

Lost in the “Post”

Rape Culture and Postfeminism in *Admen and Eve*

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In her book, *Admen and Eve: The Bible in Contemporary Advertising*, Katie Edwards explores in depth the biblical tradition of Genesis 2–3, a text she suggests is “arguably the most influential cultural document for gender relations in Western society” (2012, 9). In particular, she focuses on the ways that the character of Eve is portrayed, both in the narrative of Genesis 2–3 and in contemporary postfeminist advertising, as a dangerously alluring seductress—a *femme fatale*—whose sexuality is a source of both her power and her danger. Edwards argues that such studies of biblical themes in advertising can offer “surprising sites” for the exposure and critique of dominant ideations of sexuality and gender that are given voice both in contemporary culture and in the biblical text itself (2012, viii). In this essay, I want to respond to one of these “sites” that, although not the central focus of the book, Edwards does engage with to some extent—the unsettling intersection of certain forms of postfeminist rhetoric and advertising imagery with the perpetuation of rape myths and rape culture.¹ Taking my lead from Edwards’ exploration of this issue, I will first review some of the commonly-noted problematics of popular postfeminism before considering how postfeminist advertising images of women (including Eve images) relate to the pervasive myths and misperceptions about gender violence that are so fundamental to contemporary rape culture. I will also suggest that some elements of these myths and misperceptions can be discerned, at least implicitly, within the text of Genesis 2–3, particularly through its articulation of female sexuality and gender power dynamics.

As Edwards notes early in her introduction, the term “postfeminism” is notoriously difficult to define (2012, 5). Like “feminism,” it is often used as an umbrella term for many diverse ideologies and theoretical responses that convey a marked paradigm shift from the second wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (Walters 2014, 108). It has been adopted and utilized within the arenas of consumer culture, popular media, academic discourse, and neo-liberal political rhetoric; and, because of this assorted usage, “postfeminism” has come to encode a huge range of meanings, from an incorporation, revision, or depoliticization of feminism to a complete reaction against or withdrawal from it (Gill and Scharff 2011; Modleski 1991). Even within popular culture and the media—Edwards’ particular focus—it can represent different responses to feminism, many of which

¹ Using Martha Burt’s definition, rape myths are “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (1980, 217). Common rape myths include the equation of rape with normative sexual behaviour, blaming the victim of rape, regarding rape victims as “damaged goods,” and the belief that women are likely to make false accusations about rape (Burt 1980; Odem and Clay-Warner 1998, 129-44). The term “rape culture” refers to a cultural milieu where there is a propensity to normalize male coercive and aggressive sexual behaviour to the point that it becomes regarded less as a criminal act than part and parcel of everyday (hetero)sexual negotiations (Herman 1984).

are ambivalent at best, condemnatory at worst. And, very often, the “post” prefix conveys the sense that feminism as we once knew it is now a thing of the past, occluded or even terminated from contemporary cultural consciousness as an outmoded and redundant movement, either because it did not work or, conversely, because it has already achieved its liberating goals (Jones 1991, 298).

Focusing on its significance in popular culture, Edwards draws on two definitional categories of popular postfeminism offered by Sarah Projansky (2001)—Equality and Choice postfeminism and (Hetero)sex positive postfeminism—that appear to encompass the ideologies and attitudes encoded within contemporary Eve advertising.² Both categories map out some sense of marked dislocation between second wave feminism and the experiences of postmodern women. Thus, Equality and Choice postfeminism recognizes feminism’s successes, both in achieving certain aspects of gender equity and by granting women access to choices (particularly in education, employment, and the family) they did not have prior to feminism. The natural conclusion to this, however, is that the battles have been won and women have no further need of feminism. Thus, feminism at once becomes both disparaged *and* rendered a truism, faced with a “been there, done that” dismissal which serves to discredit feminist claims regarding the need for *continued* challenges to patriarchal power structures and their inherent gender inequalities (Projansky 2001, 73; also McRobbie 2004, 256–58).

The second of Projansky’s categories of postfeminist discourse that Edwards engages with is (Hetero)sex positive postfeminism—the category I am most interested in here. This is a “to-be-looked-at” postfeminism, where there is a celebration of women’s return to being objects that offer pleasure to the heterosexual male gaze (Projansky 2001, 80–81). Accusing former second wave feminisms of being antisex, (Hetero)sex positive postfeminism sells a new, rebranded “do-me feminism”³ that is not sexually puritanical or dogmatic, but rather advocates women’s agency in a way that is man-friendly, sophisticated, and “attractive.” Women can now embrace their sexuality *as part of* being feminist, rather than shunning it, *choosing* to play with the heterosexual male gaze rather than feeling objectified by it. Popular culture’s iconographic image of the angry, uptight feminist is thus presented as the unattractive antithesis to the cool, edgy, and media-savvy postfeminist miss, who tweets about the politics of blowjobs and enjoys her ironic predilections for pole dancing and vintage porn.

Moreover, within (Hetero)sex positive postfeminism, women can stop feeling guilty about wanting to look attractive to men and enjoy, instead, the postfeminist freedom to participate in the commercially-based “beauty culture” that is promoted in advertising and popular culture. As femininity and sexuality become marketed as essential ingredients for women’s social, sexual, and financial success,

² Projansky’s other categories of popular postfeminist thought include linear postfeminism, backlash postfeminism (both of which consider feminism a thing of the past, no longer required), and postfeminism for men—a “mansplaining” of feminism, as it were (66–89).

³ The phrase “do-me feminism” was coined by journalist Tad Friend in an article he penned for *Esquire* magazine in 1994 entitled “Feminist Women Who Like Sex.” In the article, Friend berated previous feminists for being anti-sex, championing instead a new breed of (post)feminists who were expressing their own brand of feminism *through* their enjoyment of heterosexual sex. For further discussion of this phrase and the article, see Seisler (2008, 133–35).

women are encouraged to engage in a form of guilt-free “commodity feminism,” where they can purchase certain commercial products and lifestyles that are advertised to them as the means of maximizing their feminine and sexual potential (Projansky 2001, 80; also Tasker and Negra 2007, 3). As Edwards demonstrates throughout *Admen and Eve*, postfeminist images of women in advertising (including images of Eve) often portray women who have bought these products and embraced these lifestyles and who now enjoy sexual and social autonomy, financial success, and the ability to dominate and subdue those men who once attempted to subdue *them*. Within this postfeminist framework of gender dynamics, women’s sex appeal really is “the new sexy” in both cultural and capitalist terms, no longer a sexist construct imposed on women by men but a self-identifying *choice* women can make to assert their social and sexual power. Thus, according to Angela McRobbie, “we are witness to a hyper-culture of commercial sexuality,” where female sexuality is presented as something that can be bought, shared, and enjoyed without any accompanying sense of exploitation, guilt, or self-censure that second wave feminism seemed to demand (2004, 259). In other words, feminism gets a radical makeover within popular culture, its past “look” disparaged and its cool new postfeminist incarnation—embodied by “lipstick feminists” who triumph in the boardroom *and* the bedroom—praised as a vastly improved source of gender power for women. Or, as Projansky puts it, “feminism becomes a style, easily acquired and unproblematically worn” (2001, 80).

And yet, such a reimagining of feminism in its new postfeminist form *is* problematic for a number of reasons, not least of all its dubious rhetoric about women’s newly-gained access to social power and its rebranding of women’s sexual objectification as a source of their empowerment. Within these postfeminist discourses that claim equality, choice, and (hetero)sex-positive realities for women, there is, as Angela McRobbie notes, a “double entanglement” of feminism and anti-feminism, one that both celebrates and commodifies certain tropes of second wave feminist discourse (choice, equality, sexual and social emancipation) while repudiating the anti-sex elements of this discourse (2009, 13).⁴ The result, according to McRobbie, is a “*faux*-feminism,” which claims to be a fresh, cooler, and edgier form of feminism, rebranded within new discourses dominated by the language of consumer culture, personal choice, and “aggressive individualism” (2009, 5). The drawback, however, is that women are thus encouraged, with a wink to postfeminist irony, to represent themselves *in exactly the same ways* that men had previously chosen to represent them: as sexualized, objectified bodies that are attractive to the male (hetero)sexual gaze. Only now, this is not a cause for feminist concern or protest, but is rather something to be celebrated; feminism’s self-imposed sexual sanctions can at last be discarded and women can freely express, enjoy, and exploit their own sexuality as a source of social and sexual power. In essence, then, women become complicit in their own sexual objectification and exploitation, which is marketed to them as a source of liberation by postfeminist advertising and the media, based on the rationale that “because women objectify themselves where previously they were objectified, then women are freed from centuries of male control” (Edwards 2012, 10). As Edwards notes, however, this merely offers women a liberation that is, at best “half-hearted”

⁴ Or, as Diane Negra puts it, most forms of postfeminism “are underwritten by canny distortions of feminist dogma” (Negra 2014, 141).

(2012, 10); no matter how delectably postfeminist images of objectified women are rebranded, no matter how hard they try to convince us of the potential potency of women's sexuality, they are still images that present women as little more than sex objects whose social value and social status depends only on their ability to attract the male gaze.

And likewise, no matter how sexually alluring and powerfully autonomous Eve is presented to us within these postfeminist advertising images, at the end of the day, she too is ultimately diminished as a sexual object, rendered a commodity to be used, abused, consumed, swapped, broken and discarded. She may hold our gaze from the pages of a glossy magazine or television ad, but she remains the pinned-down object of that gaze, powerless to withdraw from it. Advertising images of women, like the Eve ads discussed by Edwards, thus perpetuate the insidious control of women by dominant socio-cultural power structures, which carve out for women a particular social and sexual role, all the while reinforcing the ideology that women have no alternative access to power except through their sexuality. In other words, women's capacity to negotiate and succeed in a number of social contexts (professional, sexual, relational, financial) is marketed as dependent on their adeptness at making themselves as attractive and irresistible to men as they possibly can; ergo, in popular postfeminism, it is still male-dominated media and popular culture that can prescribe so many areas of women's lives—their appearance, their behaviour, and ultimately, their social "worth" (Edwards 2012, 67).

Additionally, I would suggest that this consumer-driven propensity to determine and define women's sexuality can also foster and maintain certain ideologies that serve to sustain rape myths and rape cultures. In the first place, as noted by Edwards, postfeminist marketing of women's sexuality as a source of their sexual emancipation undermines the hard reality faced by many women that their sexuality is more likely to be a locus of vulnerability, accusation, and abuse than their greatest weapon (Edwards 2012, 39; 43). Yet, feminist attempts to expose the ubiquity and pervasiveness of gender violence within contemporary culture are often dismissed as the overly sensitive ramblings of feminism's self-victimization mentality. The postvictimization rhetoric of postfeminists such as Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia, and Christina Hoff Sommers rebut the notion of women's powerlessness in the face of potential male violence, advocating instead for women's individual agency and their ability to "control" their own objectification (Roiphe 1994; Sommers 2013; see Weiss 2013 for a discussion of Paglia; also see Ouellette 2014, 59–60). Nevertheless, the reality of women's experiences of gender violence tells quite a different story. While many women may indeed feel adequately empowered to offer themselves up to the male gaze—and hold that gaze unflinchingly—there are many more women who simply do not have access to that sense of empowerment, regardless of how closely they conform to the sexual standards prescribed for them by popular postfeminism. Women may be granted the dubious postfeminist privilege of being cultural objects of desire; this, however, does not guarantee them adequate recourse to autonomy or justice within the sexual arena, especially when they are confronted with the threat of sexual aggression or coercion. Instead, as Edwards asserts, this postfeminist strategy ignores the unequal gendered power dynamics and lack of agency that shape and direct many women's sexual negotiations and experiences, rendering

them at risk of sexual abuse (Edwards 2012, 43). Postvictimization tropes may sound terribly compelling and empowering when one is already located within a position of empowerment, be it social, sexual, political or economic; they have a less convincing ring, however, when such empowerment is simply beyond one's reach. To suggest that women can shrug off the threat of sexual exploitation and violence only serves to negate the far more complex socio-cultural causes of sexual disempowerment—particularly dominant cultural gender roles that deny female sexual autonomy and agency—experienced as an everyday reality for many women.

Moreover, another jarring note within popular postfeminist discourse about the empowering potential of women's sexuality is that this discourse stands in uneasy tension with the still-prevalent sexual double standards that remain ubiquitous within many contemporary cultures. Postfeminist media and popular culture outlets may insist to women that their (male-defined) sexuality is a potent and trouble-free source of power, but it does not stop these same outlets "slut shaming" women for attempting to access or utilize this power (Edwards 2012, 45). Or, put another way, women may be encouraged to attract the male gaze through maximizing their sexual appeal, but they should still expect to be treated negatively for doing so, branded as sluts and whores according to the prevalent sexual standards that expect women to retain a passive and submissive role within the sexual ambit. It is one thing for a beautiful woman to look sexy and enticing on an advertising billboard or in the pages of a glossy glamour mag; it is quite another for her to attempt enacting this look within her everyday engagements with others, particularly men. Consequently, this culturally abundant act of slut shaming plays a considerable role in perpetuating the myth of victim blaming that is so common to rape cultures. For, according to the logic of this victim blaming ideology, if women commodify themselves as sexual objects, they should not be surprised if men treat them as objects, rather than human beings deserving of agency and respect. If women actively seek to make themselves so attractive that no man can resist them, how can we fail to blame them when men lose all control and act impulsively on their desires? Even if popular culture teaches them that their sexual allure is the only source of power they have, aren't these women "asking for it" if they attempt to access this power source?

This premise of victim blaming also taps into another concomitant rape myth—that men "can't help themselves" when their sexual ardour is ignited. Forcible sexual behaviour is thus understood as the inevitable effect of a man's "natural" inability to control his lust once it has been aroused by a sexually provocative woman. If women display their sexual allure, thereby inciting male ardour, then refuse to grant men access to their sexuality, we cannot blame these men for resorting to violence and coercion, but we can certainly censure the women for behaving like sluts or prick-teases in the first place. Men's agency and accountability for perpetuating acts of sexual violence are thus diminished, the culpability instead laid squarely at the feet of those women imprudent enough to whip up the passions of the hapless and hopelessly smitten male.

These elements of victim blaming are also granted expression (both implicitly and explicitly) within postfeminist advertising. Edwards offers examples from two Eve-related ads for a Lolita Lempicka perfume, *The First Fragrance*, both of which, she suggests, convey nuanced images of women who may have been the recipient

of sexual and/or physical violence (2012, 73–76). With their torn clothing and somewhat despairing posture (as well as the suggestion of a bruise on the face of one of the models), there are hints that these women *may* have been involved in some form of coercive sexual encounter. As Edwards notes, these ads implicitly convey the disturbing message that a certain product (in this case perfume) can make a woman so desirable that she will be the likely recipient of aggressive sexual attention (2012, 74). This, bizarrely, becomes the “selling point” of the product—the source of its desirability for the female consumer. Women, it is assumed, *want* to unleash their inner *femme fatale*, driving men wild with desire; they *want* to be so desirable that no man could resist ripping their clothes off and forcibly penetrating them. We cannot therefore help but blame the woman for her ensuing rape, just as we surely cannot hold the man accountable for his actions, given the insurmountable temptation that this woman has laid before him.

Moreover, although Edwards does not dwell on it explicitly in her discussion of these ads, I would suggest that this myth of victim blaming may likewise be glimpsed within the sexual undercurrents and gender assumptions that flow through the Genesis 2–3 narrative. Eve’s fruity temptation of Adam is, as Edwards notes, replete with sexual nuances that indisputably draw the reader’s attention to the dangers of irresistible female sexuality (2012, 28–34). The first woman’s strong textual identification with the forbidden fruit—food, particularly fruit, being a common trope for sexuality within other biblical traditions—as well as her nakedness suggest to the reader that her sexual allure may well have played a major part in Adam’s reckless decision to transgress the divine prohibition of Gen. 2:16–17. Eve thus becomes an icon for the perils of sexual temptation that *all* women can pose to men; most importantly, the text implies that women’s sexual allure can make men behave in the most irresponsible ways—*they* are therefore as culpable as the men (if not moreso) for whatever happens as a result. This is victim blaming in its purest form. While Adam is also punished by God for eating the forbidden fruit, the reader is left with a sense that the fault lies more squarely with Eve, given her more active role in the transgressive drama (Edwards 2012, 24–27). And so, within the narrative of Gen. 3:1–6 there are, in fact, discernible whispers of the rape myth concerning women’s sexual power to entice “innocent” men to behave irresponsibly. Also discernible is the concomitant myth of men’s lesser culpability for their sexually-driven transgressions and their seemingly inherent inability to resist a sexually alluring woman.

Thus, abiding by the rhetoric already given voice within Genesis 3, the advertising strategies for Lolita Lempicka’s *The First Fragrance* tap into the discourses of victim blaming (she wore the perfume, so she can’t complain if it made her so desirable she was raped) and male exoneration (he was driven to distraction by her perfume—she’s more to blame than he is). Additionally, these ads exploit another rape myth, also mandated by Genesis 3, which downplays the seriousness of sexual violence, equating rape with normative and socially acceptable heterosexual behaviour, rather than a criminal act of sexualized aggression. Intrinsic to this myth is the belief that female vulnerability to male sexual aggression is an innate part of heterosexual relationships, rather than being symbolic of a toxic imbalance of gender power (Lees 2002, 210–13; Herman 1984: 20–38). Within *The First Fragrance* ads, the iconography of sexual violence is located within a context of beauty, opulence, and luxury products, lending it a

certain glamorous appeal, if not respectability. Meanwhile, the ads' cultural commodification and objectification of women's bodies, along with the concomitant claims about the natural aggressiveness of masculine sexuality promote the branding of sexual violence as a socially mandated form of behaviour. As a result, the inherent physical and psychic brutality of rape is eclipsed, re-conceptualized as little more than an alternative sexual script, entered into consensually and enthusiastically by its participants. As Rebecca Campbell and Camille Johnson note, when the boundaries demarcating sexual coercion and consent are indistinct, "violence becomes sexy, and sexiness is not criminal" (Campbell and Johnson 1997, 257).

While this propensity to equate sexualized violence with normative sexuality is not expressed explicitly within Genesis 3, the basis for this rape myth can nonetheless be glimpsed therein, connected with the text's assertion that the man's willingness to "listen to" (or "obey") the voice of the woman is somehow worthy of divine censure (Gen. 3:17). As the result of her act of disobedience, Eve is to be "ruled over" by her husband; her sexualized potential to make men do as *she* desires will be contained through her divinely-ordained subjugation (Gen. 3:16). This text may therefore offer the reader a divine mandate both to curtail women's agency—including their sexual agency—and to affirm men's prerogative (if not imperative) to ignore women's expression of their will, including their sexual will. In other words, the biblical text offers men free reign to impose their sexual determination upon women, regardless of the women's own sexual needs or desires. Adam's central failing (according to God) was that he "listened to" Eve; how much better men would fare, it is implied, if they stopped listening to women's voices altogether. And thus sexual violence can likewise be re-imagined as a divinely ordained part of the natural, or ontological, order of gender relations—a necessity even—that ensures masculine sexual aggression and feminine sexual resistance remain normative elements of traditional sexual conduct, encoded within both sexes since the time of creation. A woman can say "no" all she wants, but men are under no obligation to "listen to her voice" —after all, doesn't Genesis 3 suggest that is how men got into trouble in the first place?

Thus, postfeminist advertising strategies that use Eve iconography may claim to champion the liberating and powerful potential of women's sexuality; in reality, however, and as Edwards notes throughout *Admen and Eve*, such iconography may only serve to reinscribe the misogynistic myths and misperceptions about gender roles and gender violence that are already established within contemporary patriarchal cultures and that can also be perceived in the ancient traditions of Genesis 2–3. Moreover, these misperceptions about gender and gender violence are not merely restricted to the imagery found in contemporary Eve advertising; as sociologist Anthony Cortese notes, imagery of sexual violence has become alarmingly commonplace in other high-end postfeminist advertising, offering up rape as the new iconography of "chic" (1999, 73). Dolce and Gabbana, Calvin Klein, Pirelli, Johnny Farah, Jimmy Choo, American Apparel, and *Italian Vogue* (to name but a few) have all utilized imagery of gendered violence to sell luxury items or brands.⁵ Most recently, the controversial work of Indian fashion

⁵ Other brands that have used images of sexualized violence within their advertising campaigns include fashion brands Lanvin, Supreme, Relish, Duncan Quinn, Sisley, as well as Belvedere Vodka, Redwall handbags, and glossy magazines *Vogue Hommes International*, *V*, *Interview*, and

photographer Raj Shetye has come under media scrutiny for following this trend in high fashion photography; his latest work, titled “The Wrong Turn,” consists of a series of images depicting a female model, wearing high-end fashion, being sexually abused on a bus by a group of men who are likewise stylishly dressed. These images caused a furore in the Indian media, given their seeming “glamourizing” of the fatal gang rape in 2012 of a student on a bus in New Delhi. While Shetye denied that the shoot was intended to re-enact that particular rape and insisted that he was not trying to glamourize sexual violence, his use of attractive models, highly stylized photographic techniques, and designer fashions to depict scenes of unequivocal sexual abuse do, in my mind, obscure the horrific violence of rape within a glossy and alluring context, making it appear in some sense sexy or even desirable.⁶ As journalist J.R. Thorpe insists, “That’s the horrific part of this shoot: it trivializes rape, homogenizes it, even fetishizes it. Taking a series of brutal sexual assaults and making them a display of a model’s assets—transforming a situation where a group of men raped and murdered a woman into a performance for the male gaze—is grotesque” (2014).

Media and advertising strategies such as Shetye’s therefore do nothing less than nonchalantly promote the rape myths of blaming the victim for being too sexually alluring and equating gender violence with cool and consensual sex. They connect sexual coercion and assault to sexualized images of women, blurring boundaries between violation and desire, thus inviting viewers to embrace the idea that “women secretly want to be raped, and that women invite rape by their behaviour and attire” (Cortese 1999, 74). Their images of attractive, fashionable men perpetrating acts of sexual violation only serve to mute or nullify the violence and misogyny inherent in their actions, asking the viewer to gaze at these men with appreciation (or even lust) rather than disapproval or censure (Thorpe 2014). Moreover, by using rape imagery to advertise luxury items (such as perfume and high designer fashions) in often glamorous locations, these ads equate gender violence with beauty, opulence, and pleasure, thereby erasing its realities of pain, violation, and crushing shame. As Cortese notes, “Advertising not only makes this sexual genre of violent abuse tolerable but also unmistakably glorifies it. Sexual violence has become romantic and chic instead of being seen as grievously contemptible” (1999, 85). The result, he warns, is that “the eradication of domestic and sexual violence is not made any easier” (1999, 85).

And therein lies the rub—the real and undeniable impact that postfeminist advertising and media can have on the everyday social and sexual reality for so many women. As Edwards demonstrates in *Admen and Eve*, woven through numerous advertising images is a constant entanglement of male entitlement and female disempowerment, both of which nourish the underlying ideologies of rape culture. Within these images, men *still* dictate the ideals of women’s sexuality; under the rubric of postfeminist rhetoric, women are told that they “own” these ideals and are thereby encouraged to self-sexualize in order to meet the prescriptive demands of the male gaze. Yet when they do meet these demands, conforming to male desires, they are effectively rendered vulnerable to blame,

Lula. For responses to these and other images, see Sanghani (2014); Cosslett and Baxter (2012); Green (2013); Thorpe (2014).

⁶ For further discussion of Shetye’s photoshoot and the media response to it, see Wickramasinghe (2014); Thorpe (2014).

shame, and recrimination within their rape culture milieu. The sexual power and autonomy promised to women in postfeminist advertising and popular culture is thus exposed as little more than smoke and mirrors, merely a reinscription of age-old patriarchal codes of conduct, which eschew women's sexual agency and blame women for their own sexual victimization. Indeed, as I suggested above, the discourses on sexuality and sexual violence discernible within postfeminist advertising harken back to the ancient text of Genesis 2–3, where Eve's sexuality is objectified, stigmatized, and, ultimately, regulated via divine fiat. In *Admen and Eve*, Edwards reminds us of the enduring power of this biblical text to shape cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality. I have argued that it also encodes certain myths about gendered sexuality that are themselves intrinsic to contemporary rape cultures. Postfeminist advertising does nothing to challenge these myths—rather, at times, it appears to reiterate and reaffirm them. Eve may be presented to us as the postfeminist darling of female empowerment, but look a little closer and you might just see the bruises beneath her makeup, the scratches on her thighs, the fear and shame in her eyes.

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