Film and Television Narratives at the Intersection of Rape and Postfeminism

Rape is in the news constantly, and, as Helen Benedict (1992) and Marian Meyers (1997) both argue, contemporary news coverage of rape is problematic from a feminist perspective. For example, they argue that news media represent violence against women as “a matter of isolated pathology or deviance” (Meyers, 117); privilege whiteness and “stereotypes” African Americans (Meyers), blame “rape on the assailants’ color and class, rather than their gender” (in the Central Park jogger case) (Benedict, 248); and reproduce a “virgin/vamp” dichotomy. Benedict argues in fact that, while the press did include coverage of feminist perspectives (such as the idea of “sexual violence as a phenomenon” and an emphasis on the importance of “rape crisis counseling” [248]) during the earlier 1983–84 New Bedford “Big Dan’s” case, by the late 1980s when the Central Park jogger case occurred, the press did not discuss any feminist activism against rape. Sujata Moorti (1995) makes a similar claim about televised news from April 1989 to March 1992. She argues that, “in general, news discourses re-produce dominant rape myths and the act of rape remains an ‘unspeakable’ event” (7). Taking these studies together, one could argue that by the 1990s rape coverage in the news drew on a linear historical postfeminism, not bothering with a feminist perspective at all. Now that feminism was supposedly “over.”

Unlike the above three authors, Lisa M. Cuklanz (1996) looks at representations of rape across multiple media. While Benedict and Meyers both explicitly examine journalists’ discourse, even offering suggestions for how to improve news coverage, Cuklanz offers a rhetorical analysis of news coverage of famous rape trials, as well as subsequent print, television, and film fictionalizations of those cases. Cuklanz focuses specifically on the representation of feminist antirape activism and law reform
in these contexts. She argues that “certain highly publicized trials can be seen both as a means through which feminist meanings are curtailed and delimited and as a vehicle through which these reinterpretated feminist ideas are broadcast to the general culture” (6). Pointing out that news coverage is generally more conservative than fictionalized forms, such as made-for-television movies and the film The Accused (1988), she nevertheless argues that both have begun to acknowledge antirape activists as experts and to focus on women’s points of view, for example. As Cuklanz argues, this is not a direct representation of feminist definitions of rape, but it is a shift in how rape is understood in popular culture, a shift that responds to and incorporates some feminist antirape activism. While Cuklanz does not call this shift in representation “postfeminist,” the limited incorporation and transformation of feminist ideas about rape into the popularly available views in mainstream media that she describes correspond with the definition of postfeminism I lay out in chapter 2.

Despite my brief reading of Benedict, Meyers, Moorti, and Cuklanz through the lens of postfeminism, it may well be the case that their collective focus on actual rape cases in the news (and, for Cuklanz, Moorti, and Benedict, only nationally known cases) illustrates that representations of real rape cases do not directly contribute to postfeminism and feminism in popular culture. In fact, Cuklanz shows that fictionalized versions of the famous rape trials she studies are more likely to incorporate representations of feminism than are news versions. Stepping back from the focus on actual rape cases as I do in this chapter, in fact, reveals a plethora of representations of rape drawing on and contributing to postfeminism and postfeminism’s feminism in popular culture.

For example, just the titles of a number of popular press articles on rape in general (rather than actual cases) reveal attention to feminism and/or postfeminism: “A New Way of Looking at Violence against Women” (Heinzerling 1990), “The Tyranny of Modern-Day Feminism” (Amiel 1994), “Postfeminist Images Begin to Blur” (Goodman 1991), “Are You a Bad Girl?” (Wolf 1991b), “We’re All ‘Bad Girls’ Now” (Wolf 1991a), and “Rape: The Conservative Backlash” (Johnson 1992). As these titles suggest, and as the complexity of postfeminist discourses would lead one to suspect, these articles move in a number of different directions, from taking an antifeminist position that feminism has a “new and terrible power” in Canada that controls the courts and thus leads to trials based on “charges of sexual assault that are patently false” (Amiel) to taking a profeminist position that violence against women motivated by hate, such as the Montreal massacre in
which the gunman left a suicide note “declare[ing] that women had ruined his life,” should be classified as hate crimes under new hate crime legislation in the United States (Heinzerling). These two examples illustrate competing representations of feminism as either negative or positive, but both depend on claims of unequivocal clarity (“patently false” changes and a clearly hate-filled suicide note, respectively) to make their case.

More often, however, popular culture texts that discuss rape in the context of feminism claim there is a “murkiness” surrounding rape, and they blame that murkiness (at least in part) on feminism. For example, while Ellen Goodman (1991) and Naomi Wolf (1991a, 1991b) both take feminist perspectives in their articles, each depicts contemporary U.S. culture as confused about rape, in part as a result of feminism. Drawing on two conflicting versions of feminism—one that encourages women to be free to express their sexuality and another that warns women to protect themselves from sexual violence—Goodman writes that as a result of social changes surrounding sexuality, “cultural cues are no longer universal and the likelihood that two people who meet will share the same assumptions isn’t as high as it once was.” Furthermore, she suggests that supposedly new definitions of sexual assault and consent, again implicitly available because of feminist activism, lead to enormous confusion around the words that infiltrate [women's] single lives with less terror than the word rape: words like sexuality, sexiness and the nature of ‘consensual sex.’ It is as if a huge gray spot has covered these topics too, making it hard to see clearly.” The gray spot to which Goodman alludes temporarily masked the identity of Patricia Bowman during the television broadcast of William Kennedy Smith’s rape trial and thus provided the kind of protection that some feminist rape law reform demands. In this context, however, Goodman uses the gray spot as a metaphor for what feminist activism against rape has done to all (hetero)sexuality: made it hard to see clearly. While Goodman, unlike Barbara Amiel (1994), holds men (not women) responsible for sexual assault throughout her article, she nonetheless implicitly suggests that the way feminism has been incorporated into women’s lives (she reports on several interviews with “young women” in the article) has led to the blurry “postfeminist images” of both rape and sexuality. Wolf (1991b) moves in a similar direction when she draws on a pro-sex/postfeminist position to illustrate that both news coverage and court treatment of rape victims define the sexual practices of “all of us, America’s daughters” (275) as “bad.” She writes, with ironic humor, “I have talked to boys . . . I too have bantered . . . on more
than one occasion as an undergraduate, *I too had too much to drink.* The more I think about it, the more depressed I get. Not only am I a bad girl, but nearly every girl I know is just as bad*” (212). While Wolf articulates the feminist position that “consenting to sex with one or more men in the past does not indicate consent for all future time to anyone who demands it” (274), she also suggests that the confusion around sexuality and rape is caused by the contradiction between a pro-sex feminism and news coverage and court practices that depend on women’s asexuality to ensure credibility. Thus, (her version of) feminism, which introduces women’s active sexuality into the mix, is at least partially responsible for that confusion.

For antifeminist feminist postfeminist Katie Roiphe (1993, 1994), the confusion around rape is produced *entirely* by that all-powerful postfeminist-defined feminism that supposedly controls college campuses and makes women’s lives miserable. Drawing heavily on Neil Gilbert in her book *The Morning After,* Roiphe argues that the “rape epidemic” is an exaggeration, produced simply by a change in perspective, “a way of interpreting” (53) that feminists use to “sequester feminism in the teary province of trauma and crisis” (56). Furthermore, like Wolf, she aims to reclaim sexuality for women, holding feminists’ “interpretation” of rape responsible for a “denial of female sexual agency that threatens to propel us backwards” (84). Wolf and Roiphe do distance themselves from each other. In *The Morning After* Roiphe critiques Wolf’s discussion of rape culture in *The Beauty Myth* (56), and in *Fire with Fire* Wolf critiques Roiphe’s rejection of rape as a real problem (Dow 1996b, 211). Nevertheless, both Wolf and Roiphe argue against a “victim feminism” and for a pro-sex feminism. Roiphe makes this typical postfeminist argument by rejecting women’s claims of rape, and Wolf makes this same argument by criticizing rape culture and legal practices. Despite their differences, however, both Wolf and Roiphe say that rape is confusing and that feminism (at least in part) produces that confusion. As bell hooks (1994) points out, “many passages in Wolf’s work [*Fire with Fire*] could easily have been excerpts from *The Morning After*” (93).

With this brief discussion of the representation of rape in the popular press, I hope to begin to illustrate the way these representations intersect with postfeminism, particularly antifeminist feminist postfeminism, backlash postfeminism, and pro-sex postfeminism. In the process, particular versions of feminism emerge in relation to rape. For antifeminist postfeminists such as Roiphe and Amiel, feminism sees women as
victims; paradoxically, feminism is also powerful enough to confuse people about what rape is. For pro femi nist postfeminists such as Goodman and Wolf, feminism demands women’s “equal” access to sexual expression and behavior, as well as their right to “choose” to say no, no matter how many times they may have said yes in the past. From both perspectives, however, it is the changes feminism has wrought that lead to confusion around rape and sexuality.

**Postfeminist Rape Narratives**

Both the larger field of postfeminist discourse I discuss in chapter 2 and the more specific intersection of rape and postfeminism in the popular press, which tends to hold feminism partially responsible for a confusion around rape, serve as contexts in which to understand the post-1980 films and television shows to which I now turn. I ask, How do these texts use, respond to, or challenge postfeminist discourses? In this context, how do they use, respond to, or challenge feminist antirape discourses? And what happens to rape and feminism as a result?

In the first section of the chapter, I examine links between specific aspects of postfeminism and various rape narratives. I offer four specific arguments: (1) the existence of a postfeminist backlash against feminism heightens a representational paradox in which all representations of rape contribute to a cultural assault on women, regardless of a text’s more general ideological position; (2) many rape narratives contribute to a postfeminist definition of women’s independence as limited to their relationships to family and/or to an abstract equality with men; (3) when men face rape in a postfeminist context, they emerge from the experience as idealized postfeminists who can embrace both masculinity and femininity and as a result become even better feminists than are women; and (4) the general white, middle-class, heterosexual focus of postfeminism is reinforced through post-1980 rape narratives. Overall, I argue that, like most postfeminist discourses, these rape narratives generally absorb and alter what feminism is, suggesting, in the process, that feminism is no longer necessary.

In the second section of the chapter, I focus more directly on the particular versions of feminism emerging in these texts. Here, I argue that some aspects of feminism have been absorbed into popular culture so fully that
they have become traisms that help redefine rape in particularly narrow ways. Furthermore, I argue that rape narratives depend on a postfeminist assumption that feminism has been successful. Paradoxically, such narratives hold women responsible for using the (now improved) law to end rape and view men, who know more about the new laws, as better feminists than women. Overall, this chapter argues that many post-1980 rape narratives in film and television draw on and contribute to a cultural concept of postfeminism in a multitude of ways that collectively suggest there is no need for continued feminist activism, even against rape.

To support this argument, I analyze examples from film and television that are evocative or representative of the plethora of available media texts. While notes often point toward additional examples, and while I sometimes focus on relatively unusual examples to highlight their difference from more common forms of representation, inevitably other films and television shows will come to mind for readers. This is, in fact, my hope: that readers can expand the analysis I offer here through additional examples they bring to the experience of reading this book. Rape narratives are pervasive and their relationship to postfeminism is complex and far-reaching. In this chapter, as in chapter 1, I could not hope to touch on all the possible examples (given their ubiquity), and no one example matters in particular; instead, it is the cumulative stories and representations as well as the sum total of repetitive themes with which I am concerned.

Rape as Backlash: A Representational Paradox

Perhaps the most obvious way that contemporary representations of rape in film and on television can contribute to postfeminism is through a backlash against both feminism and women. The sheer number of representations of rape that have appeared on screen since the 1970s offer a sustained definition of women as sexually victimized and a sustained cultural assault on women. In particular, graphic representations of rape, at least for the moment in the text during which the rape appears, can be understood to express hatred for and violence against women and thus can potentially increase anxiety and discomfort for many spectators. Any number of films and even some television shows include these gratuitous representations, not closely connected to the larger narrative.

Paradoxically, even texts that explicitly articulate an antirape perspective can also inadvertently contribute to these backlash representations. For
example, perhaps the most well-known self-defined antirape mainstream film, The Accused, includes a graphic rape scene (through a witness’s flashback) at the end of the film. The culmination of courtroom testimony, this scene emphasizes the horror of rape and illustrates the idea that even if a woman dresses and dances provocatively in a public bar, she is not responsible if a gang rape follows. But, the graphic representation is also explicit in its visual and aural depiction of sexual violence toward women, thus increasing the amount of violence against women that exists in popular culture representations. Thus, in this film the graphic rape scene functions, paradoxically, both to challenge rape myths from a feminist perspective and to contribute to the existence of violence against women in media culture.

This paradox of discursively increasing (and potentially eliciting pleasure in) the very thing a text is working against is not unique to the representation of rape. The same argument can be made about representations of graphic war scenes in antiwar films, or of explicit racism in antiracist films, for example. Nor is it unique to a postfeminist era. As I discuss in chapter 1, a similar paradox emerges in 1920s and 1930s films, such as Shanghai Express (1932), increasing the pathos surrounding women’s experience of gendered oppression, in part through the representation of rape. I raise the issue here, specifically, to illustrate how this paradox of representation is heightened by the fact that an antifeminist backlash is part of postfeminist culture. In other words, if postfeminist discourses were only positive about feminism, even as they shaped feminism itself, it would at least be more difficult to read graphic rape scenes as an assault on women themselves. But this is not the case; as I argue in chapter 2, postfeminist discourses include both celebration of and disdain for women and feminism. Thus postfeminism encourages a similar double reading of any representation of rape: both as an assault on women and as an expression of the horrors of that assault. My point here is that even an explicitly “progressive” film, such as The Accused, through its explicit rape scene, can participate in antifeminist aspects of postfeminist discourses: a violent backlash against both women and feminism. Wherever a text falls on a continuum from misogynous and antifeminist to feminist and antirape, the simple fact that it includes a representation of rape contributes to the existence of rape on a representational level. I am not arguing here that representations of rape are equivalent to the experience of rape, but rather that all representations of rape necessarily contribute to the discursive existence of rape and that graphic representations do so in particularly powerful ways.
Independent Women and Their Families

Despite the potential backlash against women and feminism in any representation of rape, most 1980s and 1990s rape narratives intersect with aspects of postfeminism that seek to absorb and transform (rather than violently expel) feminism. As I discuss in chapter 1, rape narratives historically often linked rape to women's independence, depicting a two-way causality in which rape illustrated that women needed to be more independent and less vulnerable, or in which independent behavior led to rape. Not surprisingly—given that women's relationship to independence is a central concern of postfeminism—these narrative structures continue throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In the context of a postfeminist tension between independence and family, these narratives often use rape to help bring these two aspects of women's lives together, linking women's independent behavior to rape in the service of protecting the family. In these texts, experiencing rape helps women “have it all” (independence and family).

For example, thrillers or horror films that incorporate rape or the threat of rape specifically in order to produce spectatorial anxiety often resolve that anxiety through an independent woman character who triumphs in the end. Furthermore, these texts define this postfeminist New Woman's independence through her capacity to overcome victimization in order to protect herself and her family. In the film Trial by Jury (1994), Rusty, a mafia leader on trial for murder, threatens Valerie, a self-employed, divorced white single mother on the jury. Even Valerie's father recognizes her independence; in describing how his own experience of jury duty differs from hers, he says he “wasn't a single girl trying to survive in that jungle [the city].” Despite these explicit depictions of Valerie as independent, when Rusty threatens to kill her son if she refuses to find Rusty innocent, she is reduced to tears and falls into the arms of the man who carries Rusty's message. At the trial, she stares blankly ahead, twisting her hair and looking incapable of making an argument (let alone a decision) for either guilt or innocence. Given this behavior, which Rusty watches closely in point-of-view shots during a trial scene, he realizes that a verbal threat is not enough to ensure her cooperation; it has simply incapacitated her. So, he goes to her apartment and rapes her, making good his verbal threats through a physical assault. This rape transforms Valerie from a frightened and confused woman into one who is powerful and in control, a role naturalized by the initial portrayal of her character as independent.
After the rape, Valerie takes over the narrative in an effort to save her son and prevent further assaults on herself. No longer twirling her hair in the jury box and waiting to see what Rusty will do, she persuades three other members of the jury that Rusty’s constitutional rights have been violated, leading to the hung jury that Rusty demanded of her as prevention against further assaults. Furthermore, she begins to stand up to the jury foreman in a way that emphasizes her independence as a woman, telling him, for example, that her name is not “Mrs. Alston.” Thus, the film explicitly links her newfound post-rape persona to feminism. Then, when the prosecution team begins to investigate her in order to prove jury tampering and Rusty sends several people to try to kill her, she escapes. Rather than collapsing in tears as she does when first threatened, she continually bangs on the hood of the car trunk in which they have locked her in order to draw a passerby’s attention. When that does not work, she fashions a weapon out of what looks like a nail file and uses it to wound all three of the people who have captured her (when they eventually open the trunk). Although she does not get away on her own (Tommy, the man who initially threatened her son and who seems to have fallen in love with her, arrives and shoots at her attackers), she is the only person to leave the scene alive (Tommy dies soon after the shoot-out).

Having moved from being an independent yet naïve New Woman to an incapacitated potential victim to an actual victim to a post-rape independent woman who can do whatever it takes to protect herself and her family, Valerie now goes further and enters a rape-revenge narrative. Knowing she has no way out, Valérie goes to Rusty, offering herself to him sexually. Here, she easily changes from an independent single mother postfeminist to an independent strategically sexy masquerade postfeminist, drawing on her sexuality to manipulate Rusty. When he attempts to kill her anyway, she is prepared with her “bad news” postfeminist persona: she stabs him in the back and then kicks him viciously as he lies on the ground dying. While this scene accesses the feminist inflections of the rape-revenge films I discuss in chapter 1, Valérie nevertheless enacts revenge not to challenge men’s perpetual assaults or because rape law is ineffectual for her, for example, but in order to protect herself and her son, in order to protect her family. Thus, in Trial by Jury the more feminist aspects of earlier rape-revenge films are replaced by postfeminist concerns.13

This example illustrates how films at the intersection of rape and postfeminism can fulfill conventions of the thriller or horror genre that build
and then relieve anxiety, as is the case in some of the pre-1980 films I discuss in chapter 1. The post-1980 depiction of rape transforming a woman into an active, independent agent—allowing a woman to take control, not play the victim, and hence become postfeminist—is not confined to a particular genre, however. For example, the film *Rob Roy* (1995), like *Trial by Jury*, represents a transformation—enabled by a rape—of an independent-minded but still relatively meek woman into a powerful figure at the center of the narrative. A historical drama that takes place in early-eighteenth-century Scotland, *Rob Roy* represents a class battle between Robert Roy McGregor and the marquis of Montrose, from whom he borrows money. Archibald (Archie) Cunningham, a man from court who serves the marquis conspires with Killlearn (another man at court) to steal Robert's loan money before he receives it. When the marquis tries to put Robert in prison for not paying back the loan he never received, Robert escapes and Archie pursues him. When Archie is unable to find Robert, he goes to Robert's home, kills his livestock, rapes his wife, Mary, and burns the house.

Prior to the rape, like Valerie in *Trial by Jury*, Mary is a latent independent woman. For example, she advises Robert not to borrow money, and she warns him that leaving her alone in the house is dangerous. In each case she speaks her mind, but in each case when Robert disagrees with her she capitulates. The film, however, takes her perspective over Robert's. Not only does the narrative prove her right when borrowing money places Robert in danger and when Archie's rape of her illustrates that she is not safe at home alone, it also places all these events in an explicit context of a misogynist environment, of which Mary is aware and Robert is oblivious. For example, although Robert tells Mary she will be perfectly safe at home because the quarrel is between men, repeated “atmosphere” scenes of explicitly sexist dialogue and behavior contradict Robert by making it clear that in general the men in the film disrespect women. Thus, the film provides two views of feminism: Mary is a latent feminist because she knows sexism when she sees it. While Robert is a postfeminist man, so sure everyone shares his belief in women's autonomy and equality that he is unable to see sexism when it is right in front of him.

The rape, however, transforms Mary from being simply outspoken-but-cooperative to being decisive and in control of herself, her family, and the narrative. Now, Mary's decisions, rather than Robert's, determine the narrative development. For example, Mary decides it is better to keep the rape
to herself than to watch her husband die while trying to avenge her honor. Implicitly depending on a feminist assumption that rape is about power, not sex, Mary understands Archie’s rape of her as an attempt to exert power over her husband. In response, by keeping the rape a secret from Robert, she refuses to allow Archie’s actions to influence Robert. Instead, she sees the rape as about herself and her relationship to her family, and the narrative develops accordingly. Thus, Mary simultaneously illustrates both a postfeminist focus on family and a postfeminist definition of woman as self-confident, capable, and self-determined. And Robert, who is oblivious to the fact that other men do not share his nonsexist respect for women, is unaware that Mary has been raped, despite several clues, such as the fact that she is now uncomfortable with his touch. Thus, Robert’s postfeminism-induced obliviousness facilitates Mary’s postfeminist concern for her family and her control of the narrative.

Without telling Robert, Mary manages to negotiate a final sword fight between Robert and Archie, which will free Robert of his debt if he wins (which, of course, he does). Mary thus controls the circumstances of the confrontation between Robert and Archie. That Robert simultaneously escapes his debt and avenges Mary’s honor by killing the man who raped her is perhaps more important to Robert than to Mary because she has already avenged her own rape by confronting Killearn, the man who watched Archie rape her. In this scene, Killearn moves toward her threateningly, and Mary begins to look vulnerable, but then an extreme close-up reveals her pulling out a knife, which she uses to stab him, making good on her threat to kill him if he does not confess.14 Like Valerie in Trial by Jury, however, Mary takes her revenge not for rape per se, but in order to protect her family: the confession she wants is about Killearn’s role in stealing Robert’s money, not his role in her rape.

In these films and others like them, rape or the threat of rape is the lever that transforms the woman into a powerful and independent agent who can protect herself.15 As I suggest by discussing films in two very different generic contexts, a thriller and a historical drama, this figure of the woman who achieves independence as a result of rape is versatile, made possible by a postfeminist assumption that all women have access to feminism and are in fact (at minimum) latent feminism who simply need a motivating event to catapult them into action. In other words, these examples represent rape as a painful but ultimately positive event, one that enables the emergence of a woman’s latent independent identity. Furthermore, this independent woman responds to rape by becoming stronger,
not weaker, so that she can protect her family. In short, in these examples rape is the generative element of a postfeminist liberation narrative.

While *Trial by Jury* and *Rob Roy* represent rape as an instigator of women’s (latent) independence, other films represent rape as a potential result of women’s already fully developed independent behavior. In these examples a woman begins the narrative as self-determined, resists an early romantic union, faces potential rape as a result of her determination to remain independent, and then recognizes her own latent desire for romance at the end of the film, a narrative trajectory that Mimi White (1989) explicitly calls postfeminist. For example, in the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) Marion Ravenwood refuses to do what Indiana Jones says, instead choosing to make her own decisions. As a result, she is captured by the enemy and faces potential rape, only to be rescued by Indiana. In the Disney film *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Gaston has noticed and is attracted to Belle’s independent, scholarly ways, and he tries to rape/possess her as a result. In the film *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), a western, when a man discovers that Jo is really a woman who has been masquerading as a man in order to live independently, he attempts to rape her. Whether one reads these films as making a feminist statement about men’s violent response to independent women (as I read *The Ballad of Little Jo*) or as warning women against living independently (as I read *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), in either case rape makes such a reading possible and, furthermore, functions as a response to a particular kind of equality feminism that is central to much postfeminist discourse.

By addressing race and sexuality, the made-for-television movie *Women of Brewster Place* (1989) slightly complicates this independence-rape-romance narrative trajectory. The movie includes the story of Lorraine, an African American woman living with her female lover, who is raped by men who yell homophobic comments at her during the rape. This movie explicitly depicts the rape as an assault not only on Lorraine’s independence as a woman but also on her identity as a lesbian; it does not resolve the rape (to which her explicit independence leads) through heterosexual romance. Furthermore, it depicts the rape as one traumatic event among many faced by the “women of Brewster Place,” all of which are produced by the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Thus, in contrast to postfeminist depictions generally, *Women of Brewster Place* reveals the dominance of heterosexuality and whiteness in postfeminist narratives, even as it also depends on a standard postfeminist representation of a woman as threatened by rape because of her independence.
Women Who Act like Men

Some texts depict independent women as interested in masculine careers. Rape emerges in these films as a mark of women’s essentialized bodily gender difference that must be overcome before they can succeed in this masculine world. In a sense, these examples combine the two types of independent women rape films I discuss above: a woman both faces rape because of her desire to access her equal right to a masculine career and is fully transformed into an independent masculine subject (a version of a postfeminist feminist), ironically, as a result of rape. Examples of rape-in-the-military films illustrate the variety of ways the post-rape masculine postfeminist woman subject can emerge.

Susan Jeffords (1988) discusses Opposing Force (1986), a film that represents a military captain’s use of rape as part of a training exercise for Casey, the only woman at his mock POW training camp. Jeffords points out that the film “teeters on the edge of” (106) an ambivalence about military rape. On the one hand, public worries about women in the military address the “danger” of rape by enemy forces. On the other hand, the military is likely to define a woman’s rape or sexual assault by one or more of her U.S. military colleagues as incidental to her choice to serve in the predominantly male military. Opposing Force represents a captain who both believes the former (believes that women will face rape if captured by enemies) and enacts the latter (rapes her in order to prove his point).

Jeffords points out that, in the process of negotiating this ambivalence, the film “succeed[s] in rewriting the definition of enemy from ‘the enemy is he who rapes,’ to ‘he who rapes is the enemy’” (111). As a result, both masculinity and rape become “performative”: a man is the enemy only when he is in the process of performing rape; and masculinity is in flux and can even be taken up by women. Performative masculinity emerges not only through Captain Becker’s transformation from leader into rapist, but also through Logan, another trainee, who takes on marks of femininity as the New Man who is a “friend” to women who are raped. In fact, it is Logan, not Casey, who expresses outrage and emotion after the rape. “By taking Casey’s voice here, Logan permits Casey to become more solidely, more ‘masculine’” (114). Thus, the rape allows the text to acknowledge that women in the U.S. military may face rape by their “friends,” but the film simultaneously distances the rape from “normal” men in the military by providing a second man to express a feminized response to rape. In turn, the evacuation of these two men from masculinity proper (one
because he is a crazed villain and the other because he is feminized) leaves that masculinity available to the woman, who is thus able to succeed in her masculine pursuit of a career in the military. In short, Opposing Force addresses women's entry into the military by representing the experience of rape and the availability of New Men as friends as the means for women to achieve the masculine identity they desire/need in order to succeed in this predominantly male arena.

Military narratives such as Opposing Force also help maintain the centrality of whiteness to postfeminism. While traditional “enemy as rapist” narratives generally depend on the racialization of the enemy as a threat to the purity of whiteness, when this narrative is displaced by the friend-turned-enemy rapist as a result of women's entry into the military, this new rapist, a figure of U.S. military authority and citizenship, is figured as white, as is the woman who gains access to equality with men through rape. Nevertheless, the specter of the racialized enemy rapist remains a backdrop in these films, a potential for which Casey is now supposedly prepared, no matter how “clemented and gone over the edge” (Jeffords 1988, 109) was the U.S. white man who used rape to prepare her. Thus, these narratives maintain an attention to whiteness without giving up the possibility of a racialized enemy rapist in some other context.

In a post-Tailhook context, the film The General's Daughter (1999) takes rape and sexual harassment within U.S. military units even more for granted than does Opposing Force, dropping the ambivalent tension between enemy rapists and friend-turned-enemy rapist. Instead, it accesses the feminist antirape argument that male-dominated institutions, such as the military, sports, and fraternities, create environments in which rape is not only possible but often encouraged. The General's Daughter, however, also transforms this aspect of feminist antirape logic. The film represents a gang rape of Elizabeth, a military trainee, carried out by a group of male in-training soldiers (rather than by a superior, as in Opposing Force), thus suggesting that perhaps something about their community led them to rape. The soldier who finally admits that the rape took place, however, explicitly says that Elizabeth's presence provoked the rape. In the end, the problem is not the military, but the presence of women in the military. This, in fact, is one of the arguments the military has used historically to exclude women (and African Americans and lesbians and gays). Thus, the feminist argument that male exclusivity encourages rape becomes a new postfeminist logic that women's pursuit of independence and equality leads to rape. Paradoxically (at least for Casey
in Opposing Force), that independence and equality is simultaneously only possible through the experience of rape.

Male Rape

If rape can masculinize women, it can also feminize men. In a postfeminist context, however, this feminization is not a straightforward emasculation, disempowerment, or displacement from the central role of narrative hero.23 On the contrary, rape can place men squarely in the center of a narrative, in control of both masculinity and femininity. Some male rape narratives represent men who are raped as now being able to "understand women's experience," and thus they become postfeminist feminists without women. Other narratives about male rape solve an assumed postfeminist crisis of masculinity (such as the "trend-whipped PFM" over which some postfeminist discourses worry [e.g., Supplee 1987]), first by using rape to take that crisis to an extreme and then by suggesting that even this excessively feminizing experience only strengthens the stability of masculine identity. Still other male rape narratives emphasize men's ability to bond with each other in a world devoid of women.

The made-for-television movie The Rape of Richard Beck (1985) illustrates a transformation of an antifeminist man into a postfeminist feminist without women perfectly. While Richard begins the film as an insensitive police detective, dismissive of women's claims of rape and contemptuous of Ms. McKey, the "hotline volunteer" from the "community" with whom his department forces him to work, after he is raped he slowly comes to terms first with the traumatizing experience of rape and then with the sexism and callousness of the law to which McKey has been trying to draw his attention. In the final scene, Richard takes over McKey's role as a feminist antirape activist and seemingly single-handedly transforms the police department by initiating and leading a sensitivity training session for students at the police academy. The film promises a new postfeminist world in which the police have a sensitivity to the women (and the few men) who experience rape. McKey's feminist activism is thus no longer necessary by the end of the film.

Richard's masculinity is never in question in The Rape of Richard Beck; his problem is simply coming to terms with feminist understandings of rape through the experience of rape.24 In this example the man's experience of rape transforms and strengthens his masculinity by forcing him to incorporate both a feminizing experience and a feminist perspective
on that experience into his preexisting masculinity. Alternatively, Tom Wingo’s rape in the film *The Prince of Tides* (1991) profoundly threatens his masculinity. Specifically, Tom simultaneously experiences rape and passively views the rapes of his sister and mother. Point-of-view shots during Tom’s flashback of the rapes emphasize his inability to stop the horror and represent him as a passive and ineffectual feminine spectator both metaphorically and literally.

The problem for the adult Tom is that, having become a postfeminist man through violent and feminizing means, he is ill-equipped to handle his postfeminist responsibilities. Like the popular press’s “trend-whipped PFMs,” Tom’s encounter with the feminine makes him undesirable and undesirous. When the film opens, Tom is impotent with his (very successful professional) wife and constantly defines his problems in terms of his inability to fulfill a masculine role, especially given his wife’s professional success. The film concludes, however, by suggesting that Tom never actually was emasculated; instead, he was only temporarily unable to come to terms with the intersection of femininity and masculinity within his own subjectivity. For example, Tom, an out-of-work football coach, successfully trains a young man, Bernard, who, because he plays the violin rather than sports, needs masculinization. By teaching Bernard masculinity, Tom confirms his own masculinity. And, by empathizing with Bernard’s plight, Tom accesses his feminine side. At the end of the film, through therapy, Tom has come to terms with the rapes. He is then able to return to his wife and daughters, reentering and embracing a family that includes a professional woman who is unwilling to give up her career. Tom is an ideal postfeminist man because—having faced his experience with rape—he can reenter a postfeminist family as a masculine/feminine man with ease and comfort. Rape makes his postfeminism possible.

Other male rape films move in yet another postfeminist direction, eliminating women altogether and replacing the postfeminist man’s acceptance of antirape feminist principles (Richard) or his return to the postfeminist family (Tom) with male friendship and bonding. For example, in the film *Pulp Fiction* (1994), rather than taking the opportunity to let the men raping Marsellus kill him, Butch chooses to rescue Marsellus, even though Marsellus has been trying to kill Butch. This bonding experience, one in which both men agree never to tell anyone what happened, saves both men’s lives. They agree to end their feud to the death, as long as Butch leaves town—his goal anyway. While rape is not the only factor in producing a lifelong friendship between Andy Dufresne and Ellis Boyd.
“Red” Redding in the prison film Shawsank Redemption (1994). Andy’s ability to survive rape and then to use his education and intelligence to garner the guards’ protection from further rape earn him Red’s respect and friendship. In both films, then, rape is the catalyst for male bonding and justifies the narrative’s preoccupation with men and men’s issues.

Furthermore, as Jeffords (1994) argues is common in late 1980s and early 1990s films, in the process of bonding, white men often save themselves by paternalistically saving people of color. Both Pulp Fiction and Shawsank Redemption provide not only male bonding but also interracial bonding, post-rape. In Pulp Fiction, a white man (Butch) rescues an African American man (Marsellus) during his rape. Here, while the white man had been threatened previously by the more socially powerful African American man, the rape and rescue reverse their power. And, while a white man (Andy) experiences rape in Shawsank Redemption, the cross-race friendship that rape precipitates ultimately allows him to “save” an African American man (Red): while Red perceives himself as unable to survive outside prison, Andy’s friendship gives him another option. In both films, then, rape not only allows an emotional connection between men that suggests a postfeminist comfort with a New Man persona, but it also represents that persona as color-blind.

Feminism in the Texts

Thus far, I have discussed several ways feminist antirape rhetoric and logic emerge in and are transformed by these texts in postfeminist ways. I have offered a brief rhetorical analysis of how discussions of rape and postfeminism in the popular press, whether engaging in a backlash against or absorption of feminism, imply that feminist redefinitions of rape and sexuality have led to a troubling confusion around rape and sexuality. I have pointed out that the graphic representation of rape in the name of a feminist insistence that rape is a violent assault, not a result of a woman’s provocative sexuality, can concomitantly function as a backlash against women and feminism by potentially increasing spectatorial anxiety and expressing cultural violence toward women. I have argued that narratives that are driven by a rape that brings out the latent independent feminist in a woman imply that rape can produce positive results and that all women are already committed to independent action, they just need rape to “free” them to take that action. I have discussed particu-
lar examples that suggest that behaving in independent ways, such as “choosing” equality, leads to rape or at least the threat of rape, whether or not the text seems to use that causality to fold women back into heterosexual romance or to critique that causality. I have identified examples that suggest that male cultures, such as the military, foster rape but simultaneously imply that it is not until a woman chooses to enter that culture that a rape takes place. Finally, I have discussed texts that insist that men pay attention to rape by recentering men as the victims of rape and by providing them with an idealized postfeminist masculinity as a result.

Each of these types of representation includes a tension between an acknowledgment of feminist antirape arguments (e.g., a woman cannot provoke rape; women have a right to independence; rape is violence, not sex; exclusive male cultures can foster rape; and men need to take rape seriously) and a transformation of those arguments into postfeminist logics that often at least implicitly hold women and/or feminism responsible for producing the situations in which the rapes take place. Collectively, the examples in the previous section illustrate how rape narratives can facilitate the representation of feminism without giving up postfeminist perspectives on either feminism or rape. I turn now to a more sustained analysis of the particular versions of feminism that appear in this context.

Women’s Perspectives

In *Rape on Trial*, Cuklanz argues that the representation of a woman’s point of view in fiction (as opposed to in news reports on highly publicized rape trials) has the most potential for representing a coherent feminism in popular culture. For example, in relation to the made-for-television movie *Rape and Marriage: The Rideout Case* (1980), Cuklanz argues that all the changes in the facts of the case that the movie made helped to develop the wife, Greta’s, point of view. “By developing this perspective and focusing on Greta’s experiences, the film adds legitimacy to her claim of rape” (93). For Cuklanz, giving validity to a woman’s perspective on rape means accepting a feminist insistence on the credibility of women who report rape.

Most post-1980 rape films include at least brief representations of a woman’s point of view and of her experience of the trauma of rape and its aftermath. These scenes lend these characters credibility and emphasize that something traumatic really did happen to them, whether or not anyone else believes them. For example, in *Rob Roy* not one but two
scenes show Mary pulling away from Rob’s touch after Archie rapes her; she is no longer able to enjoy the erotic sexuality the film emphasizes between her and her husband prior to the rape. The made-for-television movie *Settle the Score* (1989) begins with what will later be revealed as a flashback/dream in which Kate, a police officer, relives a rape that took place twenty years earlier. Diffuse light, shadows, soft focus, handheld and shaky camera movements, odd camera angles, and the fragmented bodies of both Kate and the rapist express Kate’s emotional state in both the past and the present. In *The Accused*, Sarah repeatedly insists that she be able to tell her story in court, and, although she does not get a flashback, she does get an opportunity to take the stand and state her version of what happened. Even an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210* (November 17, 1993) that includes a flashback representing the point of view of Steve, a regular character who understood a sexual encounter to be consensual, also includes a flashback representing the point of view of Laura, a visiting character who understood their encounter as rape. Despite the fact that the multiple-episode narrative develops in such a way that Laura later reinterprets the encounter as “not rape,” the flashback of her initial point of view has already offered a woman’s perspective on an “ambiguous” sexual encounter as potentially rape. While Laura may change her interpretation of the encounter, a spectator may not necessarily follow suit. This she said/he said model contributes to a redefinition of rape that legitimates charges of “acquaintance rape,” a concept that emerged from feminist antirape activism and that Cuklanz (2000) argues is dominant in television rape narratives by the late 1980s.26

Representing a rape scene from a woman’s point of view, as do *Settle the Score* and *Beverly Hills 90210*, may be the most explicit way to incorporate a woman’s perspective on rape. Any number of other kinds of representations can communicate a woman’s perspective, however, whether they move the narrative forward (e.g., *The Accused*) or simply exist as moments of narrative excess, defining the character but not structuring the narrative (e.g., Rob Roy). Perhaps the most common way of representing a woman’s perspective is a scene in which the woman takes a shower after being raped, succinctly representing the feminist argument that women who experience rape often feel perpetually dirty after the rape. In *Trial by Jury*, immediately before the rape, a shot from Rusty’s point of view pans up Valerie’s body from her feet to her face, as she says, thinking: “You’re in control. You don’t have to prove it.” He responds, “This will make it official.” The rape that occurs...
next takes place offscreen, but the film includes a standard crying-in-the-shower shot to cue the viewer that rape did, in fact, take place. In a camera movement reminiscent of the one that moves up Valerie’s body before the rape, the camera tracks from the dress she had been wearing lying on the floor, up to the bathroom sink, and over to the shower, which is running. A cut reveals Valerie sitting on the floor of the shower crying. This shot offers Valerie’s emotional point of view to counter Rusty’s controlling visual point of view in the previous scene.

In Trial by Jury as well as Leaving Las Vegas (1995) (a film that also has a post-rape shower scene), the women are uninterested in reporting the rape—in Trial by Jury because Valerie would have to admit that Rusty was tampering with the jury through her, in Leaving Las Vegas because Sera interprets the rape as a moment in which “something went wrong” with one of her “dates” as a prostitute. She does not call it a rape, and, like Valerie in Trial by Jury, she is not in a legal position to report the rape safely. While Mary did not have access to a shower or twentieth-century evidence collection practices in 1700s Scotland in Rob Roy, she also gets a ritual washing scene, cleaning herself in a lake after the rape. Given that, for various reasons, these women are unable to enter a contemporary legal system to prove that rape took place, the post-rape washing scene becomes a trope, a very brief moment outside the narrative flow that stands in for “women’s experiences of rape.”

The representations of women’s perspectives on rape in these examples often also access contemporary therapeutic discourses. For example, the psychic realm of Kate’s dream and the specific details of women’s physical responses to rape (discomfort with touch, a desire to bathe) both gesture toward therapeutic understandings of women’s responses to rape. White (1992) argues that “confessional and therapeutic discourse centrally figure as narrative and narrational strategies in television in the United States” (8). In the more specific context of rape narratives here, those therapeutic discourses also contribute to a postfeminist emphasis on the individual and her experience. Dana I. Cloud (1998) argues that “therapeutic rhetors are situated at moments of social or political movement or crisis, delegitimizing political outrage and collective activity in favor of more private endeavors” (xvi). Postfeminist discourses’ emphasis on individual choice and on incorporating independence within heteronormative middle-class family contexts illustrates therapeutic rhetors that seek to move “past” feminism’s “political outrage and collective activity.”