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‘She’s pretty hardboiled, huh?’: Rewriting the Classic Detective in *Veronica Mars*

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The 2004–7, three-season television series *Veronica Mars* created by Rob Thomas follows its eponymous protagonist, a high school student played by Kristen Bell, whose life is turned upside down by the murder of her best friend, Lilly Kane (Amanda Seyfried). Following in the footsteps of her father (Enrico Colantoni), the county’s former sheriff, Veronica becomes a private detective and attempts to solve her best friend’s murder. While the new Sheriff, Don Lamb (Michael Muhney), identifies Veronica as ‘hardboiled’, traditionally this quality has fallen under the purview of masculine identity – for example, the genre’s most famous characters, Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade. Critics’ definitions of ‘hardboiled’ even appear to eschew feminine identity through an emphasis on a ‘tough, shell-like exterior, a prophylactic toughness that was organized around the rigorous suppression of affect and was mirrored by his detached, laconic utterances and his instrumentalized, seemingly amoral actions’ (Breu 2005, 1). The required geographical and social mobility of this figure that frequently leads him into violent interactions with the criminal underbelly and corrupt forces further aligns the hardboiled detective with traditional masculine identity. Despite his mobility, however, he remains isolated and always on the periphery of these communities and favours a masculine ‘romantic individualism’ (Routledge 2001, 70). As Rzepka argues, unlike classical detective fiction which typically expresses the belief that ‘society is worth redeeming’ and attempts to restore order through solving crime, the hardboiled genre depicts an unredeemable society corrupt to its core (2005, 186). Indeed, the hardboiled detective himself has often been understood as a rejection of the female or feminine figures of Golden Age detective fiction, such as Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey and Christie’s Miss Marple (Rzepka 2005, 180).

As an alternative to this masculine figure, women writers of the 1970s such as Paretzky and Grafton offered a female hardboiled detective: these 'women protagonists contend with concerns that touch real [...] women's lives on a daily basis' (Schoenfeld 2008, 837). Such writers have, according to Walton and Jones, 'strategically redirected the masculinist trajectory of the American hardboiled of the 1930s and 1940s to what we would argue are feminist ends' (1999, 4). And yet other critics have noted that this translation is no easy task. Shuker-Haines and Umphrey analyse the oscillation of the female detective's performance between traditionally masculine and feminine roles in Grafton's and Paretzky's detective novels, noting that '[g]ender relates to the female hardboiled detective in complicated and contradictory ways' because these female detectives must negotiate this traditionally masculine genre (1998, 72).

Veronica Mars participates in the hardboiled tradition but draws freely upon the classical detective genre, while it simultaneously negotiates these genres' gender politics. Veronica, in many ways, resembles the hardboiled men she is inspired by with her 'tough, shell-like exterior' coupled with wise cracks, overt cynicism and a predominantly loner status, which she has developed in order to survive the mean and corrupt streets of Neptune High School and the community at large. After Lilly's death, Veronica finds herself no longer a part of the privileged 09er crowd – named after their zip code – but instead a social pariah. However, despite the similarities between Veronica's character and the classic hardboiled figure, her actions betray a dedication – although intentionally and often aggressively concealed through her hardboiled *performance* – to the hope that order can be restored, that the community can be redeemed and rebuilt to form a cohesive and cooperative unit. Deviating from the hardboiled detective's pessimistic attitude towards the community's unredeemable nature therefore aligns Veronica with classical detection, which depicts the salvation of the community and a return to order. Furthermore, this revision upsets the gender politics of the traditionally masculine hardboiled figure by imbuing it with the stereotypical feminine qualities of valuing and prioritizing interpersonal relationships. In other words, the translation of the hardboiled detective in this series from male to female offers an antidote to the original genre's pessimistic representation of disintegrating communities by drawing upon classical detection's commitments to the restoration of order. Combining these hardboiled and classical detection qualities, the series encourages its audience to become regular viewers. The show promises through its formulaic narrative structure that each

season's major story arc will be resolved – a promise the show delivers on, repeating the process of narrative resolution for each individual episode. Thus, while on the one hand it is an innovative hybridization of the hardboiled and classical detection, on the other hand, *Veronica Mars* paradoxically repeats its innovation, doing so to ensure repeat viewers.

The series' status as a young adult show further complicates its use of hardboiled conventions, given the youth genre's proclivity for happy endings and its focus on identity construction. Traditionally, young adult series present their protagonists with a series of formative obstacles that, when overcome, lead to a greater sense of self and a happy resolution. Veronica faces the death of her best friend, a rape, the loss of her mother, attacks on her reputation, and social ostracism, to name just a few of the major obstacles. Given the young adult format, these are grounded in her school experience. Neptune High School thus is a microcosm of Neptune the town: in other words, the high school functions as the location in which the larger community's and adults' anxieties are played out by its teenage children. Understanding *Veronica Mars* therefore requires taking into consideration the multitude of competing narrative impulses – traditional masculine hardboiled and feminist hardboiled revisions, classical detection and the young adult genre – that characterize this complex series.

The opening shot for the series zooms in on Neptune High School.¹ Veronica immediately connects the high school to the town by informing viewers that '[i]f you go here, your parents are either millionaires or your parents work for millionaires. Neptune, California: a town without a middle class' (*Pilot*). While this crime series revolves around a central character, the setting for the show with its polarized community also functions as a central character and unifying feature of the series. Just as Chandler explores the mood of a corrupt and morally disintegrating 1930s Los Angeles through Philip Marlowe's investigations in *The Big Sleep*, Thomas explores the difficulties of the teenage experience through Veronica as she travels the corrupt, 'mean streets' of Neptune High School and Neptune town.

Highly attuned to the topographical features and cultural climate of place, and her place in the social hierarchy of the school and town, Veronica successfully navigates this bifurcated community, gaining her power from having once been an insider. She informs viewers that she was once an honorary member of the upper class because her 'dad used to be the sheriff and that had a certain cachet [...]. Let's be honest, though. The only reason I was allowed past the velvet ropes was Duncan Kane', her boyfriend (*Pilot*). As the series begins, however,

viewers witness a Veronica who has been relegated to the lower class, to the 'trash' (*Ain't No Magic Mountain High Enough*). Veronica takes advantage of her liminal status and familiarity with these divided communities to search for knowledge and to solve the cases which she takes on for both her classmates and even some adults, such as her school's Vice Principal, Mr Clemmons. This liminal status is, according to Nash, a feature of 'subversive power' of the teenager who 'cross[es] boundaries in the search for knowledge' (Nash 2010, 72). Veronica therefore also frequently travels between the teen world and the adult world, trying to maintain good grades and cope with the social hierarchy of high school, while working as a private eye.

The *Pilot* episode establishes both the series' hardboiled conventions and the deviations it makes from these conventions. For example, in the episode's first classroom scene, Veronica reads aloud from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*: 'Hope springs eternal in the human breast; / Man never Is, but always To be blest: / The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home, / Rests and expatiates in a life to come' (2006, 274). While Veronica's analysis of these lines – 'Life is a bitch until you die' – typifies her hardboiled pessimism and penchant for wisecracks, her teacher's interpretation actually identifies the motivations that appear to characterize Veronica's actions throughout the series: 'The thing that keeps us powering through life's defeats is our faith in a better life yet to come.' While the feisty heroine would never openly concur – thus remaining, in some sense, true to the traditional masculine hardboiled detective figure who 'suppresses [his] affect' – her actions throughout the first two seasons reflect a commitment to such a 'faith' that the corrupt elements of society can be eradicated and order thus restored.

Her hardboiled performance protects her from the weaknesses traditionally associated with her gender – being emotionally and physically weak and fragile, sentimental and community oriented – even though, paradoxically, traditional femininity is simultaneously suggested as the influence behind her actions. Through flashbacks, viewers learn that once an honorary member of the 09ers, Veronica epitomized traditional notions of femininity through her physical appearance, with her long flowing blond hair, pretty dresses and pep squad uniform that are also meant to reinforce depictions of her naivety and innocence, and her former integration into the community. Furthermore, these flashbacks establish Veronica's innocence by contrasting her with her seductive, femme fatale best friend, Lilly. The physical appearance of the current-day Veronica with the chin-length, spiky hair and tom-boyish clothing emphasizes her change into a cynical, unsentimental and 'isolated'

teenage girl (*Meet John Smith*). The present version of Veronica mocks such typically feminine teenage girl behaviour: 'if you do this for me, we'll be best friends forever' and 'Relax, Dad. I'm cutting pictures of Ashton out of *Teen People* as we speak' (*Ruskie Business*). Highly aware of gender politics, however, she occasionally takes advantage of her gender to solve investigations, as seen in the episode *The Green-Eyed Monster* in which she dresses provocatively to test the fidelity of a client's fiancé.

Such awareness and manipulation of gender stereotypes result from her knowledge of corruption within the community, and yet, despite her pessimism, she still expresses hope for improvement. For example, in the episode *Return of the Kane*, one of the lower-class students, Wanda, takes on Duncan Kane for student president, running on a platform of 'real change'. Wanda explains that '[t]he rich kids, they run things around here. They're the minority and they're corrupt', and she calls the situation 'class warfare'. Her commentary on the problem at school reflects the wider social problem of the power struggle between the 'haves and have-nots'. Veronica helps Wanda tackle corruption by proving that one of the rich teenagers, Madison, rigged the election. Interestingly, given the series' proclivity for restoring order, its creator here refuses straightforward didacticism as Wanda herself then turns out to be corrupt and a 'narc'. The anti-corruption message Wanda bases her campaign on and her insistence that she would have 'changed the way things work around here' are discredited by her 'willingness] to wreck [Veronica's] future to save [her] own', and thus the corruption and class conflict at the high school remain.

The class tensions of the first season are carried into the second season as Veronica fails to eradicate all corruption and repair the fracture between the 'haves versus the have-nots'. By the second season, Veronica has started dating Duncan Kane again and, through this relationship, regained some of her former status within the 09ers. Veronica bitterly comments that '[i]n Neptune these days, you're forced to choose sides' because the town has gone 'crazy' over the perception that '[a]nother rich kid' (Logan Eckles) is 'getting off scot-free' (*Normal is the Watchword*). The lower-class students express their feelings of betrayal: 'So, did you like your taste? Your little year of living dangerously? [...]. As soon as they'll have you back, you go running to the 09ers,' and '[L]ast year was just some-some big old act for you' (*Normal is the Watchword*). Such conflict mirrors what Harper has identified as a characteristic anxiety of nineteenth-century detective fiction that features a fictional detective 'who had inside knowledge, who knew the language of the underworld, yet whose loyalties lay with the bourgeois, the property owners' (2009, 69).

Veronica's lower-class classmates accuse her of this very misplaced loyalty. However, this belief that Veronica has chosen the side of the 09ers and has reintegrated into the school's privileged group is a misconception fuelled by the increasingly and vehemently divided community. Her peripheral membership actually fractures the 09ers because of Duncan's and Logan's competing romantic interest in Veronica.

This representation of the split community is partly necessitated by the fact that *Veronica Mars* as a television series must keep some conflicts ongoing, unlike the novels of, for example, Agatha Christie whose detective figure returns time and time again to solve new mysteries. While previous mysteries may be referenced in later works, the readers' desire for resolution ensures that each remains its own discrete narrative. In *Veronica Mars*, the individual episode plot arcs are subordinated to several larger mysteries that run throughout the season – Lilly's murder and Veronica's paternity – and, as in the case for carry over even into subsequent seasons – Veronica's rape.

The continual divisions also arise, however, from the series' divided commitments to hardboiled and classical detection. While Veronica's actions betray a desire to restore order to her community, she aggressively conceals this through her hardboiled performance because it reinforces the boundaries between herself and the community that she feels has betrayed her and which contains many corrupt elements: 'The fine people of Neptune gathered their pitchforks and torches, stormed the County Commissioner's office, and ran Dad out of office [...]. My friends got on the bandwagon as well' (*Credit*). Because her father accused the 'beloved' Jake Kane whom 'half the people in this town owe their fortunes to', her former friends believe she 'stabbed' them in the back (*Pilot*). Veronica's knowledge about and rejection of the corrupt elements within her community manifest themselves in the form of the 'wisecrack, a stylized demonstration of knowledge which expresses an irreverence towards authority and institutional power. Wisecracks put to use as weapons are an assertion of autonomy, a defiant refusal to be browbeaten' (Willett 1996, 7). Indeed, despite her isolation, and the general hostility and taunts she experiences, Veronica refuses to be browbeaten.

Veronica uses her experiences to 'get tough' and 'get even', exposing and eradicating the corrupt elements that fracture her community (*Like a Virgin*). The show suggests she must retain her hardboiled performance in order to successfully clean up the community because this hardboiled nature prevents her judgement from being clouded by emotion or misplaced trust. This lesson is most apparent through the plotline associated with her investigation into Lilly Kane's murder, when she must

even investigate her former boyfriend and Lilly's brother, Duncan, and her current love interest, Logan, who becomes a male version of the femme fatale. Both express great dismay over Veronica's suspicion and refusal to trust them during the episode *Leave it to Beaver*. After a confrontation with Duncan, instead of 'wallowing in the grief of betraying an ex-boyfriend', Veronica tells herself that 'a girl must prioritize', and she continues to investigate her current case, thus refusing to succumb to the perhaps expected teenage girl emotional response and instead favouring a hardboiled performance.

Transferring the hardboiled persona to the young adult genre, the show's creator, Thomas, had to transform the character and negotiate the traditional conflicts of the character with Veronica's identity as a teenage girl. As Fisher puts it in her introduction to a collection of articles on the girl sleuth, traditionally this figure 'require[s] lack of parental supervision' and the 'conviction of superiority over her parents, police officers, and other adult authority figures' (Fisher 2009, 7). Veronica frequently demonstrates this sense of superiority throughout her investigations, especially with regard to her teachers, Vice-Principal and Principal. Veronica's liminal state between youth and adulthood often causes concern to her father Keith and some adults, believing that she has grown up too quickly. While Keith frequently defends her against other adults' criticisms by stating '[s]he's not your average seventeen-year-old' (*A Trip to the Dentist*), he reminds and encourages her to behave like one: '[y]ou're a high school girl. Do some high school girl things now and then' (*Ruskie Business*). The show thus expresses frequent anxiety about the rate at which teenagers lose their innocence and cross over into the realm of adulthood. Veronica's experiences also function as exaggerated examples of the problems adults fear their teenagers will encounter during their formative years, such as underage drinking, sex, drugs and peer pressure. Paradoxically, on the one hand, Veronica's hardboiled nature prevents her from succumbing to the pressures that many 'normal' teenagers face, and yet, on the other hand, her hardboiled nature leads her to confront exaggerated versions of these problems. For example, like many of her peers, Veronica struggles to communicate with her father, often keeping secrets from him for fear of his disappointment or reaction. However, it is her rape that brings this to the forefront – 'I never told my Dad [...]. No good could have come from that' (*Pilot*).

While Veronica is an abnormal teenager in many ways, she is also not totally immune to the difficulties of being a teenage girl. Martaus discusses 'the centrality of the rape in creating Veronica as the vigilante

girl detective', quoting Havrilesky who contends that Veronica is 'stripped of all the teen girl insecurities' (Martaus 2009, 75). Such a claim, however, fails to take into consideration Veronica's hardboiled performance, consisting of a tough exterior that conceals and protects a soft centre. The need for this performance is pronounced in the series' consideration of Veronica's sexuality. Since Shelly Pomeroy's party, Veronica's sexual reputation has been tainted. Having been drugged, Veronica acts unlike herself and, as viewers learn in *A Trip to the Dentist*, her behaviour was largely interpreted by the other party attendees as promiscuous. Throughout seasons one and two, she is constantly reminded of this loss of reputation and often these reminders are meant to emotionally wound her: '[t]hings I hear about you' (*Pilot*), and '[d]on't go blaming me because you got all wasted and slutty' (*A Trip to the Dentist*). Veronica's hard exterior prevents others from knowing the ways in which their words wound her. She acts tough and tells those she perceives as weak to employ the same strategy: 'you want people to leave you alone, Mandy, or better yet, treat you with respect? Demand it. Make them' (*Hot Dogs*) and 'You get tough, you get even' (*Like a Virgin*). However, despite this act, Veronica acknowledges that 'maybe once in a while' it 'bother[s]' her 'what people say' (*Like a Virgin*). The series thus provides a vision of how to survive the common female high school experience of 'slut bashing' or shaming about sexual reputation.

However, despite this tough exterior, Veronica occasionally and explicitly reveals her softer centre. For example, in *Ruskie Business*, she explains to her father why she continued to investigate a case he had asked her to drop: 'I just thought it would be nice if, instead of breaking people up, we brought them together for once.' Keith reminds her that 'we're private investigators, not the frigging *Love Boat*'. He is highly aware of the ways in which his daughter has been hardened by their experiences: 'I used to think that solving the case was the key to our happiness. Solve the case and my reputation is restored. Solve the case and your mom comes home. Solve the case and you go back to being a normal teenage girl' (*Return of the Kane*). Veronica's desire to bring people together represents what the series suggests constitute the hopes of a 'normal teenage girl', and, despite her continued hardboiled performance, one of her motivations for solving Lilly's murder is her desire to 'bring this family back together'. Refusing to show weakness, even to the series' viewers, in her voiceover, Veronica mocks herself for this seemingly uncharacteristic goal: 'I'm sorry, does that sound mushy? [...]. Veronica Mars, she's a marshmallow.'

This performance of toughness that conceals and protects frequently holds her back from forming emotionally supportive intimate ties, and thus the limitations of the hardboiled performance are explored. While Wallace (Percy Daggs III) correctly identifies that ‘Underneath that angry young woman *shell*, there’s a slightly less angry woman. You’re a marshmallow, a Twinkie,’ he repeatedly struggles to access that soft centre (*Pilot*, my emphasis). In this episode, Wallace, having got himself into trouble with the motorcycle gang the PCHers, has been duct-taped to the school flagpole. He first meets Veronica when, in traditional hardboiled fashion, she rejects the majority’s response of passively standing by and instead supports the weak by cutting Wallace down. She then uses her sleuthing skills to repair the damage between him and the PCHers; however, while she and Wallace bond over this experience and become friends, Veronica often keeps him at arm’s length, unable to fully let him in and give up the security of her individualism. In *A Trip to the Dentist*, Wallace expresses frustration with Veronica’s secrecy, trust issues and unwillingness to establish intimate ties with people: ‘[y]ou know, I do these things for you and I never ask you why [...]. You know why? Because I know you would never tell me.’ Veronica views this dynamic positively, telling Wallace, ‘I’d do the same for you.’ For Wallace, though, this behaviour keeps them isolated from each other.

As one would anticipate, then, despite the ways in which Veronica attempts to restore her community by ridding it of corruption and malign influences, she resists integrating herself fully back into the community, remaining committed to the individualism characteristic of the hardboiled detective. The series reinforces the advantages of this individualism through such plotlines as with Wanda in *Return of the Kane* (discussed above) and Veronica’s brief relationship with Troy Vandegraff (Aaron Ashmore), who turns out to be a drug dealer. While Veronica occasionally considers integrating herself and giving up her individualism, she frequently finds herself duped, and the show appears to reinforce the message that trust is dangerous. Instead, Veronica repeatedly returns to the general principle that emotions, such as love, are risky but ‘Information is insurance’ (*You Think You Know Someone*).

Her growing friendship with Wallace nevertheless operates as a normalizing influence through his role as her sidekick keeping her connected to the community. When Wallace briefly leaves Neptune in season two, it becomes clear to viewers that Veronica has grown to value and lean on him, as evidenced through the series of emails Veronica sends to him, although these emails are characteristically tongue-in-cheek in tone: ‘Wallace, Wallace, Wallace. Wherefore art thou? [...].

Things that have changed in the nineteen hours since my last email: I've grown four inches, changed my name to London, and have discovered that apparently I'm not the only love of Duncan's life. You really need to start answering my emails. This is a little too Doogie Howser's journal for me' (*Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner*). Unlike the type of sidekicks who normalize by being so markedly Other, Wallace normalizes Veronica by keeping her tied to the community (O'Reilly 2008, 62). As he becomes more popular at school because of his integration through basketball, he simultaneously helps to keep Veronica connected too. Despite Veronica's belittlement of the kinds of feminine and community-driven behaviours she used to exhibit and now mocks, she shows her appreciation to Wallace in the episode *Betty and Veronica* by giving him anonymous gifts.

Wallace's friendship functions more, then, like that of a traditional sidekick from classical detection, such as Captain Hastings from Christie's Hercule Poirot series, by keeping Veronica in the network. Like Poirot, however, Veronica sees what her sidekick does not because he is too integrated and often lets his optimism cloud his judgement. Indeed, this optimistic belief in the goodness of others leads Wallace into trouble in the episode *Rashard and Wallace Go to White Castle*. When Wallace defends Rashard as 'cool' and believes he can convince him to come forward and admit he was driving a car during a hit and run, Veronica argues that Rashard will be more interested in the money he stands to gain from a promising basketball career than in justice. Wallace responds by questioning, '[i]s there anybody you don't think is corrupt deep down?' This exchange thus emphasizes a key feature of their relationship: they balance out each other's pessimism and optimism and compensate for the ways in which these outlooks damage them.

Veronica's self-awareness of her individualism manifests explicitly in the season two finale, *Not Pictured*, when during graduation Veronica receives loud applause and people call her name as she takes the stage. She pauses with a stunned look. Vice Principal Clemmons asks, '[y]ou were expecting some other reaction?', at which Veronica finds herself speechless. Despite her continued sense of isolation and individualism, then, Veronica finds she is a vital and, more importantly, valued member of the community. Even with her often superior knowledge, because of her hardboiled individualism and pessimism, Veronica fails to understand fully her role within and her identity in relation to the community.

This show reveals, then, that unlike similar young adult texts that draw upon the hardboiled genre, such as Rian Johnson's noir movie *Brick* (2005), *Veronica Mars* refuses to conform entirely to the hardboiled

conventions that its detective protagonist performs in order to survive the difficulties that she faces throughout her high school career. The show's use of the hardboiled genre ultimately provides a strategy through which Veronica negotiates the obstacles she faces at high school and in the community beyond, while the classical detective genre influences soften the hardboiled pessimism and the isolated individualism associated with its detective.

In the 2014 follow-up movie, Veronica has given up the detective trade because 'the price was too high' and she now lives in New York City. While she reluctantly agrees to assist Logan when he asks for her help to beat the charge of murdering his ex-girlfriend, Carrie Bishop aka Bonnie De Ville, Veronica's initial reservations subside when she gets her first break in the case. Her father repeatedly encourages her to leave, urging her not to 'let this town take you down like it does everyone else'. In line with the series' propulsion towards narrative closure, the movie ends with Veronica revealing not only the murderer of Bonnie De Ville but another classmate as well. She and Logan also rekindle their 'epic' love story. In a closing scene monologue, Veronica verbalizes a philosophy that reveals how the series straddles the hardboiled and classical detective fiction genres, and demonstrates that she finally understands her role within the community:

Dad always said this town could wreck a person. It's what happens when you're playing a rigged game. I convinced myself winning meant getting out, but in what world do you get to leave the ring and declare victory? This is where I belong: in the fight. It's who I am. I've rolled around in the mud for so long, wash me clean and I don't recognize myself. So how about I just accept the mud and the tendency I have to find myself rolling in it.

Veronica acknowledges that the odds are against her, but she refuses to succumb to the nihilism of the hardboiled genre when she declares that she will remain in the fight to save the town from corruption and thereby restore the community.

Note

1. The DVD contains an extended version of the *Pilot* episode that begins with Veronica on a stake out, waiting to get the 'money shot' for an adultery case she is working on for her father.