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Reckoning with *Highland Rape*: Sexuality, Violence, and Power on the Runway

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Abstract

Alexander McQueen's Fall 1995 show *Highland Rape* was a turning point in his career. The title of the show, in conjunction with the models' appearance on the runway in ripped, revealing clothes, was undeniably provocative, and the controversy raised his profile considerably. Several reviewers criticized the show, labeling it "misogynistic." McQueen consistently objected to this characterization, saying that the phrase "Highland Rape" referred to England's historical "assaults" upon his ancestral homeland of Scotland and drew from witnessing the abuse that his sister suffered at the hands of her ex-husband. Because of this, some fashion scholars have dismissed the idea of McQueen's

misogyny as merely a failure to fully understand his oeuvre and his biography. While critiquing McQueen's use of sexual violence, it is necessary to find a middle ground between the idea that either McQueen's work is too complex and authentic to be criticized or that his sometimes-troubling approach to race and gender politics should condemn him to wholesale dismissal. However, examining *Highland Rape* through its authorial intent and a close reading of the garments themselves, while considering the power dynamics between model and designer, reveals a performance that reinforces the glamorization of rape and the manipulation of women's bodies.

KEYWORDS: sexual violence, Alexander McQueen, misogyny, performance, runway

A photograph of a five-inch sutured surgical scar was the only image that appeared on the invitation to Alexander McQueen's Fall 1995 fashion show (Gleason 2012). It was equivocal: would horror or healing lie ahead? *Highland Rape*, McQueen's fourth runway collection, was a turning point in his career. The title of the show, in conjunction with the portrayal of female models on the runway in ripped, revealing clothes, was undeniably provocative. Some reviewers labeled it "misogynistic" (Brampton 1995), while others praised its "restless, rousing ideas" (Spindler 1995). It remains one of McQueen's most challenging and debated presentations, and the duality suggested in the macabre invitation remains unresolved. The controversy surrounding *Highland Rape* raised McQueen's profile considerably; only a year later, he was appointed creative director of French haute couture house Givenchy (Frankel 2015).

Yet, for all of the debate surrounding *Highland Rape*, there has been little analysis of the specific elements of the show itself, either in contemporary reviews or later scholarship. When addressing McQueen's use of sexual violence, critics have focused generally on this show as either representative of McQueen's oeuvre and fashion—suggesting that either McQueen's work is too complex and "authentic" to be criticized—or on McQueen as merely an example of misogyny in fashion and thereby reading all portrayals of women as victims as inherently misogynistic. McQueen himself consistently objected to accusations of misogyny, instead saying that the phrase "Highland Rape" referred to England's historical "assaults upon his ancestral homeland of Scotland"—i.e., the "ethnic cleansing" carried out by English forces in the Scottish Highlands in the eighteenth century—or his own experiences with violence and assault (Molloy 2015). In particular, he alluded to witnessing the abuse that his sister suffered at the hands of her ex-husband (Hume 1996). This explanation, however, fails to take into

account the visual language of the garments themselves and how the performance fits into representations of sexual violence.

A nuanced critique of *Highland Rape* and McQueen considers how fashion plays a crucial role in identity formation, as well as how clothing articulates ideas of bodies, sex, violence, and power. Examining *Highland Rape* through a close reading of the garments themselves, alongside McQueen's authorial intent, reveals a performance that ultimately glamorizes sexual violence and exploits the subjugation and exposure of women's bodies. This is especially relevant when considering the way in which the models enacting his vision fit into the fashion hierarchy as figures with minimal bodily autonomy.

“An obvious ploy at provocation:” critical responses to *Highland Rape*

Highland Rape was set up as a conventional runway show in a tent at London Fashion Week. The soundtrack consisted of clanging bells, thunder, house music, and the occasional siren, while the stage was covered with scattered heather and bracken.¹ Models were styled with long red hair or short pixie cuts and some wore white contact lenses, making their eyes appear glassy and staring. Although there were complete garments shown, many pieces included sheer lace, rips, or tears. Commentary about the show has focused chiefly on “staggering and blood-spattered” models, but there was no consistent way of walking throughout and only a few models wore gloves that appeared blood spattered (Evans 2003, 141). Many of the models walked in a more typical runway manner, even occasionally including a flirtatious smile, blurring the line between horror and allure. During her walk down the runway, one model slipped her hand into the tear in her skirt as if to touch her genitalia, while suggestively biting her lip (Figure 1). Another model staggered unsteadily down the runway wearing a dress with a slash across the chest, revealing one nipple; some included a pseudo-military march. Several models held their jackets while walking to control the amount of chest revealed (Figure 2). Model Jodie Kidd, who was 15 years old at the time, appeared in striped briefs and a jacket with no shirt.² She clutched the jacket throughout to cover her breasts, but they were still exposed several times. One model walked down the runway acting awkward and frightened, constantly pulling and adjusting her skirt, and another lurched down the runway in a black dress ripped open to reveal her right breast, which she periodically tried to cover with her hand (Figure 3). She reappeared as the final look of the show, cowering against the back wall.

Fashion critics responded immediately, with a mixture of interest and disgust. For example, fashion critic Sally Brampton at British newspaper *The Guardian* questioned McQueen's talent, calling the show a “sour note” and concluding that, “It is McQueen's brand of misogynistic

Figure 1

Model reaching into a rip in her skirt to feign touching her genitalia. Niall McInerney, Photographer. Fashion Photography Archive © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.



absurdity that gives fashion a bad name” (Brampton 1995). Marion Hume and Tamsin Blanchard at *The Independent* took a similar view:

The Emperor’s new clothes: rape victims staggering in dresses clawed at the breast were a sick joke, as were knitted dresses that [Marks & Spencer] would make better for a fraction of the price. McQueen likes to shock. To admit to not liking his collection is to admit to being prudish. So, we admit it. He is a skilful tailor and a great showman, but why should models play abused victims? The show was an insult to women and to his talent. (Blanchard and Hume 1995)

Figure 2

Model wearing McQueen's signature "bumster" trousers and trying to hold her jacket closed. Niall McInerney, Photographer. Fashion Photography Archive © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.



American reviewers were considerably more positive. *Women's Wear Daily* praised the show as boundary pushing, writing, "The Highland Rape', was aggressive and disturbing. Some even said the political rhetoric was a bit passé. But everybody left talking about it, which is more than you can say for many shows this season" (WWD 2018). However, the article went on to wonder "what pillage has to do with selling clothes" (Blanchard and Hume 1995). Journalist Amy Spindler at the *New York Times* called it "an obvious ploy at provocation" but went on to praise the show, announcing that "it was a collection packed with restless, rousing ideas, by far the best of the London Season" (Spindler 1995). There was also coverage of the show on television and radio, underscoring the show's provocative character and the designer's *enfant*

Figure 3

Black dress ripped open to reveal model's right breast. Niall McInerney, Photographer. Fashion Photography Archive © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.



terrible reputation.³ Irrespective of the criticism of *Highland Rape*, however, “there was no disputing the fact that this show made Alexander McQueen’s name,” and, the following year, he was appointed chief designer at famed French couture house Givenchy (Bolton et al. 2012, 20).

Analysis and commentary by fashion scholars over the 25 years since *Highland Rape* has focused primarily on how the show’s controversy raised McQueen’s profile and the way in which its themes fit into the designer’s oeuvre as a whole. Fashion historian Caroline Evans’ book *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* explores McQueen’s work in detail and offers the most in-depth analysis of the *Highland Rape* show itself. She asserts that representations of cruelty to

women are not necessarily an indication of misogyny, writing, “[t]he cruelty inherent in McQueen’s representations of women was part of the designer’s wider vision of the cruelty of the world, and although his view was undoubtedly bleak[,] it was not misogynist” (Evans 2003, 145). However, this distinction between a cruel representation of women that would be misogynistic and McQueen’s perception of the world does not address the inherently gendered nature of McQueen’s medium as a designer of women’s clothes. Evans’ analysis sidesteps the difficult question of the ethics of McQueen’s show, framing the theme and styling of his shows as a value-neutral esthetic choice. She also raises the issue of theatricality in her response to McQueen’s critics: “Criticisms of McQueen’s work as misogynistic [have] tended to obscure its defining characteristic, the theatrical staging of cruelty. Although most apparent in the styling of his collections, his esthetic of cruelty also extended to his designs where it is not only thematic but intrinsic to his cutting techniques and his method of construction” (Evans 2003, 142). Evans stresses McQueen’s supposed consistency in depicting cruelty; however, it is not clear how thematic cruelty fundamentally negates misogyny. In fact, in Evans’ method of analysis—i.e. her focus on the thematic coherence of styling, cutting techniques, and construction—appears to make it impossible to find a way in which a design could be deemed misogynistic or exploitative short of the designer himself saying that his hatred of women was a prime motivator.

Similarly, fashion scholar Rebecca Arnold raises “the question of whether such images were liberating and empowering women, or trapping them forever in the public realm,” but fails to give a definitive answer, instead suggesting, “the body represents a site of conflict, where frustration and anger is inscribed on the skin in contradictory images of anguish and pleasure, the flesh symbolically punished for the desires it provokes” (Arnold 1999, 500). Others have praised McQueen’s ingenuity in exploring violent and provocative themes: “The choreography of the presentation of *Highland Rape* with its flayed female bodies disgusts and fascinates equally [...] It thematises traumata in addition to the dialectics of pleasure and pain, eroticism and death, man and machine, love and brutality, victim and aggressor, as well as examining power and threat, desire and vulnerability” (Loschek 2009). Overall, much commentary on McQueen’s misogyny has been ambivalent; *Washington Post* fashion critic Robin Givhan responded to the issue of McQueen’s misogyny as an open question, saying, “Much of what he did often made you scratch your head and ask, ‘Is he for or against women?’ You weren’t quite sure if he was empowering them or if he was subjugating them” (NPR 2010).

By contrast, journalists such as *The Guardian*’s Joan Smith have specifically identified McQueen as misogynistic, inquiring “why McQueen associated women’s bodies with rape, murder and trash” (Smith 2010).

Her critical editorial about Alexander McQueen asked, “When you’re basically there to write about clothes, what are you to make of models tottering along the catwalk in ripped dresses, looking like blood-stained rape victims?” (Smith 2010). Smith’s dismissive comment that “you’re basically there to write about clothes” suggests that it is fashion itself—and not just McQueen—that is ill-equipped to wrestle with complex issues and “blood-stained rape victims.” Similarly, feminist scholar Sheila Jeffreys uses McQueen as a symbol of innate misogyny in fashion. In *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*, Jeffreys counters Evans’ assertion that McQueen’s women were portrayed as powerful, saying that “the idea that women gain power over men by being clothed as prostitutes or dominatrixes is a pernicious myth” (Jeffreys 2015, 91). Andrew Bolton, curator of the 2011 McQueen *Savage Beauty* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art dismissed this type of critique, saying, “The liberal press, in particular, was quick to label McQueen as the latest in a long line of male homosexual designers who exploit women while pandering to their own fantasies.” He countered that the show was “a comment on the designer’s heritage, personal history, and psychology” (Bolton et al. 2012, 20). For these scholars and commentators, the debate fundamentally concerns whether the themes of rape and cruelty are areas that fashion could, or should, explore. In the case of *Highland Rape*, however, the show offers a more complete picture of what McQueen is communicating about sexual violence through the specificity of its clothing, styling, and model bodies.

“Wild women in the highlands:” McQueen’s explanations of *Highland Rape*

Examining McQueen’s own language about *Highland Rape*—in particular his explanation of the historical basis of the name itself, as well as how the violence his sister suffered at the hands of her husband influenced him—reveals an inconsistency about the intention of the show and McQueen to be an unreliable source for analysis of his own work. McQueen complained, “People were so unintelligent they thought this was about women being raped—yet *Highland Rape* was about England’s rape of Scotland” (Wood 2015, 51). Although his explanation appears to separate the rape of women from the metaphorical rape of Scotland, the show itself featured models who appeared as though they had been physically assaulted, and the display of breasts and genitals reinforced the sexualized nature of the violence. Furthermore, rape has been a weapon of war throughout history, which muddies the distinction between “women being raped” and “England’s rape of Scotland.” Using victimized women to prove a point, moreover, positions women’s bodies as objects rather than subjects, replicating rather than challenging the historical role of women as pawns or prizes. Some of McQueen’s

other explanations took a different angle: “I’m not misogynist, but the idea was saying to the public, a man takes from a woman. The woman’s not giving it. And that’s what rape is. My older sister was badly beaten up by her husband and when you’re 8-years-old and you’re seeing your sister strangled by her husband [...] you know, all you wanna do is make women look stronger”⁴

Although McQueen’s exposure to violence clearly influenced his aesthetic, the idea that his *Highland Rape* collection makes “women look stronger” is puzzling. Even if McQueen wanted to position his characters as survivors (rather than victims) the emphasis on the aesthetic of the immediate aftermath of assault, including the tears and stains, focuses on what has happened *to* them rather than any other aspect of the story. Despite his assertion that this show was only about Scotland, here, McQueen refers to the act of rape in its personal context, as he appears to be suggesting that this show serves the purpose of raising awareness of the horrors of rape. The runway show, with its dance music and deliberately sexualized posing, however, links rape and violence with glamour and performance, highlighting the display of women’s bodies over any political message.

It is difficult to reconcile *Highland Rape* with McQueen’s idealized woman, “the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale*, the woman whose sexuality was dangerous, even deathly, and for whom, therefore, male desire would always be tinged with dread” (Evans 2003, 145), and his stated intention throughout his career to create a woman “who looks so fabulous you wouldn’t dare lay a hand on her” (Hume 1996, 82). This imagined woman seems paradoxical when *Highland Rape* so explicitly portrayed women upon whom hands had been laid. Despite McQueen’s rhetorical embrace of a “strong woman” ideal, the idea that fashion can protect women from sexual assault seems more in line with misogynistic rhetoric that certain types of clothing invite sexual assault than rebalance of power in a patriarchal society. Clothing often plays a critical role in the interpretation of consent in rape cases (Entwistle 2015),⁵ wherein garments perceived as revealing or provocative are understood to be a proxy for consent, despite the fact that, statistically, the type of clothing has no correlation to the likelihood of sexual assault (Johnson and Lennon 1999, 12).

McQueen further undermined the idea of a coherent authorial intent in his inconsistent and vitriolic response to criticism of the show. In 1996, he told the *Sunday Times*:

[The critics] should have been grateful to me. At least I gave them something to write about. They completely misunderstood *Highland Rape*. It wasn’t antiwomen. It was actually anti the fake history of Vivienne Westwood. She makes tartan lovely and romantic and tries to pretend that’s how it was. Well, 18th Century Scotland was not about beautiful women drifting across

the moors in swathes of unmanageable chiffon. My show was anti that sort of romanticism. (McDowell 1996)

His framing of the show emphasizes a realist rather than romantic perspective. The reference to Vivienne Westwood, and *Highland Rape* as a counterpoint to “drifting across the moors,” suggests that the show could even be read as aggressive toward Westwood’s idealized woman or even Westwood herself. McQueen also asserted that the criticism was a matter of intellect, saying, “You needed only a little intelligence to take the clothes out of context and look and see how they were cut. I can’t compensate for lack of intelligence, but I wish people would try a bit harder. The show is meant to provoke an emotional response. It’s my 30 minutes to do whatever I want” (McDowell 1996). The idea that those who criticized his show were responding too emotionally, rather than intellectually, is at odds with the deliberately visceral nature of the show itself and contradicts the touches that McQueen included to emphasize a brutal contrast to the romantic vision of Scotland. In opposition to his previous insistence on his own sensitivity to the issue of rape, he added, “It was really just a hedonistic collection: wild women in the Highlands” (Socha 2006), a characterization that associates the models’ faltering walks down the runway with pleasure-fueled abandon. These justifications both minimize the seriousness with which commentators addressed the show (“just a hedonistic collection”) while simultaneously accusing them of failing to engage with the historical elements of the show. McQueen did not entertain the validity of any criticism, a defensiveness that was also demonstrated in the fact that he reportedly punished reviewers for their negative reviews of *Highland Rape* by moving at least one fashion critic to the third row and failed to invite others to his subsequent shows (Thomas 2015, 156.).

Watch fobs and bleach stains: *Highland rape* as performance and collection

The lack of coherence in the way McQueen’s statements addressed criticism necessitates heightened attention to the medium through which he supposedly communicated best: his design. Examination of the show itself can therefore expose the message that both the clothes and the performance tell about women and sexual violence. The combination of staggering, cowering models and those that were deliberately presenting as sexually available, *e.g.*, by rubbing their bodies or biting their lips while looking out into the audience, displayed an elision of sexual violence and sexual pleasure. The slashes on the clothes highlighted the women’s erogenous zones, with several pieces that specifically revealed the nipples or crotch—a choice that not only emphasized the sexual interests of the aggressor, but placed the audience in the role of erotic voyeurs. Bleach stains on the crotch of certain looks implied that the

Figure 4

A model wearing a skirt with a bleach stain to look as if she “so frightened [she] had peed their pants.” Niall McInerney, Photographer. Fashion Photography Archive © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.



models were “so frightened they had peed their pants” (Wilson 2015, 135), adding a particularly visceral layer to the show as the clothes themselves appeared embedded with fear (Figure 4). Another look showed black briefs covered with cigarette butts paired with a sleeveless lavender shirt full of holes and tears. While this was reportedly McQueen’s attempt to justify taking funding from a UK “Put Smoking Out of Fashion” campaign, the effect is of a victim of abuse, the target of cigarette burns (Thomas 2015, 150).

For many of the looks, the models’ walks demonstrated how the skirts’ length and narrow cut restricted movement. Several tartan styles and pieces similar to English military uniforms recalled the “Highland” inspiration, and there were numerous examples of McQueen’s already well-known “bumster” pants, trousers cut low enough to reveal several

Figure 5

A look showing a black skirt and the silver “watch fob” threaded from back to front. Niall McInerney, Photographer. Fashion Photography Archive © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.



inches of the model’s posterior. Another important element of the collection was the chains hanging from the models’ skirts, which some reviewers believed were “tampon strings” (Figure 5) (Socha 2006). Andrew Bolton wrote, “They were, in fact, watch fobs, and were actually more subversive than tampons. The chain was threaded in between the legs, from the bottom to the crotch. Isabella Blow, the famous stylist who was a close friend and mentor of McQueen, described at length the personal satisfaction the chain provided her as she walked” (Bolton 2015). In a different context, the erotic implication of the silver watch fob could be playful; in the context of implied rape, it is distinctly sinister, representing an aggressor literally in contact with the model’s genitalia without her consent. Here, what Bolton calls “subversive” might be better characterized as invasive.

Additionally, the use of model bodies as the medium to create this show raises further issues of gender, power, and vulnerability, which is particularly relevant when considering themes of sexual violence. As sociologist Ashley Mears writes in *Pricing Beauty*, her exploration of model labor, “Creative goods such as music, art or books do not mysteriously emerge from individual acts of artistic genius. [...] A work of art is as much the product of a whole series of intermediaries and their shared norms, roles, meanings and routines as it is the creation of an individual artist. In other words, mundane processes of production are important in shaping culture” (Mears 2011, 17). In examining McQueen’s show, the models function as crucial intermediaries whose role affects the meaning of the work itself. In this case, the instability and replaceability of the average model put them in a distinct power disadvantage in the fashion industry vis-à-vis a designer, which complicates the idea of seeing them as co-creators of the runway show. Mears calls a model’s relationship to her agency “indentured servitude” (Mears 2011, 62), as they are obligated to pay off the debts the agency incurs to establish them as a model, making it especially difficult for a model to turn down work or otherwise disrupt the relationship to the client-designer. In contrast to the image of models as the embodiment of glamor, the careers of models are frequently characterized by “lack of control over their professional careers; alienation from their own selves, bodies and emotions; personal insecurity; commodification and so on” (Soley-Beltran 2013).

McQueen’s own attitudes toward models reinforced a power dynamic wherein models were passive actors, which, in turn, diminished the possibility of the models’ agency in the creation and performance of *Highland Rape*. McQueen was renowned for his authority over his models because he “demanded energy from his army of models. For the duration of the show they were under his esthetic control and, once on the catwalk, he often demanded of them a performativity asked by no other designer” (Wilcox 2015, 33). Journalist Judith Thurman’s posthumous *New Yorker* profile pointed out that McQueen “certainly subjected his models [...] to extreme trials. They were caged in glass boxes or padded cells, half smothered or drowned, masked, tethered, tightly laced, straitjacketed, and forced to walk in perilous ‘armadillo’ booties, with ten-inch heels” (Thurman 2011, 16). Jodie Kidd, a model from the *Highland Rape* show, discussed her experience with McQueen in a 2018 documentary, saying, “I honestly just thought that he really just didn’t like women, he didn’t like the models, he didn’t like anything. He was just trying to torture us all. But his vision, when you actually came down and the silhouette and the way he made you look was so extraordinary. I don’t think I really understood because I was 15 at the time exactly what was going on or the connotations of it.”⁶ Although Kidd reflects on the show as “extraordinary,” her original perceptions of the show showed at least some of the models found the clothes “hostile”

and were uninformed about its meaning even as they were participating in it. The *New Yorker* profile went on to quote McQueen's response to the question of what his models might have thought about the constraints that he subjected them to: "We're not talking about models' feelings here. We're talking about mine" (Thurman 2011, 16).

This power dynamic between McQueen and the models is significant because consent and bodily autonomy are at the heart of sexual violence. Art historian Angelique Szymanek argues that for a work about sexual violence to be subversive, it must trouble or upend gendered power dynamics (Szymanek 2018, 36). Using model bodies as objects through which to convey ideas, without specifically considering their bodily autonomy—in an industry in which models who say no to clients do not work—foregrounds the issue of consent on the runway and raises the question of whether the semi-nudity and implied violence on the runway replicates a troubling backstage power dynamic (Abelson and Pfeiffer 2018). Kidd, when talking publicly about the show, made clear that she was not fully informed about the show and, as she was only 15-years-old, it would be difficult to see her as an empowered participant. The consequences of models' lack of power in these professional situations were highlighted in a 2018 *Boston Globe* report that revealed the extent of the sexual abuse and harassment that models face in professional settings. The authors wrote, "Nearly 60 percent of models interviewed by the *Globe* said they had been touched inappropriately during work-related situations, the violations ranging from unwanted kissing to rape. Yet, for decades, victims of sexual misconduct in the fashion world have struggled to be heard and taken seriously" (Abelson and Pfeiffer 2018). Drawing attention to the metaphorical rape of Scotland with model bodies, but failing to note the condition of the models themselves—wearing clothing, such as jackets that continually opened when they walked and the silver chains threaded between their legs that deliberately tested their boundaries—suggests the garments themselves are complicit in an industry that fails to respect the bodies McQueen chose to display.

Several scholars have compared McQueen's runway shows with performance art as a way to emphasize their complexity but, even viewing this show through that lens, *Highland Rape* fails to interrogate the issues of women's bodily autonomy in a subversive way (Duggan 2001). For feminist performance artists who have dealt with issues of bodily autonomy and rape, "female artists' construction and presentation of their bodies as already sexualized resides in the simultaneous presence of the artist as subject and object. Even as we are viewing the artist's body as sexual object, we are conscious of her status as the author of her own image, her control and authority over her own body, and her embodied subjectivity" (Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary 2006, 765). For example, in Yoko Ono's influential performance art piece *Cut Piece*, first performed in Japan in 1964, she offered scissors and invited

members of the audience to cut off pieces of her clothing, blurring the relationship between giving and taking and using her own body as a medium to explore violence and consent (Brownie 2017).

In the use of models, the tension of objectivity/subjectivity is not present; both the models and the part they play as rape victims are objectified, in contrast to McQueen's role as designer and male subject (Steinmetz, Cassils, and Leary 2006, 767). Subversive rape-related performance art has "conjured the appearance of rape in forms that are not within the hegemonic lexicon. Rather than a spectacle, erotic fantasy, reasonable punishment for 'unfeminine behavior', or any other number of misogynist visual tropes, [rape] appeared in these ephemeral performed spaces as a systemic mechanism of violent oppression" (Szymanek 2018, 38). In this case, McQueen's runway performance combines all the elements of spectacle, erotic fantasy, and punishment which enforce rather than disrupt the typical characterization of rape within a patriarchal culture. McQueen himself appeared to be part of this mechanism, wherein even though he himself had been a victim of sexual assault, he used other, vulnerable bodies to enact those traumas and build his own reputation as a provocateur (McQueen 2018).⁷

Conclusion

Considering the meaning and impact of *Highland Rape* remains relevant when reckoning with the legacy of a designer called a "genius" upon his death in 2010 (Cartner-Morley 2018). Subsequent staging of a museum exhibition of McQueen's work, "Savage Beauty," first at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and then at the Victoria and Albert in London, have cemented him as an icon of his time. The 2018 documentary *McQueen* has also reinforced his position as a troubled genius, reading his personal biography into his work. In all three of these examples, *Highland Rape* features as a notable part of a misunderstood iconoclastic persona. However, critiquing and examining the way McQueen dealt with issues of power and agency allows for an understanding of the potential, or limitations, of the runway for engagement with serious issues of gender, sexuality, power, and violence. McQueen's imagination, experimentation, and willingness to push boundaries has cemented his place in the history of fashion, but this outsize reputation should not overcome or obscure criticism or the specificities of his work.

With the rise of the #MeToo movement, the issue of consent on the runway has become even more critical—not only because of the reckoning regarding exploitation within modeling and the fashion industry itself, but also because references to power and consent have appeared in several runway presentations. Missoni's Fall/Winter 2017 collection prominently featured "pussy hats," echoing the ones worn at the 2017 Women's Marches against the election of Donald Trump (Friedman

2017). In particular, they referenced his comment on the leaked Access Hollywood tape to “Grab ‘em,” meaning women, “by the pussy” (Mandler 2019). For Dior’s Fall/Winter 2020 collection, creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri collaborated with anonymous feminist art collective Claire Fontaine who illuminated the runway with lighted signs, including one declaring, “Consent. Consent. Consent.” Although these attempts were not necessarily successful, they testify to fashion’s continued desire to address issues of sexual violence (Phelps 2020). Directly engaging with the challenging, contradictory, and sometimes disturbing aspects of Alexander McQueen’s work allows for a more complex and critical legacy, while also contributing to the wider question of how fashion negotiates with sex, violence, and power.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. The video version of the fashion show referred to for this paper is part of the Bloomsbury Fashion Video Archive.
2. Jodie Kidd at [32:34–34:18]. *McQueen*, dir. Ian Bonhôte and Peter Ettedgui, perf. Lee Alexander McQueen, Janet McQueen, Gary McQueen (Bleecker Street), 2018, accessed December 12, 2018.
3. There is an unattributed 1995 news report from Kinolibrary on Youtube reporting on this show (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8Sdwys0nTo>) and a voiceover in *McQueen* (2018) at [34:22] included Judith Church, MP for Dagenham, saying, “The very title of the show, Highland Rape, has been done to shock people. It’s been done to attract publicity. It has succeeded and that, in a way, is sad, because I think women want to look at fashion, but they don’t want to see it in some way as portraying them as a victim.”
4. *McQueen*, [34:39–35:00].
5. “These associations of women with dress and appearance continue even today and are demonstrated by the fact that what a woman wears is still a matter of greater moral concern than what a man wears. Evidence of this can be found in cases of sexual harassment at work as well as sexual assault and rape cases. Lawyers in rape cases in all American states except Florida can legally cite what a woman wore at the time of attack and whether or not the clothing was ‘sexually provocative’. This is true in other countries as well. Judges in the UK often base their judgements in rape cases on what a woman was wearing at the time of her attack. A woman can be cross-examined and her dress shown in court as evidence of her

culpability in the attack or as evidence of her consent to sex. In one case a woman's shoes (not leather but 'from the cheaper end of the market') were used to imply that she too was 'cheap'. In this way, dress is used discursively to construct the woman as 'asking for it'." (Entwistle 2015)

6. Jodie Kidd, *McQueen* [32:34–34:18].
7. McQueen had been sexually assaulted by his sister's husband, although he never spoke about it publicly during his lifetime. *McQueen* (2018).

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