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Man enough to kill, boy enough to cry: Liminality and irresolvability in *Adolescence*

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Abstract

This short article considers the television show *Adolescence*, using the show's title as an entry point for analysis and critique. Adolescence is the name we give to the liminal zone between childhood and adulthood. However, the concept of an "adolescence" is conspicuously gendered and racialized; it is a strategic attempt to extend the protections and moral absolutions of childhood that is overwhelmingly reserved for white, male youth. As such, one of its primary functions—both in culture at large and in *Adolescence* as a cultural representation—is to selectively complicate questions of agency, responsibility, and blame. My analysis proposes that this titular sense of adolescent liminality is mirrored in *Adolescence's* overall narrative ambivalence about the causes and conditions of gender-based violence. Ultimately, I find that the show harnesses the "in betweenness" of its adolescent protagonist to divorce violent misogyny from power, dodging important questions about the compounding roles of patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and the digitally networked far-Right.

keywords

misogyny, gender-based violence, television, believability, youth, far-Right

If childhood is an age of innocence, and adulthood the era of responsibility, then adolescence is the liminal zone between. It is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as a 'period of

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time, following the onset of puberty, when a child develops into an adult'. But this medicalized definition is illusory. Adolescence is ultimately a construct: a way of delineating a narrow sliver of the lifespan in which it is neither socially, culturally nor morally appropriate to treat us as children nor as adults. The law draws deceptively firm starting lines for adulthood, designating (for example) the precise age at which we become fully capable of consent, or fully culpable for the harms caused by our actions. The idea of an adolescence, however, blurs these lines in ways that are intentional, historically novel and profoundly uneven. It is conspicuously gendered and, as Cornel Grey writes in this special section, deeply racialized; it is a way of qualifying responsibility and tempering blame that is predominantly reserved for young men and often only made legible through whiteness. It is thus routinely denied to girls, and most of all Black girls and boys, who are 'adultified' even from childhood (see Davis, 1981; Epstein et al., 2017). Thus, the liminality of adolescence is better understood as an expression of power relations than as a specific developmental stage. It is a highly selective attempt to extend the protections and absolutions of childhood for as long as possible and to complexify the problem of agency during the 'in betweenness' of white, male youth.

It is in this liminal zone, where questions of accountability become slippery and vexatious, that we find 13-year-old Jamie: man enough to sexually harass women online and to kill, yet boy enough to wet his bed, to cry for his parents, to lie committedly without any real hope of getting away with his crime, the way children do when they break things: *It wasn't me. I didn't do it*. 'Adolescence' is an appropriate title for a show whose narrative unfolds, in real time, as a meandering and ultimately frustrated search for blame – not only for the victimization of Katie, whom Jamie has murdered, but for the way that Jamie himself (and by extension, his family) has also been victimized by his crime. That the show, in its tight focus on Jamie, treats these two 'ruined lives' as somewhat equivalent tragedies is problematic and will no doubt be discussed elsewhere in this special section (see also Banet-Weiser, 2021; Chouliaraki, 2024). However, the show – both in its script and in the way it has been marketed – frames this choice as a pragmatic one. It represents an attempt to grapple with a question that both animates and undermines many efforts to combat gender-based violence: how does it happen, how is it possible, that 'our boys' – the boys we know and love and raise – become 'those men'? How, and when, do children get caught up in the adult business of violence?

Of course, these are the wrong questions: once it is grasped that such violence is structural, the reality that misogyny is seeded in childhood becomes unavoidable. We are born into and of such violence because we are born into and of the world – a world that was built on the subjugation of women and the systematic devaluation of our lives. But when violence is structural, how should we think about responsibility? If we are looking for causes and conditions that we might be able to change, who or what should we be looking at?

Wrestling with these uncertainties, *Adolescence* jiggles the handles of many doors. Are 'bad men' to blame? Bad women? Bad parents? Bad schools? A bad Internet? That last, possibly jiggliest of handles, is the one that seems to have inspired most of the heated public discourse that has followed the show's release – so much so that, arriving late to *Adolescence* as I did, I was surprised by how scant and sporadic the show's discussion of

the digital manosphere actually is. As Catherine Baker et al. (2024) have shown in their research, young men are blasted with an algorithmically fueled fire hose of misogynistic content on digital platforms, and this must be understood as a core condition not just of the most extreme manifestations of modern misogyny but also the steady cultural yoking of a growing litany of smaller patriarchal grievances to the anti-migrant, anti-feminist, anti-queer and anti-democratic politics of the increasingly fascistic global far-Right. Yet, the only substantive engagement with the manosphere comes when it is revealed that Katie used the vocabulary of misogynistic digital sub-cultures to bully Jamie on Instagram by using emojis to imply that he was an incel. Whether or not Jamie had engaged with these digital sub-cultures, and the role they may have played in seeding and stoking the kinds of hate and entitlement required for Jamie to take the life of the girl whose scorn he felt he could not – or should not – endure, is left entirely unexplored.

Like many feminist critics, *Adolescence* is careful not to over-ascribe the role of technology, digital sub-culture or any of the other possible 'causes' of Jamie's crime that the show explores. Indeed, although the show is better understood as a careful excavation of the everyday context for Jamie's crime (rather than the crime itself), it proceeds through the various elements of that context with a determined sense of narrative (and, ideological) agnosticism. Each possible explanation – the various 'bads' listed above – is wheeled out into the view of the audience only to ultimately be found insufficient; although we are given some opportunities to contemplate the larger causes and contexts of aggrieved modern masculinity, Jamie's decision to violently murder his classmate is maintained beyond the boundary of our comprehension. The narrative ethos of the show vis-à-vis its central subject – gender-based violence – is neatly distilled in this metanarrative exchange between the two investigating police officers in Episode 2, whose search for answers during a visit to Jamie and Katie's school parallels that of their audience:

> DI Luke Bascombe: We're here for Katie. We're here for her parents. We're here to get answers. *It's our job to understand why.*
>
> DS Misha Frank: You can't understand why. Do you actually think you can? We've got the video. We know what he did. You're not going to know why, mate. *Look at all of the things we've seen. You are not going to know why.* You just won't.
>
> (emphasis added)

As a feminist scholar, I feel conflicted about the stubborn sense of irresolvability that *Adolescence* maintains around Jamie's decision to kill Katie. On the one hand, simplistic explanations that would chalk up Jamie's actions to 'just' the digital manosphere or 'just' flawed parenting or 'just' a violent individual pathology would be reductive and politically unhelpful. Yet, as Sarah Banet-Weiser and I have argued, the persistent sense of irresolvability that frames cultural conversations about gender-based violence is often a political convenience. Doubt works in profoundly uneven ways: for those accused of sexual violence and other gender-based harms, it is a benefit to be enjoyed, while for survivors and feminists, it is a burden to be endured (see Banet-Weiser and Higgins,

2023). Uncertainties about facts in discourses about gender-based violence – be they about the fact of an act of violence or the social facts that frame such an act – often serve as alibis for what is, ultimately, a lack of real care for what those facts can tell us about the world and the lives of women within it. A lack of political will to grapple with what *is* known.

For all its granularity and attention to detail, *Adolescence* is beleaguered by a similar lack of political will. Gender-based violence is not a mysterious phenomenon – it is, as feminist research and critique have long established, an entirely intuitive expression of patriarchal power relations, complicated to prevent but not so complicated to understand. And yet, frustratingly, it is the persistence of a (white supremacist, heterosexist, capitalist) patriarchal social order – an order in which perceived loss of power, status and moral self-certitude will inevitably, to (white) boys and men, feel like dispossession, subjugation and victimhood – that appears to be the only door handle that *Adolescence* does not decide to try. Similarly, in refusing to engage seriously with the digital manosphere and its imbrication with the far-Right, the compounding effects of racialized aggrievement and economic dispossession on the contemporary so-called 'crisis of masculinity' that is driving young men, like Jamie, *both* toward violent misogyny and into the arms of reactionary right-wing movements are left unexamined. Despite its impressive emotional texture, the narrative of *Adolescence* is impressionistic rather than expository. It is, as co-creator Jack Thorne has described, a conversation starter (see Prime Minister's Office, 2025) rather than a conversation shaper; it has little to actually *say* about modern misogyny beyond the fact of its existence and the (very occasional) fact of its consequences for those who engage in its most violent expressions.

'Adolescence' is, as I have discussed, a state of almost-responsibility, of not-quite-culpability, of neither innocence nor guilt. So too, we should note, is the status of being *accused* – and it is here that I find *Adolescence* actually making its most interesting cultural interventions. Jamie, we are frequently reminded through dialogue between various characters, is an 'accused' killer, but not yet (legally speaking) a proven one. He remains so for the duration of the show, whose first episode opens with his arrest and final episode closes shortly before his trial. In Episode 1, when Jamie's father is still clinging to belief in his son's innocence, he reminds the arresting officers that his son is 'only accused' and should be treated accordingly. Later, in Episode 3, when Jamie is protesting the harsh conditions of his pre-trial detention to the visiting child psychologist, he asserts:

> Jamie: 'Accused. It's all accused. If I did it, if I hurt her, then I get it, but I didn't, so'…

Legally, to be accused is to be entirely innocent, up until one is 'proven' guilty in a court of law. But that legal standard has, as Amia Srinivasan (2021) has argued, long been out of place in the realm of culture. Culture does not resolve uncertainties about truth so procedurally nor so finitely as in courtrooms, sorting claims into one of two categories. As Sarah Banet-Weiser and I have argued, the insistence by many accused men that they should be treated *by society* (rather than by the law) as wholly innocent until their guilt is 'proven' cynically capitalizes on both the difficulty of establishing legal guilt for many forms of gender-based violence[1] and the diminishing possibility of 'proving' anything in

a digital culture characterized by endemic and intractable doubt (see Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023; Higgins and Banet-Weiser, 2024). Even Jamie – who has been caught on CCTV stabbing Katie to death – appears to be aware of the ways that doubt can, or should, work in his favor as an accused boy/man. 'You can't trust videos anymore', he warns the visiting psychologist. 'It's all fake news'.

However, we – the audience – have seen the video of Katie's murder. We do not feel uncertainty about Jamie's guilt, in the way we might have been tempted to feel had the footage not been shown to us. What *Adolescence* offers audiences, through Jamie, is an opportunity to see the rhetorical repertoires of accused men performed in a context of known guilt – to hold one variable impossibly steady (the fact of guilt) so that we can critically reflect on the other (the claim of innocence). This is an experience that invites the audience to subjunctively reimagine how we engage with and relate to these repertoires in culture at large, at a moment when the 'accused man' has become something of a lightning rod for men's rights activism and far-Right sexual politics. Accused men, the show reminds us, *can lie*. They can also be highly sympathetic. And even in the face of substantial evidence, they can – and usually will – insist such evidence falls short of proof. Jamie's insistence that '*if* I hurt her, *then* I'd get it, *but* I didn't, so…' is laid bare as a pernicious trope – one that has allowed accused men and their supporters to claim to care about violence against women *in general* while always denying, dismissing and demeaning the specific women who speak out about it. The echoes between Jamie's flimsy self-defense and the rhetoric of countless high-profile cases, from the Depp/Heard trial to the Kavanaugh hearings, are both intentional and powerful.

There is much more to say about *Adolescence*, and I am sure there will be much criticism – including in this special section – about the way that Katie herself is marginalized from the narrative. The show is somewhat unconventional among post-#MeToo media in its choice to center and complexify Jamie as a perpetrator, but deeply conventional in a way that it keeps Katie at the periphery of our care and attention. And it must be said that there is nothing new, less still subversive, about using women's suffering as a plot device through which men can wrestle with their own morality, confront their own vulnerability and 'learn' about their masculinity. In the long history of narrative media, the road to men's self-discovery is paved with the bodies of dead women – and in *Adolescence*, Katie is less a character than a prop. Yet, such self-discovery and communal responsibility on the part of boys and men is undoubtably needed if we are ever going to live in a world less marred by misogynistic violence, and *Adolescence* has punctured the public consciousness in an unprecedented way. Thus, like Jamie, I am suspended in a zone of liminality: between idealism and pragmatism, between what I feel *should* inspire care and animus for change among young men and what actually might. Ultimately, *Adolescence* is a show by, for and about white men. If such shows are the solution, what was the problem?

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Note

1. For example, in the United Kingdom in 2024, approximately 1 in 4 women reported having been raped or sexually assaulted since the age of 16. However, a majority of these assaults are never reported to the police; of those that were reported in 2024, charges were ultimately only brought in 2.7% of cases, with conviction rates likely to be much lower (see Rape Crisis, 2024).

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Biographical note

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