

The phallic girl goes to Italy

Amanda Knox, post-feminism and phallicism between the national and international spheres

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**The phallic girl goes to Italy: Amanda Knox, post-feminism
and phallic femininity as they cross between the national
and international spheres**

Journal:	<i>European Journal of Womens Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	EJW-19-0090
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Keywords:	Amanda Knox, post-feminism, phallic girl, femme fatale, femininity, Berlusconi
Abstract:	The article takes as its subject the trials of Amanda Knox, Raffaele Sollecito and Rudy Guede for the murder of the English student Meredith Kercher in Perugia on 2nd November 2007. Through a Foucauldian discourse analysis of the coverage of the case in three of the main Italian dailies (Repubblica, Il Giornale, and Corriere della Sera), the article explores the discursive strategies that are employed – through the interplay of the media and the legal system – to reinsert the disruptive figure of 'the woman who kills' within normative and sanctioned forms of femininity and female sexuality. Furthermore, the analysis shows how the Amanda Knox case is central for understanding Italian culture, which is characterized by an anxiety toward, and rejection of, a novel facet young femininity in post-feminist culture, the phallic subjectivity and sexuality incarnated by Amanda Knox.

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9 **cross between the national and international spheres.**
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16 The article takes as its subject the trials of Amanda Knox, Raffaele Sollecito and Rudy Guede
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21 system – to reinsert the disruptive figure of ‘the woman who kills’ within normative and
22 sanctioned forms of femininity and female sexuality. Furthermore, the analysis shows how
23 the Amanda Knox case is central for understanding Italian culture, which is characterized by
24 an anxiety toward, and rejection of, a novel facet young femininity in post-feminist culture,
25 the phallic subjectivity and sexuality incarnated by Amanda Knox.
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37 **Key words:** Amanda Knox; post-feminism; phallic girl; femme fatale; femininity; Berlusconi
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40 The trials of Amanda Knox, Raffaele Sollecito and – to a lesser extent – Rudy Guede, for the
41 murder of the British student Meredith Kercher on 2nd November 2007, have been covered
42 extensively by a variety of media in Italy and abroad. Considering only the press in Italy,
43 thousands of articles, commentaries and editorials have been produced about the Perugia
44 crime, many of which had as its main protagonist the young Amanda Knox, the only woman
45 involved other than the victim. Amanda's personality and her personal history were
46 researched, analysed and dissected, as well as her behaviour in court. In addition, Amanda
47 was scrutinised in the 'privacy' of her time in jail, which was heavily reported on and
48 monitored by the media.
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58 The case has been object of scholarly enquiry in different fields, such as criminology (Gill 2016;
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3 Mirabella 2012; Montana 2016), communications (Ho et al. 2018; Page 2014), and – the most
4 prolific – media/cultural studies (Annunziato 2011; Bortoluzzi 2016; Boyd 2016; Clifford 2014,
5 2016; Gies 2016; Gies & Bortoluzzi 2014, 2016a; Goulandris and McLaughlin 2016; Heim
6 2016; Holohan 2016; Simkin 2013, 2014, 2016). The work by Simkin (2013, 2014, 2016) is
7 particularly relevant as, similarly to this article, it argues that the Amanda Knox case reveals
8 important contemporary attitudes towards what is perceived to be a ‘transgressive’ female
9 sexuality, as well as the commonalities it has within long-standing representations of female
10 criminality. However, the analysis of the representation of Amanda Knox in the Italian legal
11 system, as well as in the media, presented here establishes an important link between female
12 subjectivity, media representations, the justice system and the political, economic, cultural
13 and social context of Berlusconism.
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25 The article explores the way the connection between the news media and the legal system
26 produces a space of subjectification for young femininity. Indeed, the interplay of these two
27 seemingly separate spheres works to police the boundaries of normative femininity.
28 Furthermore, the article shows how the Amanda Knox case is central for understanding Italian
29 culture, which is characterized by an anxiety toward, and rejection of, a novel facet young
30 femininity in post-feminist culture, the phallic subjectivity and sexuality incarnated by
31 Amanda Knox. The Perugia murder must therefore be placed both within and without
32 national cultural, economic and political boundaries, the originality of this case study being
33 exactly this: the exploration of post-feminist phallic subjectivity as it crosses between the
34 national and international spheres.
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45 The research project is grounded in a Foucauldian discourse analysis of the articles produced
46 by three major dailies in Italy – *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Giornale*, and *Repubblica* – between
47 2007 (the year of the murder) and 2011 (date of Amanda and Raffaele Sollecito’s first
48 acquittal). The decision not to extend the study up until 2015 (the date of the final acquittal)
49 was taken because the press coverage diminished significantly when Amanda Knox left the
50 country, as the defendants no longer needed to be present at the subsequent hearings.
51 Raffaele, on the other hand, continued attending the trials; the lack of interest of the Italian
52 media after the departure of Amanda Knox provides further evidence of the centrality of
53 Amanda in the case, and of young femininity in Italian culture at large. The analysis was also
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3 complemented through institutional documentation, specialized websites, and non-fictional
4 books reconstructing the events.¹
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9 The articles to be analysed have been retrieved through the newspapers' online archives, via
10 the use of keywords related to the case, selecting only longer articles that included
11 descriptions, evaluations and personal histories. The search produced 353 articles in *Il*
12 *Giornale*, 453 in *Repubblica* and 338 in *Corriere della Sera*.² By employing a Foucault-inspired
13 discourse analytical method, the methodology of the study was grounded in the
14 understanding that language works to engender certain truth claims and secure dominant
15 relations of power. Thus, the discourse analysis employed in the research study sought to
16 identify the cultural discourses that have been employed to understand and describe Amanda
17 Knox and her participation in the murder of Meredith Kercher, and to explore the way these
18 discourses participate in defining intelligible forms of subjectivity, those that are sanctioned,
19 as well as those that are deemed unintelligible.
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31 The article first provides a reconstruction of the events, from the discovery of Meredith
32 Kercher's body in 2007 to the final acquittal of Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito in 2015.
33 The following section explores the connection between the news media and the legal system,
34 and how these institutions build onto each other in the production of a space of
35 subjectivation. The article then moves on to the analysis of the media coverage of the case,
36 focusing on the gender discourses that are produced and reproduced through the
37 representation of Amanda Knox's femininity and sexuality in the publications selected.
38 Ultimately, it is the interconnection between the court case on the one hand (and hence the
39 legal system) and the mediation of these court cases (and hence the media system), that has
40 created a public space within Italian society to vilify specific understandings of femininity,
41 while at the same time imposing normative models of gendered performativity.
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56 ¹ Because of the international attention the case has attracted, it has been possible for me to retrieve many
57 public legal documents from online sources, newspaper's websites and other websites specialising on the case,
58 making them available on their webpages.
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The investigation and trial for the murder of Meredith Kercher

On 2nd of November 2007, 21 years old British student Meredith Susanna Cara Kercher was found dead in her room in the detached house in Via della Pergola, Perugia, she shared with another 3 female students. Her body, found partially naked underneath a duvet, showed numerous knife wounds, one of which was found to have been the fatal blow, delivered to the neck. She was studying in Italy for a year as part of the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) – a program set up by the European Commission to facilitate international student exchanges within Europe. Perugia hosts approximately 40,000 students a year, who not only attend the *Università di Perugia* or the *Università per Stranieri* [University for Foreigners], but live and populate its centre.³

On 6th of November one of Meredith's housemates, 20 years old American student Amanda Knox was arrested by the police in relation to the murder. During the interrogation, which lasted until the early hours of the next day, Amanda Knox accused her boss, Diya Lumumba (nicknamed Patrick), a 36 years old Congolese bar manager, of the murder of the British student, and placed herself at the crime scene. Following Amanda's allegations, both Diya Lumumba as well as Raffaele Sollecito, Amanda Knox's Italian boyfriend and fellow student himself, aged 23 from the town of Giovinazzo, were taken into custody: the three were accused of 'complicity in homicide and sexual violence'.

However, forensic evidence on the crime scene led the police to believe the involvement of a fourth man, which the police identified as Rudy Guede, a 21 years old Italian citizen with Ivorian origins, who had fled to Germany two days after the murder. Lumumba was finally released on 20th November: no evidence placed him on the murder scene (in fact he had never been in the house) and a Swiss professor confirmed his alibi for the night of 2nd November. Amanda Marie Knox, Raffaele Sollecito and Rudy Guede were instead tried for the sexual assault and murder of Meredith Kercher.

³ All translations from Italian are mine; when deemed important the Italian is included in italics and my translation in square brackets.

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3 While all three suspects pled innocent, the judge ruled their indictment for the murder.
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5 Amanda Knox and Raffele Sollecito decided to proceed with a standard trial, while Rudy
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7 Guede opted for an abbreviated trial procedure.⁴ On 16th December 2010 Rudy Guede's
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9 sentence for the rape and murder of Meredith Kercher was confirmed. After a long and
10
11 complex trial, on 27th March 2015 – after almost 8 years since the murder – the Italian judicial
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13 system acquitted Raffaele and Amanda.
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18 **Trial by media and media-logic trials: the increasing boundedness of the legal system and** 19 20 **the media** 21

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23 While 'media trials' have occurred episodically since the emergence of the print press, Fox et
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25 al. (2004) remark that since the 1990s the media coverage of legal matters, as well as the role
26
27 the media plays in its unfolding, has grown exponentially. They argue that 'the mass media,
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29 in both traditional and emerging forms, focus predominantly on the sensationalistic, personal
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31 and lurid details of unusual and high-profile trials and investigations' (p. 6), producing what
32
33 they call 'tabloid justice'. Such tabloid justice tends to personalise the events, providing
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35 details, descriptions and history of the participants (Drucker 1995; Fox et al. 2004; Jewkes
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37 2004); they increase dramatisation by employing graphic imagery, emotive and clamorous
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39 language (Fox et al. 2004; Peleg and Bogoch 2014); they emphasise conflict over conflict
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41 resolution (Peleg and Bogoch 2014; Drucker 1995); they express opinion, often through the
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43 employment of humour or irony (Drucker 1995; Marafioti 2008); and often show a lack of
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45 thorough investigative journalism and professionalism (Kellner 2003; Fox et al. 2004;
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47 Marafioti 2008).
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49 Moreover, the legal institutions themselves cannot avoid the engagement with the media, in
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51 a way that suggests that the verdict in public opinion is almost as important as the one in legal
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55 ⁴ Under Italian law, the accused is allowed to request a fast-track trial, as Rudy Guede did; the trial is held behind
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57 closed doors and judgement is based solely on the evidence, rather than proceeding with a standard hearing. In
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59 return for saving the court considerable time, the sentence is automatically reduced by a third if the accused is
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found guilty. Two years after the murder, Rudy Guede's sentence was shortened from 30 to 24 years, then
reduced to 16 years as a benefit for choosing an abbreviated trial procedure.

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3 courts. Research by Ericson et al. (1987, 1989, 1991) has investigated the way in which
4 organisations, particularly those connected with the judicial system, are able to produce self-
5 serving official narratives and to have others accept them as legitimate. In addition, the
6 increasing role that the media plays in social life means that institutions have developed ways
7 to engage with the media for their own purposes and to construct themselves as legitimate.
8 Examples are the appointment of public information officers who specialise in communication
9 and the organisation of press conferences, but also the leaking of sensitive information, as
10 well as manufacturing narratives that will attract more media attention (Chermak and Weiss
11 2005).

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13 This involves the prosecution as well as defense lawyers. As Coffey (2010), an American law
14 practitioner, argues in his book titled *Spinning the law: trying cases in the court of public*
15 *opinion*:

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In virtually every court case that appears on the media's radar, lawyers are attempting to spin reporters, control the message, and win the verdict of public opinion. With today's vast universe of cable television stations, internet broadcast, web sites, and blogs, an over-increasing number of cases receive media attention in one form or another. No one knows exactly to what extent a victory outside the courthouse translates into a favourable verdict inside the courtroom, but as I have described, it is too important to be left to chance (p. 323).

Indeed, lawyers have developed ways to engage with the media, hiring PR professionals and media consultants, constructing privileged relationships with lead correspondents, and generally trying to spin news in ways favourable for the defendant, something which would have appeared extraordinary only a few decades ago (Fox et al. 2004).

Therefore, the way these two seemingly separate fields interact and build on each other illustrate how their combination produces a space of emergence for young femininity in Italian culture. In the Kercher murder case, the legal system and the media worked together in the production of gender discourses that define and police the boundaries of acceptable femininity and female sexuality, some of which draw on wider cultural discourses that are employed to make sense of cases of women who kill, as explored below.

Women, crime and the criminal justice system

Throughout history female lawbreakers have been considered as deviant, and worse than their male counterparts. This is because they are viewed as doubly deviant: they transgress society's rules as well as transgressing gender norms (Morrissey 2003; Seal 2010; Mallicoat 2012). Indeed, women who engage in criminal behaviour appear to challenge normative gender roles and behaviours, contravening the cultural assumption that women are helpless, docile, and in need of male protection.

Until three decades ago, the accepted orthodoxy in mainstream legal and criminal justice system was that women commit far less crime than do males, but are much more likely to be mentally ill (Kendall 2005). Such assumptions are based on essentialist discourses about women's 'nature', the result being that women's greater emotionality, passivity and weakness (while men are characterised by rationality, agency and aggression) explain and motivate women's criminal behaviour (Miller & Mullins 2011). Hence, claims about the nature of female offence span from the aggressive, violent, spiteful female criminal to the helpless, passive docile woman in need for male protection (Mellicoat 2012).

Since the mid-1990s feminist research in this area has become more prolific, with important critiques to the representations of women who kill, such as those of Chan (2001), Morrissey (2003) and Seal (2010). These authors argue that mainstream legal and media discourses use 'stock narratives' and 'standard narratives', familiar from media and fictional portrayals, which create and reproduce discourses of gender. These dominant discourses serve to contain, explain and manage what society feels to be unintelligible; in this way, 'belief in an ordered world can be maintained or restored and power relations preserved' (Kendall 2005, p. 42).

Feminist criminologists have worked to challenge stereotypical and essentialising discourses of mainstream scholarship, attempting not only to return agency to female criminals, but also to show how social structures and lived realities affect women who participate in criminal

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3 behaviour. Life-course theory, that 'attempts to link social history and social structure to the
4 unfolding of human lives' (Laub et al. 2011, p. 314), has been increasingly used in assessing
5 how events in women's lives can provide insight into the reasons, motives, patterns and
6 peculiarities of women's criminal behaviour. However, a life-course approach legitimises the
7 digging in and intense scrutiny of women's histories, becoming subject to what Birch (1993)
8 has named a 'facile psychology', which often constructs arbitrary relations between
9 childhood, family life and the criminal offence.
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18 As it will be shown below, the obsessive and intrusive investigation of the media into
19 Amanda's past, her relationships, her sexual behaviour, the social media she made use of,
20 even the stories she produced as part of her university degree, helped in creating a specific
21 image of Amanda Knox. The media, alongside the magistrate's construction of Amanda's
22 personality and narrative of events, is integral to the need to construct a 'facile psychology'
23 to make sense of women who kill. Indeed, Chan et al. (2005) have pointed out how 'psy'
24 sciences have become such integral part of the legal process, that it is useful to think of a
25 'hybrid psycho-legal control system' (p. 10), the media participating in the system by
26 reproducing and magnifying discourses and narratives produced in the court and in wider
27 culture, as it is explored in the analysis below.
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38 **Knoxy Foxy: enforcing normative femininity and sexuality through the figure of the woman** 39 **who kills** 40

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42 The representation of Amanda Knox in British and American press has been researched by
43 several scholars (Annunziato 2011; Bortoluzzi 2016; Boyd 2016; Clifford 2014, 2016; Gies
44 2016, 2017; Gies & Bortoluzzi 2014, 2016b; Goulandris and McLaughlin 2016; Heim 2016;
45 Holohan 2016; Simkin 2013, 2014, 2016). Among these, several remark on the
46 hypersexualisation of Amanda Knox and her construction as 'femme fatale', a common
47 narrative in cases of women who kill (Goulandris and McLaughlin 2016; Simkin 2013, 2014;
48 Holohan 2016). Most of the authors in the collection by Gies and Bortoluzzi (2016a) remark
49 on the binary that has been created – in different ways – by the media between good and bad
50 femininity. Finally, Simkin's (2013, 2014, 2016) work shows considerable similarities with my
51 own analysis; namely, the ambivalences and contradictions in relation to the emergence of a
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3 new, more agentic, sexuality for young women, and the inter-textuality between media
4 representations of the events and fictional texts.
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9 While it is important to remark on the similarities across national cultures in an increasingly
10 globalised media sphere, it is also important to stress the differences. Indeed, the analysis of
11 the legal and media representation of Amanda Knox presented here needs to be
12 contextualised within the culture of Berlusconiism, one in which women and their sexuality
13 have taken centre stage, in ways that afford them agency, whilst at the same time subjecting
14 them to strict scrutiny and control. Hence, the article engages in an exploration of a new
15 permutation of femininity, one which demonstrates her equality to men through sexual
16 agency, as it crosses between national and international contexts.
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24 25 *Deviant/phallic femininity as evidence of guilt* 26

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28 Throughout the case, Amanda was constantly placed as the object of the gaze and the object
29 of investigation, her beauty and attractiveness being constantly mentioned, her looks and
30 conduct endlessly commented upon, with *Il Giornale* giving her the nickname 'faccia d'angelo'
31 [angel face] from very early on (Veronese 2007, par. 1). The media's obsession with Amanda's
32 appearance results from the perceived incoherence between her candid type of beauty and
33 the horror of the crime she was accused of having committed, reflecting the influence of
34 physiognomic theories which proliferated in Europe in the 18th century and which can be said
35 to still maintain a hold onto people's understanding of the relationship between the self and
36 one's exterior appearance, especially in relation to the face (Featherstone 2010).
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46 Recurrent were the use of formulas indicating that Amanda was wearing a mask, such as in
47 the extract below from an article titled '*Il vero volto di Amanda* [Amanda's true face]' (Brown
48 2010):
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52 Who was Amanda Knox? A fresh faced and good student from Seattle, the universal
53 image of the American girl - attractive, athletic, bright, hard working, adventurous,
54 lover of languages and of travelling? Or was her beautiful face a mask, a false front to
55 hide a degenerate soul? (par. 3).
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58 As Birch (1993) has argued in relation to her own case studies, in this instance too the
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3 language and the hyperbolic metaphors used to penetrate Amanda Knox's appearance, and
4 to reach beyond to find the truth, only work to embrace the mystery and reinforce the notion
5 of femininity as enigma. The conceptualisation of Amanda's beauty as a mask unleashed
6 deep-seated and long-standing fears of feminine inscrutability and the feminine as a source
7 of evil (Seal 2010). These feelings are made explicit by the following extract, taken from a
8 commentary on *Il Giornale* (Veronese 2007): '[i]t used to be easy understanding who to trust,
9 she has a face I do not like, you would say. Now those faces are the ones people like the most'
10 (par. 3).
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20 At the same time, however, assumptions that the body will nonetheless reveal in some way
21 or another what is hiding underneath is widespread (Verhoeven 1994), hence the constant
22 reporting and monitoring of Amanda's behaviour, not only during her appearances at the trial
23 and in the 'privacy' of her time spent in jail, but also by investigating her personal history.
24 Amanda reportedly had a 'strange' attitude: she was overly relaxed during the trials by smiling
25 and singing; at other times she was cold and concentrated; and her appearance in court with
26 a t-shirt with the slogan 'All you need is love' was met with intense media commentary and
27 interpreted as a sign of direct hostility toward the Italian legal system by the prosecution.
28 These behaviours were worthy of attention and speculation since, in the eyes of the
29 mainstream press, they challenged normative femininity, which dictates that a woman,
30 having spent time in jail and facing the possibility of spending more time secluded, should
31 appear dishevelled, desperate and hysterical.
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43 At the beginning of the trial, Amanda Knox did not give the appearance of being particularly
44 affected by the situation, thus failing to inhabit a sanctioned normative femininity. Indeed, it
45 was Knox's failure to meet the standards of normative femininity that attracted the police's
46 attention to her in the first place. Several sources (Burleigh 2011; Follain 2011; Nadeau 2010)
47 revealed that the police became suspicious of Amanda as her behaviour after the murder of
48 Meredith did not show the conventions of (feminine) mourning: she was seen kissing Raffaele
49 Sollecito, was doing gymnastics while waiting to be interrogated at the police station, and
50 went shopping for sexy underwear with her boyfriend only a few days after the murder.
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And it was such overt sexual drive which became the central focus of much media attention,

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3 but also became a fundamental theme of the prosecution's accusation. Amanda's past and
4 personality was dissected by the media, especially by the British tabloids, which hunted down
5 Amanda's ex-lovers, chased any saucy details, embellished their stories, rummaged through
6 social media, found her Facebook and Myspace pages and reproduced nicknames, comments
7 and pictures. An image of Amanda began to emerge, the infamous 'Foxy Knoxy', which was
8 readily picked up by the prosecution as evidence of her deviance: she was a narcissistic,
9 hedonistic, sexually voracious young woman, who enjoyed nightlife, drugs and alcohol.
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18 *Corriere della Sera* (Tortora 2007) reports an interview given by one of Amanda's ex-sexual
19 partners to the English publication *News of the World*, describing her as:
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22 A man-eater, insatiable in bed [...]. The 22 years old Albanian confessed to the British
23 tabloid to have had an authentic 'sexual marathon' with the 20 years old American
24 just a few weeks before her house mate was found dead in Perugia. The youngster,
25 who worked as a barman in a venue in Perugia, highlighted that Amanda, just like a
26 predator with its prey, is always able to possess the men she desires. (par. 1)
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29 And later in the same article:
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32 The Albanian also recalls that Amanda often bragged about her daily usage of drugs:
33 "She was not the kind of girl you would take home to meet your mother - the young
34 man remarks - I knew she only wanted sex" (par. 2).
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37 This is reminiscent of McRobbie's (2009) notion of the 'phallic girl', a new subject position
38 available for young women today.
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42 McRobbie (2009) identifies the 'phallic girl' as one of the 'spaces of attention' or 'luminosities'
43 (p. 54) provided to young women in post-feminist culture. According to the author, post-
44 feminism is a cultural context in which women are cast in a 'double entanglement' (p. 13):
45 they are allowed a notional form of equality, in terms of participation in the public spheres of
46 work, education, leisure and consumer culture, as long as they abandon any attachment to
47 an active feminist agenda. Furthermore, young women are placed in specific 'spaces of
48 luminosity' that work to show their equality to men, in a way that suggests that feminism is
49 now redundant.
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3 The 'phallic girl' is one of these luminosities and indicates how in the past 20 years or so,
4 women have been allowed to enter male domains in the form of mimicry of male behaviour,
5 by smoking, drinking, swearing, engaging in casual sex, being involved in fights, getting
6 arrested, going to strip clubs, and so forth (McRobbie, p. 83). McRobbie (2005; 2009) employs
7 Butler's (1993) exploration of the 'phallic lesbian' to theorise this new permutation of young
8 femininity: Butler claims that the phallic lesbian may disturb the gender system by
9 appropriating the phallus, suggesting that it may be useful for heterosexual women to do so
10 themselves. Inspired by Butler, McRobbie (2005; 2009) understands young women to claim
11 equality to their male peers by engaging in traditionally masculine behaviours, and thus
12 appropriating symbols of male power.
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23 More recently, a range of scholars in the UK, USA and Australia have engaged with the 'phallic
24 girl' or 'ladette' in contemporary culture (Dobson 2014a, 2014b; Egan 2013; Hubbard 2011;
25 Jackson and Tinkler 2007; Nicholls 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2011). While not all authors
26 agree with McRobbie's theorisation of phallic femininity, the consensus is that since the mid-
27 1990s this subject position has been increasingly normalised by the media (albeit with a
28 degree of anxiety). While this is undoubtedly true for these cultural contexts, in the case study
29 presented here, overt female sexual desire such as Amanda's, among other 'phallic'
30 behaviours, is understood as being essentially American and foreign to Italian culture (see for
31 example: Risé [1966] and Alberoni [2009]).
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42 And, as Simkin (2016) also argues, American portrayals of femininity appear to have
43 influenced heavily the narratives constructed for Amanda's subjectivity. One example is the
44 popular TV show *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), but more specifically the character of
45 Samantha. *Sex and the City* is an American sitcom which concentrates on the lives of four
46 thirty-something (and then forty-something) women friends in New York: Carrie, Samantha,
47 Charlotte and Miranda. Samantha is the most outspoken, explicit and sexually experimental
48 of the four friends. Within the show she is the character who most represents the neoliberal
49 notion of women's right to sexual pleasure and is in fact the most sexually active and sexually
50 satisfied (Henry, 2006).
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Amanda's phallic subjectivity plays with some of the themes of Samantha's characterisation

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3 and lifestyle: Samantha enjoys casual sex, smokes marijuana, is familiar with New York's
4 nightlife, owns a vibrator and does not feel she needs to hide her sexuality, just as Amanda
5 Knox was portrayed to be. The popularity and diffusion of American TV shows such as *Sex and*
6 *the City* (and more recently others such as *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012), which among its cast has
7 many 'girls gone wild') has created a particular image of American femininity, which
8 necessarily influences the characterisations and narratives employed both inside and outside
9 the court.⁵
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18 Ultimately, the prosecution depicted Amanda Knox as a sexually voracious 'femme fatale',
19 who was able to submit men to her will by using her beauty and sexual appeal, a common
20 narrative often used in cases of women murderers (Morrissey 2003; Seal 2010; Neroni 2006;
21 Keitner 2002). The prosecutor, reported the media, pictured Amanda Knox as the mastermind
22 behind the murder of Meredith Kercher. Amanda is 'a young woman with a multifaceted
23 personality, characterised by a quick wit and wiliness [...] [and] a strong dramatic flair and an
24 elevated, one might say fatal, ability to bring people together' (Ponte 2007, par. 6); Raffaele
25 Sollecito is described instead as 'a young man characterised by a fragile temperament,
26 inclined to being conditioned by influences of all genres' (Sarzanini 2007, par. 7); while Rudy
27 is depicted as 'psychologically dominated by the American' (Capponi 2008, par. 2).
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38 By constructing Amanda Knox as a cunning, devious and erratic femme fatale, and Raffaele
39 Sollecito and Rudy Guede as subjugated to her beauty and personality, the prosecution drew
40 on a standard narrative employed to describe women who kill, in which the monstrous and
41 super-human will of the *femme fatale* manipulates men into doing her bidding by playing on
42 their sexual desire for her (Birch 1993, Chan 2001, Morrissey 2003, Seal 2010). Indeed, the
43 narrative produced by the prosecution was that Amanda, leading a life of escalating vice and
44 excess, managed, through the manipulation of both Raffaele Sollecito and Rudy Guede, to
45 recruit them for a perverse sexual game/ritual with the unwilling Meredith Kercher, which
46 eventually ended up in tragedy.
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59 ⁵ Ironically, the participants to *Jersey Shore* are of Italian ancestry and proud to be.
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3 In narratives of the *femme fatale* employed in the courts, sexual 'deviance' is aligned with
4 depravity, and female sexual desire with violent transgression (Birch 1993). And indeed
5 investigations in Amanda's sexual experience and subjectivity by the prosecution and by the
6 media grounded most of the allegations against her: the number of men she invited at home
7 (Sarzanini 2007), the fact that she had condoms and a vibrator (Zurlo 2009), allegations of
8 sexual incontinence (Tortora 2007), the "'hot sex" [...] sesso "bollente"' (N.A. 2009, par. 7) she
9 would have had with Raffaele, all seemed to indicate that she was guilty of murder.
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18 Moreover, Verhoueven (1994) argues that by suggesting that conflict or violence subsumes
19 eroticism and pleasure, the media unknowingly depicts sexual desire as a political struggle for
20 power. The framing of the murder of Meredith Kercher as a mixture of sex, animosity and
21 aggression, with Amanda playing the leading role, seems to suggest a desire on Amanda
22 Knox's part to participate in the crime as equal to men. Thus, the representation of Amanda
23 in terms of the phallic girl/*femme fatale* has to be read as an anxiety on the part of the social
24 order towards the emergence of a threatening subjectivity to the status quo, one which,
25 subverting gender roles by expressing dominance and sexual assertiveness, may go as far as
26 appropriating male violence in a quest for 'the ultimate control'.
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37 **Conclusion**

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39 This article has shown how the interplay of the media and legal system produces a space of
40 subjectification of young femininity, through which normative femininity is defined and
41 enforced. Furthermore, the analysis presented in this article shows how old and new forms
42 of sexism and misogyny have characterised Italian culture in the age of Berlusconi. On the one
43 hand, the representation of Amanda Knox as the fatal *femme fatale*, reproduces longstanding
44 narratives that have been used to understand women who kill. On the other hand, more
45 contemporary discourses and media representations about female sexuality participate in the
46 case, depicting Amanda Knox as the post-feminist – and American - 'phallic girl', a new subject
47 position available for young women today.
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58 While this was not the only representation of Amanda in court, this side was emphasised by
59 the media and the prosecution, making a clear connection between excessive sexual desire,
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3 moral disinhibition, drugs and murder. The representation of Amanda as the one inflicting the
4 fatal stab, and her conviction for both rape and murder, seems to symbolise the phallic girl's
5 yearn for power, appropriating the ultimate form of control, the one over life and death.
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7 Ultimately, the representation of Amanda Knox as a phallic girl conveys the social anxiety that
8 this facet of post-feminism femininity provokes, one that is perceived as a challenge to the
9 status quo, threatening to subvert the gender order by expressing dominance and sexual
10 assertiveness.
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18 The Amanda Knox case is fundamental for the understanding of post-feminist culture in Italy,
19 where a framework of nominal equality provides a cover to sexist forms of aggression towards
20 women. Indeed, behind the illusion of sexual liberation that post-feminism promises, female
21 sexuality is still object of intense scrutiny, policing and regulation. The aggressive vilification
22 of Amanda's personality, her representation as the monstrous *femme fatale*, allusions to the
23 mystery of femininity, as well as allusions to female duplicity, cunningness and deceitfulness,
24 all participate in a profoundly misogynistic culture that continues to exist in Italy. Ultimately,
25 this article goes to show how post-feminist culture actively performs an undoing of feminism,
26 as indicated by McRobbie (2009): women are bestowed with certain freedoms, such as being
27 able to enjoy casual sex, drinking and taking drugs, but these freedoms can easily be turned
28 against them in an attempt to redraw the boundaries of sanctioned femininity.
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