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**Abusing Silence: Dehumanization through Silencing  
in Martin Koolhoven's *Brimstone***

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## Abstract

Although Koolhoven's *Brimstone* (2016) predates the #MeToo movement, just as the discourse of women's vocality, the film already seems to be articulating the same criticism against the culture of silence as the movement, and as previous feminist movements as well, by positioning itself as a feminist parable embedded in historical context. Also incorporating religion as a focal point in the narrative, the film explores various forms of gender-based abuse, oppression, and the different methods of dehumanization, mostly through different instances of silencing, for example the usage of scold's bridle, (self-) mutilation, or controlling one's use of language. This paper examines silencing as an act of oppression, and a conscious denial of one's agency, and offers an overarching interpretation of it in *Brimstone*, while also positioning the film as a modern parable, a feminist stance against the culture of silence embedded in historical and cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** gender studies, *Brimstone*, revisionist Western, silencing, abuse

Since *Brimstone* spent several years in the pre-production phase,<sup>1</sup> with the producers and the director, Martin Koolhoven, writing, rewriting, casting, recasting, and trying to get funding for the project, it would have been impossible to predict the cultural milieu the film would be released into. No way to anticipate that the topics *Brimstone* (2016) discusses, namely silencing, domestic violence, or even the systematic oppression of women would get into the limelight of social discourse due to the #MeToo movement a year after the film first premiered. However, it must be noted that the questions of vocality and silencing were also central topics in previous feminist waves and discourses, but the MeToo and the fourth wave of feminism once again highlighted these issues. As a result of the 2017 harassment and rape accusations against Harvey Weinstein and the subsequent scandal, not only society, but the films produced also started to focus more on the representation of women, specifically on the misogynistic practices in Hollywood, and on issues that had been the focal point of books, articles, and generally women's lives before.

As Koolhoven's *Brimstone* represents various cases of gender-based abuse and silencing, this study discusses the critique of masculinity and religion as depicted through the methods of humiliation and oppression directed at the young, female protagonist, named Joanna. The film focuses on the numerous ways Joanna resists and takes agency over the course

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<sup>1</sup>“*Brimstone* (2016) – Trivia,” *IMDb*, [www.imdb.to/2SqP7am](http://www.imdb.to/2SqP7am). Accessed August 4, 2023.

of her own life, as the daughter of a Dutch immigrant preacher in the Wild West during the 1870s. Joanna is expected to and often forced to be obedient, which also aligns with the way decent women were represented in traditional Western films, if at all. However, as a revisionist Western, *Brimstone* takes a different approach to women and their role in the Wild West, depicting not only the different methods of humiliation and oppression in the household, but also the systemic misogyny of the Wild West, reflecting on classical Westerns in general as well, by rethinking the concepts and traditions glorified in the past. In this paper, I examine the various forms of gender-based abuse and oppression, with a heavy focus on patriarchal silencing and women's use of silence as a form of resistance, with special attention to the role of Christian symbolism and the overall critique the film articulates.

Violence, resistance, and incest are all recurring motifs<sup>2</sup> throughout *Brimstone*, as these themes are embedded in the foundational myth of American culture: the frontier myth.<sup>3</sup> These motifs are not only heavily intertwined but also center around women's (self-)silencing and vocality. Both Heike Paul and Susan Kollin point out the connection between gender, oppression, and religion, and their significance in frontier culture, due to the patriarchal conventions based on the teachings of the Bible. Kollin argues that speech and language in Westerns function as a means to control narrative and perspective,<sup>4</sup> which supports the relevance of my inquiry into silencing. Citing Catherine A. Mackinnon, Deborah Bird Rose explains that silencing practices “work double damage: not only suppressing people's audible voices, but reconfiguring the meaning of their silences as well. [...] The quality of silence expresses power relations; it is, of course, gendered”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Mackinnon discusses the gendered differences of vocality, and explains that:

when you are powerless, you don't speak differently. [...] Your speech is not just differently articulated, it is silenced. [...] Not being heard is not just a function of lack of recognition, not just that no one knows how to listen to you, although it is that; it is also silence of the deep kind, the silence of being prevented from having anything to say.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Although incest is only shown once, the movie implies that the Reverend's actions suggest cyclicity, implying that once Joanna's daughter, the Reverend's granddaughter comes of age, he would take her as a wife as well.

<sup>3</sup> Paul, Heike, “Agrarianism, Expansionism, and the Myth of the American West,” *The Myths that Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*. Transcript Verlag, (2014): 342.

<sup>4</sup> Kollin, Susan, *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West*. (U of Nebraska P, 2015), 164.

<sup>5</sup> Rose, Deborah Bird, “The Silence and Power of Women,” in *Words and Silences*, ed: Peggy Brock (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 92.

<sup>6</sup> Mackinnon, Catherine A, *Feminism Unmodified*. (Harvard U P, 1987), 39.

Later on, Mackinnon adds that if one half of the dialogue is silenced, the other half seems to be the only side,<sup>7</sup> thus highlighting the narrative-dominating qualities of silence. Feminist movements have been articulating the gendered nature of silencing and related power inequalities for decades; furthermore, Michele Foucault also theorized the connection between language, or discourse and power. However, Mackinnon's text summarizes the issue in a manner that is most adequate when it comes to understanding *Brimstone*.

Historian Nancy Woloch describes women's status in *Women and the American Experience* as having "secondary status in the family, where she served her husband, cared for her children, and worked in the household. (...) In church, as at home, her role was limited",<sup>8</sup> which also correlates with Paul's teachings in the Bible:

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor  
to usurp authority over the man,  
but to be in silence.<sup>9</sup>

The Bible served as the foundation for Western society, and therefore, women's position was defined by Apostle Paul's words and their rather conservative reading, both within the family and the community as well. In *Brimstone*, this misogynistic approach is mostly embodied by the Reverend (played by Guy Pearce), who not only abuses, both verbally and physically his wife and daughter, but rapes them, and also chases Joanna across the country, with the same intentions, leaving a trace of bloodbath behind. The reverend relies on the Bible to justify his actions, and on the implication that as a preacher, he knows the teachings of the Bible, and is, therefore, right to do whatever he is doing; as though his status would give him the right to be abusive and violent, while the same sacred text refused the right of resistance to women.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Woloch, Nancy, *Women and the American Experience*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Bible* (1 Timothy 2.12)

## Women in the Wild West

As a revisionist Western<sup>10</sup>, *Brimstone* relies on and subverts the tropes and traditions of traditional Westerns. Richard Barsam and Dave Monahan originate the traditional Western literature from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, pointing out that the so-called "dime novels" appeared twenty-five years after Cooper's novel, and contributed to first "stage productions and traveling circuslike shows featuring staged reenactments of famous battles and other events", after which "[m]ovies wasted no time getting into the act".<sup>11</sup> According to them, the Western, as a landscape-attached genre, heavily incorporates the untameable wilderness that men (cowboys, outlaws, and lawmen) regularly attempt to subdue; thus, civilization and wilderness are confronted with each other in stories traditionally written for "young men and semiliterates".<sup>12</sup> Through taming nature, the taming of women is intrinsically part of the genre, which is in an intriguing contrast with women's striking lack of presence in classical Westerns. Westerns tend to represent Americans as rugged, self-sufficient people, who have a chance to tame the wilderness that is the Wild West, creating a myth and a genre in which "certain aspects of the history of the American West have been amplified and modified to serve a collective cultural need".<sup>13</sup> That collective need is the foundation that the American identity is built on, the myth of the self-reliant man, and of the chosen nation that can and would roam the Wild West, tame it, and reign over it.

Considering that nature and land are traditionally viewed and associated with femininity (as both are defined as something to be tamed by men), it does not come as a surprise that Westerns are "typically preoccupied with notions of masculinity," or that these narratives are dominated by the ever-present authority of male figures.<sup>14</sup> Machoism and masculinity are not only present in the nature/culture dichotomy but also in the way these stories are usually told, through the eyes of cowboys, and outlaws, not sparing violence and gunfights. In *Brimstone*, Joanna's perspective underlines this image of a traditionally masculine milieu into which she does not and cannot fit. The film utilizes a Western protagonist rarely seen

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<sup>10</sup> A case could be made for the reading of *Brimstone* through its Gothic elements, as the genre has its own history with women's writing and agency. However, the in-depth analysis of these elements and their usage is outside the scope of this paper, as I read it as a revisionist Western subverting the conventions of classical Westerns.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Meran Barsam and Dave Monahan. *Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film*. (New York: Norton, 2010), 95.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Bandy, Mary Lea and Kevin Stoehr. *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western*. (Berkeley: U of California P, 2012), 40.

before: a woman who is not weak and passive and does not fit the traditional role of a prostitute, a housewife, or a damsel in distress.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr in *Ride, Boldly Ride* explain this in detail, adding that viewers' dissatisfaction with familiar themes on screen is among the reasons why the Western, as a genre, needed to be transformed.<sup>16</sup> Native Americans' role, for instance, changed entirely, from villains or noble savages to valorized heroes.<sup>17</sup> In classical Westerns, women rarely appeared, and more often than not, they were degraded into a secondary position, and mostly reduced to represent one of the major archetypes: a prostitute, or a (still-to-be) housewife, who needs to be protected,<sup>18</sup> regardless of whether she wants help or not. This degradation of women in Westerns stemmed from traditional gender roles, which allowed men to control women in both the public and private spheres. This jurisdiction men held over their entire family was described by Woloch as the following:

“In colonies, (...) lines of authority and submission within the family were drawn [...] [men] wielded authority over wife and children, supervised finances, made family decisions, served as intermediary between family and community, and in more pious circles, provided the conduit through which God's blessing flowed”.<sup>19</sup>

I argue, therefore, that women were historically erased from Westerns, relegated to being only the “helpmates”, simply based on the social system that subjugated women to men to the extent where men were in charge of their children, not women whose assumed role in the family was always to nurture them.<sup>20</sup>

The representation of women in Westerns (regardless of the archetype they were placed into), inevitably became a question during the 1960s, when the Civil Rights movements, including the Women's Rights movement, became a social issue as well. The mode of representation shifted from the rather banal, simplistic one to a more prominent, more complex style. This altered, reimagined version of the genre became known as revisionist Westerns, about which Richard Slotkin argues that “Hollywood attempted the revision of a genre what had become too predictable” at least “four times since 1970”,<sup>21</sup> pointing out

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<sup>15</sup> All of these are archetypal female figures present in Westerns (Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride*, 38–39; 97).

<sup>16</sup> Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride*, 227.

<sup>17</sup> Barsam and Monahan, *Looking at Movies*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride*, 38–39.

<sup>19</sup> Woloch, *Women*, 20–21.

<sup>20</sup> Walsh, Margaret, “Women's Place on the American Frontier,” *Journal of American Studies*, 29, no. 2, (1995): 241.

<sup>21</sup> Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1993), 628.

that the shift from traditional to revisionist Westerns was not a direct and easy process. Bryan W. Rommel-Ruiz connects this shift to Hollywood challenging “the United States’ mythic past, especially in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate”,<sup>22</sup> as well. However, audiences started demanding narratives that were “more realistic and less myth-governed”,<sup>23</sup> meaning that indigenous peoples’ and women’s representation became a focal point in the new narratives.

Brett Westbrook argues that women were not “erased” from Westerns, they simply did not belong in those stories, as they did not belong to the Wild West in the first place.<sup>24</sup> As this point of view is clearly embedded in a rather classical standpoint, it also fails to take into consideration that women played a significant role in the society of the Wild West. Settlers to the Wild West needed women to start families with and someone to take care of the household and the domestic duties; this need consequently contributed to the idea that women were not and should not have been agentic subjects, but rather bio-props in the background, a mere “helpmate”.<sup>25</sup> But more importantly, research shows that many prostitutes (as it is also subtly touched upon in *Brimstone*) contributed to the economic growth of the frontier as “savvy entrepreneurs”.<sup>26</sup> All this comes down to the very simple conclusion that women played significant roles in the Wild West. Therefore, their erasure in the classical Western was based merely on patriarchal traditions, rather than reality, validating the need for revisionist Westerns, such as *Brimstone*.

However, it needs to be noted that Joanna does appear in all three of these archetypes. She is a lady in distress throughout the entire film, as she is constantly looking for people to help her or save her, only to realize that even if they try, she ends up facing the Reverend alone again. She does become both a prostitute at one point and later a housewife. This transition could also stand for the modern view on coming of age; leaving behind the child she once was, she becomes a prostitute, which seems like a rite-of-passage rebellion, only to settle down as a mother, a wife, and a midwife, a respectable figure in her community. However, in her case, these are only attempts at finding a safe place. Taking on these roles, however, is not simply for Joanna to assimilate into traditional feminine roles and communities, but rather to hide in them. First as a prostitute, then as a housewife, Joanna hides in plain

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<sup>22</sup> Rommel-Ruiz, W. Bryan. *American History Goes to the Movies*. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 106.

<sup>23</sup> Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride*, 227.

<sup>24</sup> Westbrook, Brett, “Feminism and the Limits of Genre in A Fistful of Dollars and The Outlaw Josey Wales,” *Clint Eastwood, Actor and Director: New Perspectives*, U of Utah P, (2007): 27.

<sup>25</sup> Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean. *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 130.

<sup>26</sup> Erin Blakemore, “What Red Light Ladies Reveal About the American West”, *JSTOR Daily*, May 5, 2016, <https://daily.jstor.org/red-light-ladies-in-the-american-west/>.



sight, using these archetypal roles as a means of resistance against the Reverend. Thus, by living her life in a way she decides to, she resists not only the Reverend's wishes and demands, but also the control he tried to impose on her. This mode of representation also goes against the classical Western tradition of relegating women to the role of supporting character, rather than being the focus of the stories themselves.

### **Disrupted narrative as a tool for symbolism and criticism**

Koolhoven's *Brimstone* utilizes narrative techniques, genre conventions, and plot devices to critique religion, patriarchy, and gender-based oppression. With religious meanings woven into the disrupted order of chapters and the obviously domesticized instances of abuse, harassment, coercion, and humiliation, the film highlights extreme instances of radical patriarchal norms, gender norms and expectations. In the following analysis, I not only offer an overarching interpretation of the film but also position it as a modern parable, a feminist stance against the culture of silence embedded in historical and cultural contexts.

Navigating the narrative of the film, however, can be quite confusing, and at first, it might seem to raise more questions than it answers. Upon closer inspection, it becomes abundantly clear that the narrative structure is a means to add a layer of meaning to Joanna's personal story. The voice-over narration in the prologue and an epilogue, first gives the impression it is Joanna telling her own story, maybe recounting it to her daughter. By the epilogue, however, it becomes clear that Joanna is dead and never had the opportunity to tell it, and instead, her daughter, Sam is narrating her mother's life, almost turning it into a parable, even though in the main body of the film, the focalizer is Joanna herself. This mediated tone also contributes to the overall theme of the silencing and (denied) voice, which I will come back to later.

The main body of the film is divided into chapters, all titled after a corresponding section of the Bible, reinforcing pious misogyny as the primary topic the film sets out to criticize. These chapters, however, do not follow Joanna's life story in chronological order (for the order of the chapters, see the table below). The "Chapter 1: Revelation" and "Chapter 4: Retribution" follow the story of Joanna, now under the pseudonym Liz, as a mother struggling to stay alive and keep her family safe, after the Reverend's reappearance in her life after years of being seemingly free. The second ("Chapter 2: Exodus") and the third ("Chapter 3: Genesis") dive deeper into the background of the events, telling the story of Joanna as a (pre)pubescent child, teenager, and young adult. While this disrupted narrative may be perceived as a means to keep the audience tense and confused, it also serves a purpose: up until "Chapter 3: Genesis", the story is told backwards, implying a

connection between the Book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, where the story of humanity and the original sin comes from, and the chronologically earliest point in Joanna's story, where this parable started. In Joanna's domestic life, her childhood is the foundation of the plot. The film peels back the chapters, layer by layer, along with the religious and patriarchal criticism it builds on the foundations of the third chapter, where all the background information about Joanna's childhood is revealed, including what happened to her mother, who was also abused and forced into committing suicide by the Reverend. The chapter also reveals how Joanna escaped from this household.

BRIMSTONE		
TITLES	CHARACTERS	EVENTS
III Genesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Joanna (<i>thirteen-year-old</i>)</li> <li>- Anna (mother)</li> <li>- The Reverend (father)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Joanna's first period</li> <li>-Usage of scold's bridle</li> <li>-Anna commits suicide</li> <li>-Joanna is raped and escapes</li> </ul>
II Exodus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Joanna (<i>teenager/young adult</i>)</li> <li>- The Reverend</li> <li>- Frank (employer)</li> <li>- Elizabeth (prostitute)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Joanna is a prostitute</li> <li>-Elizabeth's tongue is cut out</li> <li>-Joanna steals the identity of her friend, Elizabeth</li> <li>-Joanna silences herself</li> </ul>
I Revelation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Joanna /named Liz (<i>married woman</i>)</li> <li>-The Reverend</li> <li>-Sam (Joanna's daughter)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Joanna is fleeing from the Reverend to save Sam</li> <li>-Joanna struggles for the survival of the kids and herself</li> </ul>
IV Retribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Joanna /named Liz (<i>married woman</i>)</li> <li>-The Reverend</li> <li>-Sam</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Joanna kills The Reverend</li> <li>-Joanna is arrested for murder, and commits suicide</li> </ul>

Table 1. Summary of the relevant characters and events of each chapter in chronological order.

Table 1 clarifies the chronology and events of the film, with the second column, which contains the main characters and events that are relevant to the scope of this paper (table 1). The chapters are not only short re-interpretations of the Biblical titles, but they also take place in different seasons. Genesis takes place in spring, Exodus in the summer, Revelation is set in autumn, and Retribution is in the winter, and with this, the story suggests cyclicity. It creates the illusion of a full circle, also emphasized by the presence of the upcoming generation (by the presence of Sam, Joanna's daughter), and by the recurring motifs of the film, such as abuse, oppression, and silencing, the never-ending re-appearance of the Reverend in Joanna's life. Furthermore, each stage the audience witnesses is set in different years<sup>27</sup>, suggesting that the Reverend's anger and the abuse followed her, her entire life, which aligns with Shlain's argument that as Eve is blamed in the Bible for the original sin, women "are to serve a lifetime of subjugation".<sup>28</sup> The Reverend is implied to count on that lifetime of servitude from the women in his life, as he abuses Anna until she hangs herself, and keeps reappearing in Joanna's life.

### **Abuse, silencing and other forms of violence**

The third chapter establishes Joanna and her mother, Anna, as victims, living under the abusive oppression of the Reverend, who justifies his actions by quoting the Bible at every given chance. He argues that the entire congregation moved to the New World for the promised religious freedom, while simultaneously holding rigorous rule over the said congregation, into which Anna and Joanna had to integrate in order to maintain the image that the Reverend expected: that of the perfect wife and daughter. Once again, this expectation is based on the teachings of the Bible,<sup>29</sup> proclaiming that women should "occupy a place secondary to man", which would mean that no equality in the household is sustainable or rational because the "husband should rule over the wife".<sup>30</sup> For Anna and Joanna, this means constant abuse: the film showcases belting; it is implied that the Reverend usually forces Anna to have sex, and although only a bloodstain on the bedsheet is shown, it is heavily implied that the Reverend rapes Joanna after the forced wedding.

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<sup>27</sup> Chapters one and four are in the same year, are in different years than chapters two and three.

<sup>28</sup> Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*, (London: Penguin, 1998), 114.

<sup>29</sup> This hierarchical dynamics between the sexes can be traced back to the Book of Genesis, as God created Adam first and then Eve only as a help-mate (Harris, *Sex, Ideology and Religion*, 40).

<sup>30</sup> Kevin Harris, *Sex, Ideology and Religion: The Representation of Women in the Bible*. (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), 39–40.



**Figure 1. The Reverend attempts to marry Joanna, who is forced to wear a scold's bridle. Screenshot: *Brimstone* (01:52:14).**

Religious humiliation can also be regarded as a method of silencing, as Anna is constantly and repeatedly shamed before the members of the church and her inadequacy that the Reverend sees as a challenge to his authority. One of the most prominent instances in *Brimstone*, is not the verbal, almost theatrical shaming the Reverend imposes on Anna, but forcing her to wear the scold's bridle, even during sermon, in front of the members of the congregation. The device was designed, besides public degradation, to prevent the wearer from speaking, drinking, or eating. While the Reverend seemingly does it to prove the power he holds over his family, not only Anna, but also Joanna is ashamed of it: she tells Anna that she would rather die than to live like this. As a result, while the Reverend is preaching about the original sin, highlighting that women should be subordinated to men, Anna hangs herself during the service, thus taking back control over her own fate, even if it is only in her death. This is not the only occasion when the bridle is used, as later Joanna is also forced to wear it, after she refuses to serve the Reverend as he would see fit, for example by becoming his second wife after Anna's death, as seen in figure 1.

*Brimstone* includes numerous ways of domestic abuse, whether it is the "traditional" type or it takes place in the context of the brothel, as the first layer of silencing, in which several different methods are embedded, including rape, control over the use of language. The previously mentioned scold's bridle, designed specifically for both abusing and silencing functions, is a device looking back on centuries-long history. Its usage in the film evokes historical roots as the scold's bridle was invented in the sixteenth century; it furthermore dehumanizes the one forced to wear it. As the device is "mostly associated with horses",<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Kaleena Farga, "Scold's Bridle, The Torture Device Used to Silence Women in The Middle Ages," *All That's Interesting*, April 22, 2023, <https://allthatsinteresting.com/scolds-bridle>.

while resembling the pieces historically used on slaves as well. The one specifically included in *Brimstone* has a gag, pushing the tongue down, thus denying the ability to eat, or drink, inciting pain and discomfort upon the wearer, further dehumanizing the women wearing it. Kaleena Fraga explains that device was historically applied upon a decision made by “local entities like town councils and judges”, and by taking upon himself to apply it to the women in his life, the Reverend appropriates these roles.<sup>32</sup> Despite being a reverend, he holds a position of authority; however, it does not necessarily infer that he possesses additional authority to determine such a sentence.

Lynda E. Boose explains this tradition in “Scolding Bridles and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member:” the scold’s bridle was “devised primarily as [a] shaming [device]” and it “was turned into a carnival experience, one that placed the woman’s body at the centre of a mocking parade”.<sup>33</sup> It not only was shameful, because of the connotations, or because of the bodily restrictions, but also because it was considered to be part of a public shaming process, and the bridles oftentimes featured parts that made them even more embarrassing for the wearer.

The scolds, the women who gossiped, the women with “loose morals”,<sup>34</sup> or the women who somehow challenged men in the Wild West were “seen as threats to male authority”,<sup>35</sup> and therefore needed to be punished, silenced, and tamed, much like the wilderness of the frontier itself, while the same kind of humiliating factor never played into punishing male outlaws.<sup>36</sup> Punishing women, however, allowed for the “public body to expel recognition of its own violence by projecting it onto and inflicting it upon the private body of a marginal member of the community”.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the body of the woman ceased to remain private, even though she was argued to belong to the private, the domestic; a predicament that Joanna’s narrative seems to be symptomatic of, as she flees from the home to the margins of the public, to the home again, trying to escape from abuse.

The film depicts several forms of violence, but none of them can be highlighted as more frequent, or more significant in Joanna’s narrative than domestic abuse, and hence I find it important highlight the complexity of this broad term. In *Brimstone*, domestic abuse appears in two distinct ways: firstly, the traditional, “classic” interpretation, as several sequences depict how Joanna and her mother suffer physical and emotional oppression by

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<sup>32</sup> Farga, “Scold’s Bridle”.

<sup>33</sup> Lynda E Boose, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42, no. 2, (1991): 189.

<sup>34</sup> Farga, “Scold’s Bridle”.

<sup>35</sup> Boose, “Scolding Brides”, 190.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

the Reverend. Abuse is shown as a normalized, ordinary part of everyday life, meant to keep both Joanna and Anna obedient, well-mannered, and under the control of the Reverend.

Violence had always been a part of Joanna's life, for which the chronologically earliest scenes in "Genesis" serve as a testament. At this point Joanna is about thirteen, visibly confused as she is trying to figure out the family dynamics and her own very much changing body at the same time, all while being thrust into a culture that is not her own. Amid all these changes, as she starts her first period, she is also subjected to the dehumanizing humiliation the Reverend puts her through as he shames Joanna for her alleged impurity. In this twisted coming-of-age narrative, Joanna's first period serves as an opportunity for the Reverend to imply that she has just become somehow dirty, as he tells Anna to "wash [her] daughter. She is unclean",<sup>38</sup> which aligns with how Mary Douglas writes about the conceptualization of dirt in patriarchal societies, as it is seen as "essentially disorder," and that it "offends against order";<sup>39</sup> dirt is therefore "matter out of place"<sup>40</sup> defying the system. In Joanna's case, this system is the misogynistic traditions enforced by the Reverend, and by becoming "disorder", she offends the order that the Reverend is trying to uphold in the house, where everything is in his control. Starting her period is only the first step out of line, and after that, Joanna revolts against everything the Reverend seems to stand for.

Joanna also witnesses the Reverend beating her mother with a belt as a form of punishment, for having "humiliated him" in church when she admitted that she was the only one in the congregation not to "receive the calling"<sup>41</sup> from God. Seeing it as a challenge and offense to his stance as the figure of authority in the community, the Reverend reestablishes his position of power also within the domestic sphere by punishing Anna. The Reverend sees danger in his wife: danger to his position as the head of the household; by not obeying him (not speaking exclusively English, instead of Dutch), withholding sex from him, and danger to him being the head of the congregation as well. Being "mean, bitter, angry, or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating, and murder",<sup>42</sup> therefore Anna does not seem to be able to escape these punishments, and she also realizes that she cannot even save her daughter when she finds the Reverend lurking around Joanna while she is in the bath.

Domestic abuse culminates in the Reverend forcing Joanna into a (illegitimate) marriage after Anna's death. In a study discussing sexual misconduct victims in the late nineteenth century, Linda Gordon points out that incest is "essentially a male crime," as the majority

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<sup>38</sup> *Brimstone*, 01:28:47–01:28:51.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. (New York: Routledge, 1984), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 36.

<sup>41</sup> *Brimstone*, 01:21:04.

<sup>42</sup> Marilyn Frye, "Oppression." *Women in Culture: A Women's Studies Anthology*, Blackwell Publications, (1998): 46.

of cases took place between a male relative, mostly the father and the daughter.<sup>43</sup> Gordon calls the cases where the girls were forced to be the second wives “domestic incest”,<sup>44</sup> which not only evokes the term “domestic abuse” but also establishes that by marrying the girls, the incest becomes domesticized in an attempt to normalize the practice. In these cases, just like the Reverend, the fathers were “committed to and even dependent upon his family yet rigid in his refusal to do the work of family maintenance and his expectation of being served”.<sup>45</sup> In other words: the Reverend refuses to be challenged again and is trying to arrange a marriage that would be more convenient, with a wife who, allegedly, would be obeying him, so that he does not have to change his ways.

Gordon also points out that the girls who escaped the household where they were subjected to domestic incest, were often further victimized, resulting in a tendency of becoming sexual delinquents.<sup>46</sup> Joanna not only becomes a representative of this tendency, after she is sold to a brothel; but the film also makes a subtle connection between the domesticity of the home and the faux family-like hierarchy of the brothel. The owner, Frank, acts as the head of the “house”: he makes the rules and the decisions, and he punishes those he sees fit. As these women live under the same roof, under the rule of one man (their employer), and had the household chores to take care of, the brothel could count as a household. The brothel, named *Inferno*, is represented a symbolic manifestation of hell, not just in its name, but also as a venue of rape, torture, death and persecution. Joanna quickly learns that the prostitutes have to obey the requests of the clients, whatever they may be.

Frank decides to cut out Elizabeth’s tongue, taking away her ability to speak. Later on, when the Reverend appears again, and kills Elizabeth, Joanna is presented with the opportunity to hide in the silence and use that silence as a way to resist the Reverend. She takes Elizabeth’s name, thus completely changing her identity, and leaving the brothel, she starts a new life as a wife, stepmother, and later mother of a child. To fully take Elizabeth’s identity and place in the pre-arranged marriage, Joanna, for lack of a better option, cuts out her own tongue. This act of self-silencing can be read as a desperate way not just to adapt to being Elizabeth, but to silence herself and her past. Thus, she reclaims her previously forcefully silenced body, and her agency, by choosing to remain silent on her own volition. By silencing herself, she refutes the possibility of others doing the same thing to her; her tongue cannot be cut out, like Elizabeth’s, and her voice cannot be taken

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<sup>43</sup> Linda Gordon, “Incest and Resistance: Patterns of Father-Daughter Incest, 1880-1930,” *Social Problems*, 33, no. 4, (1986): 253–254.

<sup>44</sup> Gordon, “Incest and Resistance,” 254.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 255.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 254.

away, since it is already non-existent. This camouflage enabled her to hide in the domestic sphere, as a member of a decent community, and as a wife of a respectable man. From the marginalized, socially often ignored position of a prostitute, Joanna flees to being an active, well-known, participating member of the small town, as a midwife, a needed, central figure of the community. Cutting her tongue out is not temporary, like other ways of silencing: it defined the rest of her life, as she sacrificed her ability to easily communicate, to verbally express her concerns, fears, and traumas, and her own vocality. She has taken from herself the only way women traditionally could fight back, the means of hostile harangue.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Graphic violence, taboo topics, shocking experiences, and the cruel frontier conventions of the 1880s summarize Koolhoven's *Brimstone*, while the film also balances between genre conventions, stereotypes, expectations, and gender norms. It seems to be an unconventionally gruesome coming-of-age narrative for Joanna, which involves rape, abuse, silencing, killing her own father, and losing her family. By the end of the film, she manages to break the cycle of abuse and create a new life for her daughter<sup>48</sup> before she is arrested and commits suicide, thus taking back her agency for the last time, and claiming autonomy over her fate and her body. To avoid being incarcerated, and having her life, agency, and autonomy being ripped from her once again, she purposefully falls into the water, drowning herself, while the sheriff shoots at her in the water. Thus, she once again decides to self-silence, and control her own death, instead of letting others do it for her. The Reverend's narrative ends in a climactic, and spectacular death when he is not only set on fire but also shot through the window, causing him to fall out from the first story of the house. When killing the Reverend, Joanna uses the name of Elizabeth, therefore she takes revenge for both herself and also symbolically for the friend the Reverend killed earlier.

*Brimstone* is critical of Christian dogma and pious conventions and conveys its stance through a series of loose reinterpretations of Bible verses to ground the religious connections and its criticism in this tradition. The Reverend stands as a representation of the devil, using and abusing the teachings of the foundation of Christianity itself to silence all voices

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<sup>47</sup> Woloch, *Women*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> Although it is never confirmed on the level of plot, but the film does maintain the tension at the end, with a slight implication that the Reverend might still be out in the woods, lurking around them. Joanna stares in the distance, but the audience is not shown whatever she sees or suspects to notice. The moment can be taken as a subtle reminder that the abuse and torment is never truly over, and she always needs to be careful.



that would challenge his status in the household and the community as well. However, the Reverend also finds his authority to be challenged by his own family, and therefore he justifies rape, abuse, and humiliation, and uses them to silence Anna and Joanna physically and mentally as well. All forms of silencing, the use of the scold's bridle, denying the right to speak in their own native language, and physical mutilation are utilized to dehumanize the women to a point where they would not oppose the authority of the Reverend. Every instance of taking back control results in all female supporting characters being killed, and both Anna and Joanna facing serious pain; later they both commit suicide as they see death as the only thing in their lives they can control. While critiquing conventional gender roles and representing the multifaceted nature of (domestic) abuse and silencing, the film inevitably links the notion of voice to agency, and silence to the lack of agency, and therefore silencing to the deprivation of autonomy.

The film guides the audience through the story retrospectively to convey the illusion that the cause of the events lies in "Genesis," which is not only the third chapter, after which the audience re-enters the original storyline, but also the first book of the Bible. Koolhoven explains the conventional oppression of women that the teachings of the Bible established in Western societies. The film amplifies this effect by integrating a cyclicity into the chapters, by setting each chapter in different seasons, or by representing three generations of women facing the same abuse, which characterizes the gender relations that were considered the norm in nineteenth-century America.

Thus, the film serves as a parable about women who have to actively and consciously resist patriarchal oppression, otherwise, they will be silenced, and *Brimstone* allows for the parable reading through highlighting women's issues and problems through positioning vocality at the center of social discourse, and highlighting the history of oppression women have faced. Although the film itself predates the #MeToo movement itself, it can be considered a precursor, standing as a testament to the fact that the movement came at a time when these topics were already central, and significant, yet still underrepresented, which also aligns with claims of the fourth wave of feminism.

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