelle's tip into feminine excess mocks her psychological evaluation and infantile treatment intentionally and femininely. In this way, Villanelle's femininity aligns with theorisations of lesbian femme identity. Laura Harris and Elizabeth Crocker propose 'femme as a critical approach to femininity' which reframes performances of femininities in a manner that positions femme sexuality and expression as playful and politically conscious (Harris & Crocker 1997: 3-4). Voluminous pink, as one example from Villanelle's wardrobe, is therefore a simultaneous dip into feminine excess and queer expression, sartorially expressing Villanelle's multiple queer femininities. These outfits express her femme side, in a fashion that permits a playful resistive commentary on the demands her employers place on her, as expressed through Konstantin's patriarchal voice. Villanelle's femme side, as expressed through clothing, is an escape into femininities.

Indeed, this escape, like her disguises, permits those viewing her to become disarmed by the presentation—a highly dangerous position to take around Villanelle. Pink clothes, especially, may prove doubly disarming. Elizabeth Wilson wrote in 1990 that, 'clothing naturalizes gender in the sense that we feel that it is "natural" for girls to wear pink, just as it is "natural" for them to be less aggressive than boys', a sentiment Villanelle clearly plays with when she dons the colour (68). In donning pink, Villanelle signifies her femininity, accruing a veneer of harmlessness (though the excessive nature of Villanelle's sartorial feminine expressions is also somewhat menacing thanks to its incongruity.) Villanelle's femme turn is therefore a conscious performance of femininity, which she weaponises similarly to her

disguises. ‘*Killing Eve*’, writes Sonia Saraiya (2018) in *Vanity Fair*, ‘plumbs feminine allure in new and interesting ways’, one which relies not on a femme fatale character’s seductive sexuality to ensnare targets, but on visages of disarming girlishness.

Overall, Villanelle’s wardrobe, composed of disguises, high fashion and fine tailoring betray her mercurial sartorial style and extreme levels of knowledge about the communicative capacity of clothing. In *Body Dressing*, Susan Kaiser defines style as a form of minding appearance, describing this as ‘the continual interplay between an individual and his/her various identities and communities, in such a way that combines style, truth and subjectivity’ (2001: 80). In this matrix, ‘style becomes a critical and creative strategy for negotiating new truths and subjectivities. That is, it becomes a vehicle not only for being, but also for becoming’ (83). Villanelle’s understanding of clothes is as such a vehicle. They allow her to become anyone through disguise, to articulate her femme and butch energies at any given time (the latter of which I do not have the space within this article to properly discuss, though Sarah Gilligan and Jacky Collins offer an excellent exploration of Villanelle’s suits in their article (2021), in effect fabricating her identity as one which is constantly shifting, being built and dismantled. Villanelle’s wardrobe is therefore demonstrative of how queer style ‘uncover[s] queer less as a category or system and more as a dynamic of slippage, a site of renegotiation, undermining, overstatement and reinstatement’ as Geczy and Karaminas assert (2013: 14). In giving viewers such a stylish monster, *Killing Eve* effectively reroutes queerness from monstrosity and into the amorphous bodyshapes produced by Villanelle’s extensive wardrobe.

### **‘Such a drama queen’: Villanelle’s Queer Humour**

Villanelle’s comic sensibility is established early in *Killing Eve*’s first episode where she plays a prank on her handler Konstantin by feigning an overdose (‘Nice Face’ 2018). Throughout the

series, Villanelle cracks jokes, says inappropriate things to diffuse tension, wears costumes for mocking purposes, and pulls pranks. Queer humour, according to Jennifer Reed, is produced by the comic actor ‘constructing a self outside of normative heterosexuality’ (2011: 764). Reed argues that humour is elicited through self/other relationships and a process of (dis)identification with either side of that binary, but a queer comic, in ‘refusing the normative terms of heterosexuality, [...] tend[s] not to participate in a self/other relationship to men in particular, or to others generally’ (2011: 764). In creating a comic atmosphere in which humour is dislodged from self/other identification, queer humour is a more capacious comic form. For Reed, ‘the queer gesture in humor, and the humorous gesture in queer, is the mining of this liminality’, where individuals are no longer aligned with self/other or with gay/straight (2011: 766).

Queer women are often perceived in popular culture as humourless; Don Kulick’s chapter on ‘Humorless Lesbians’ (2014) begins by addressing this stereotype, determining that ‘lesbians find themselves positioned culturally at the nexus of perceptions that hold that (1) women have no real sense of humor except in relation to men, (2) women who do not engage in heterosexual relationships forfeit their femininity and consequently become masculinized, and (3) masculinity is no laughing matter unless it is failed masculinity’ (97). In short, same sex desire in women renders them humourless. Throughout his chapter, Kulick identifies that humourlessness often functions as a dehumanising discursive strategy: ‘to claim that a particular group lack a sense of humor is to make the ominous assertion that they lack humanity’ (92). This being the case, the fact that Villanelle emanates mirth through observational humour, jokes, pranks and dress suggests that she continually humanises herself by being comical. Comedy is her method for establishing empathetic contact with viewers, which fosters identification with Villanelle.

Take, for example, her wearing the Goddard dress to a psychological evaluation. The incongruous comedy this scene produces is linked to the notion of psychologically evaluating a psychopath. The premise itself, of essentially a ‘fit to work’ meeting for an assassin, is already funny for its pairing of the glamour of the spy thriller with the mundanity of a health check. The scene has a frame of comic disidentification, but Villanelle does not, and viewers are pleased by her wearing a voluminous, pink tulle dress as a ‘fuck you’ to the entire process. The humour she makes here aligns with the audience’s; that her receiving a psychological evaluation is ridiculous. Her job is murder, she cannot be of sound mind. Effectively, Villanelle’s comic ‘fuck you’ here bridges a distance between her psychopathic characterisation and the (non-psychopathic) viewer through highlighting the ridiculousness of her receiving a workplace psychological evaluation. Rather than position Villanelle as (queer) ‘other’ to the (cis/het) audience in the self/other dialectic of humour highlighted by Reed, Villanelle’s comic perspective is something we are encouraged to share. The audience is laughing with her and is on the side of the queer psychopath when she wears this dress. Villanelle’s comedy therefore engages in the queer humorous work of identification rather than disidentification. She is comic in a way that gets viewers on side as much as she uses comedy to manipulate characters and discussions within the show.

Queer humour is not solely located in a liminal space, since it must be articulated by someone, usually a queer individual. Therefore, the liminal, capacious, space of queer humour is indexed by the speaking subject’s own marginalised identities. This marginalisation also facilitates the establishment of a monster queer dialectic, as discussed earlier, so to mine marginality for its comic capacity, *Killing Eve* again gestures to and evades these conventions (Westengard 2019). Indeed, this marginality is even what permits a comic slippage into liminality. In *Performing Marginality* (2004), Joanne Gilbert writes that members of marginalised groups ‘gain a certain freedom, a latitude that can only be experienced in the open

space of the margins. By “performing” their marginality, social outcasts call attention to their subordinate status’ (xi). From this vantage, queer comics engage in humorous forms of cultural critique, using the rhetorical strategies afforded to them through comedy to manipulate their social contexts. Gilbert, who focuses on stand-up comics, draws attention to how this manipulation commoditises marginalised status, realising a transfer of wealth from the socially powerful to the socially marginal. For Villanelle, a less literal approach to understanding her manipulation of her marginality is required, since she is not paid to be funny.

Rather than commoditise her marginality as a queer, female psychopath, Villanelle’s humour serves her as a manipulative tool. ‘Humor is inextricably linked to power’, Gilbert writes, and Villanelle’s use of humour in *Killing Eve* is intimately tied to how she manipulates power (2004: xv). Like her clothing, Villanelle’s humour is mercurial and off-kilter, affecting those she is comical around by disarming them. For example, in the final episode of season three (‘Are You Leading or Am I?’ 2020), Villanelle has been followed by Rhian, another assassin for the Twelve. Rhian is there to escort Villanelle back to H el ene (Camille Cottin), an upper manager for the shady organisation. Rhian, dressed completely in black, aggressively tells Villanelle, ‘oi, H el ene wants to see you’, to which Villanelle responds, ‘if you want to dance, you just have to ask.’ This throws off Rhian. Villanelle dips Rhian, before saying ‘okay’ and being led by Rhian to a London Underground station. On the Underground platform, Villanelle walks on the back of her heels, and asks Rhian if she will ‘talk me through your outfit.’ Rhian says she likes ‘to be comfortable’ to which Villanelle responds “‘comfortable’ is what you make people with a terminal illness.’ This remark, and the entire conversation, clearly wobbles the power balance between the two. Rhian is meant to be in charge, yet she does not know how to respond to Villanelle. At the same time, the ‘girl talk’ topic of outfit choices carries with it a harmless air.

After this brief exchange, Villanelle ponders why ‘two ruthless killers’ such as they are so keen to follow orders, characterised by her being told to jump and then repeatedly jumping around. Rhian does not rise to Villanelle’s juvenile actions here, and instead answers that ‘autonomy’s overrated. Sheep are happier than wolves.’ Following this, Villanelle remarks that Rhian ‘almost ha[s] no sense of humour’ clearly indicating that Villanelle believes she is funnier, and consequently has more fun, than Rhian. Villanelle then threatens to tickle Rhian, and proceeds to poke and prod her as a train pulls into the station. These actions agitate Rhian enough that she pins Villanelle to a wall before telling her that ‘the bigger your crisis, the quicker that I can take your place.’ To Rhian, Villanelle’s fall from grace in season three presents a career development opportunity. This agitation makes Villanelle angry, and the two proceed to fight, though Villanelle’s prior behaviour suggests she intended to agitate Rhian by being comical. In getting this threatening retort out of Rhian, Villanelle is given the opportunity and impunity to kill Rhian, which she does by kicking her onto the Underground tracks as a train arrives.

Throughout this exchange, Villanelle uses a range of comic strategies to get the upper hand over Rhian. She turns dialogue away from the present topic by asking if Rhian wants to dance, confusing and disarming her. Following this, Villanelle vacillates between small talk, quasi-philosophical remarks, and juvenile poking, prodding and repetitions. These vacillations all have comic elements to them, including absurdity (ruthless killers dancing together) and incongruity (a grown woman acting childish). However, each aspect of the exchange between the two sees Villanelle using comic methods to determine what it takes for Rhian’s guard to slip so that Villanelle has the opportunity to kill her. Villanelle’s comic sensibility is as mercurial as her wardrobe, constantly shifting to suit the situation and meet her needs. It is a tool for manipulating her targets and removing obstacles. Humour is capable of disarming and agitating, and is a tool used with expertise by Villanelle. As a queer, female psychopath,



Villanelle is triply marginalised, having access to a huge amount of ‘comic “capital”’ thanks to her marginalised status (Gilbert 2004: 24). From this vantage, she is able to make jokes about murder, the expectation for assassins to be comfortable and blend in, and uses that comic sensibility to her own ends. Doing so allows her to wriggle into more comfortable, and powerful, positions during social exchanges, meaning her queer humour makes her an all the more effective killer.

## **Conclusion**

Queer representation in Twenty-First Century media texts is obviously changing. With a deluge of characters across a range of televisual formats, viewers can see more queer identities than ever. An underexplored aspect of this shift concerns the representation of awful queer characters. Villanelle presents just one example of this kind of awful character. She is not *Killing Eve*'s villain, nor is she a hero. She does not quite gel with conventional characters of spy thrillers, like femme fatales and aspects of her queer biography are deftly and wilfully evaded in the show. Indeed, I remarked in the introduction to this article that Villanelle is a usefully uncategorisable character. Monstrosity provides a partial frame, since fictional psychopaths often function as a queer cipher in texts from the mid-twentieth century onwards. However, monstrosity as queer cipher still refrains from fully capturing the precise televisual shift Villanelle represents. Villanelle's narrative evades rendering her monstrosity as a queer cipher, and in this unlacing, queerness becomes legible through new means and to new ends. In this respect, I focused on Villanelle's wardrobe as a means for queer expression and her humour as a queer tool for manipulating power.

What binds these facets together is that both are highly mercurial: Villanelle's style changes all the time, and her comic methods vacillate wildly. This character quirk enables her

to flit between social contexts and to portray multiple versions of herself as the context and her desires demand. In turn, her queerness becomes equally as mercurial, changing its expression and composition as Villanelle's whims and desires do. This quality of hers is what makes her both a fantastic queer character and a highly efficient monster, without either being contingent on the other. This mercurial attitude constantly flirts with contemporary notions of queerbaiting, as Shannon Liao's article for *The Verge* points out (2018), but this is more reflective of audience demands for clear and unambiguous queer representation. Such a demand is hardly helpful to a continual development of queer representation on screen, since ambiguities are more reflective of anyone's lived experience. In shifting the queer monster away from an unambiguous imbrication, *Killing Eve* displays queerness through multiple, yet legible, ambiguities. Villanelle marks a shift away from a queerness that 'is too often forced into a restrictive template' (Goldberg 2018: [n.pag.]) and towards more varied volumes of queer representation.

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