

FEMINISM AND CELEBRITY CULTURE IN SHAKESTEEN FILM

by

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(Under the Direction of SUJATA IYENGAR)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the effectiveness of popular culture's interpretation of third wave feminist thought. It places a particular focus on the genre of "Shakesteen" films made popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which adapted Shakespearean plays for American teen audiences. Within that focus, this thesis discusses the celebrity personae of two women whose careers were furthered by Shakesteen roles: Julia Stiles and Amanda Bynes. Ultimately, it seeks to determine whether it is possible to portray a political movement in a way that is culturally palatable without compromising the goals of that movement.

INDEX WORDS: feminism, Shakespeare, teen culture, Shakesteen, third wave, Julia Stiles, Amanda Bynes

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Mrs. Sally Grover, who began my ongoing love affair with Shakespeare and his varied cultural permutations, introduced me to the concept of academic criticism of pop culture, and ultimately taught me that, even as it seems an eternal fixture in celluloid, in real life, high school does not last forever. For that I am eternally grateful.

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CHAPTER ONE

FEMINISM AND CELEBRITY CULTURE IN SHAKESTEEN FILM: AN INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the intersections of current trends in feminism and popular culture in order to determine the effect these intersections have on the formation of contemporary female teen identity. More specifically, I will examine the way these intersections have an impact upon contemporary teen culture through celebrity influence on teen identity formation. I will focus on celebrities who have worked in a specific genre of teen films: the so-called “Shakesteen” films dominant in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the bulk of this thesis concerns problems that I see regarding pop-cultural representations of teen feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the chronologically reactive nature of conflicting feminisms within the larger movement means that I must briefly summarize feminism's major ideological shifts over time, or “waves,” as they are commonly known.

American first wave feminism occurred from approximately 1848-1920, is widely thought to have originated with the (primarily female) proponents of the abolition movement, and held women's suffrage as its primary goal. Famous American first-wave feminists include Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Alice Paul, all of whom were present at the presentation and signing of the *Declaration of Sentiments* at the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York on July 28, 1848. This declaration sought to point out the sexism inherent within the documents thought to be the cornerstones of American civil liberties. It did so by appropriating similar rhetoric and language found within these national texts but including women within the groups of people that received the rights bestowed by them. For example, the *Declaration of Sentiments* turns the following, otherwise

familiar, passage from the *Declaration of Independence* from a critique of British tyranny to one of American sexism with the addition of only two words:

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men *and women* are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government....
(Stanton 71, emphasis mine)

By appropriating familiar sentiments typically lauded for their liberating qualities in a way that expressed the latent oppression these sentiments enforced on American women, first-wave feminists set a precedent of protests that subsequent generations of feminism would continue to follow, even over a century later. Cady-Stanton and her peers expressed something historical or familiar in an unfamiliar way, and, in doing so, brought attention to a more contemporary sociopolitical issue. Many critics of this first-wave movement claimed that its proponents were neglecting their natural femininity in trying to enter into what had been a traditionally male sphere of influence.

Later in the twentieth century, second wave feminists built upon the achievements of first-wavers by extending the presence of women in the public sphere first established by their enfranchisement in 1920. Second wave feminists worked to use these broad political rights to obtain rights that seemed closer to where and how women lived their lives day to day: within their marriages, as they raised their families, and in the workplace. Second wave feminism is split into two disparate movements: second wave liberal feminism and second wave radical

feminism. Liberal feminism is typically thought to have begun with the widespread entry of women into the workforce during and after World War II. This phenomenon so fundamentally changed the structure of the American family's everyday routine that, after the war ended and many women were told to give up their jobs and return to their homes, they became dissatisfied about the role(s) their society expected them to fill. Out of this dissatisfaction, many women also became depressed and were subsequently diagnosed with the vaguely defined and rarely discussed “housewives' syndrome,” which Betty Friedan called “the problem that has no name” in her landmark 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. In it, Friedan recounts observations and anecdotes collected from informal gatherings of women whose primary job was to care for their husbands, children, and homes. A shocking number of these women, Friedan writes, felt unsatisfied:

As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—Is this all? (Friedan 198)

Part of the groundbreaking nature of this text, I would argue, lies in the locus of the blame for this nameless problem, which, according to Friedan, appears to be an ideological shortcoming perpetrated by American society at large: she writes that unspecified “experts” peddle the myth of “true feminine fulfillment” that tells women they must “[pity] the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who [want] to be poets or physicists or presidents,” and instead, focus their energy on maintaining their families and homes exclusively (Friedan 198). This rigid definition of the appropriate female role, Friedan writes, has become “the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture” (Friedan 199). By identifying a

widespread problem whose roots permeated a culture that prided itself on promoting an image of contentment born of progress, Friedan caused many Americans to question whether the things that their world told them should make them happy really did so at all. Like the first wave feminists, Friedan took an idea that was familiar to most (the outwardly-happy, busy American housewife taking care of her family) and added an unfamiliar dimension to it (the issue of female dissatisfaction and depression) in order to call attention what she saw as a pressing sociopolitical issue. In an effort to bring this issue to the broader public consciousness, Friedan founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Friedan became the organization's founding copresident, along with Pauli Murray, a law professor at Yale and a member of the President's Commission on the Status of Women, who, as one of the only African American members, was dissatisfied with the way commission's efforts failed to recognize that all women did not experience oppression of the same type or in the same ways (*The Founding of NOW*). In addition to raising awareness about the need for gender equality as a national, wide-reaching goal by lobbying for legislation such as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and legislation that allowed women access to safe, affordable methods of birth control, second wave feminists made it clear that, in their vision of a better world for women, every woman should have a voice, and, as such, what was important in any given woman's daily life was important not to her alone, but instead, had a broader meaning, and should be thought of as politically significant.

Many second wave feminists adopted the slogan “The personal is political” as a battle cry for the movement. Carol Hanisch coined this phrase in her essay of the same name, originally published as a part of the compilation *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation in 1970*. While this phrase was widely accepted as one of near-universal significance by a majority of the movement's members, there was a degree of dissent regarding the application of the statement

within the movement itself because of the way “the personal” differed across lines of race, class, and sexual orientation. Indeed, many critics of the second-wave noted that, for many of its members, the rights of “women” were often understood to be the rights of white, heterosexual, middle to upper-class women specifically, and many of the public faces of the second wave seemed to be ignorant to the fact that some of the “rights” or “privileges” they were fighting for were defined differently for women of other races or classes. For example, while prominent second wave voices like Friedan and Gloria Steinem spoke out about the right of women to be able to hold jobs outside of the home, many low-income women protested the exclusion of their specific interests. Because of the unfortunate intersections of race, class, and economic privilege, most of these women were African American and had seen working outside of the home not as a privilege to be won, but as a reality necessary for the survival of themselves and their families.

Another segment of women that felt excluded from the tenets of second wave liberalism saw their homes and marriages not only as venues in which they debated the gendered division of labor, but also as battlegrounds for a different kind of revolution: one in which female sexuality was a central issue. These second wave radical feminists fought against censorship of their sexual expression, some by championing female-positive pornography (both visual and literary) whose goal was to challenge socially constructed perceptions of a mild, passive female sexuality that may respond to but certainly did not initiate sexual acts. On the feminist literature front, Erica Jong’s 1973 novel *Fear of Flying* worked to negate these perceptions. In the novel, Jong tells the story of Isadora Wing, a poet who feels stifled by both her straining marriage and her family’s frequent injunctions that she would only be happy if she had children (Jong 7, 40). The majority of the novel’s action is centered around a trip Isadora and her husband, Bennett, take to a psychoanalysts’ conference in Germany. While there, Isadora meets the improbably-

named Adrian Goodlove, who she sees as her vehicle to the transcendence found within the “zipless fuck,” which is “zipless” for two reasons:

because when you [come] together zippers [fall] away like rose petals and underwear [blows] off like dandelion fluff. Tongues [intertwine] and [turn] liquid. Your whole soul [flows] out through your tongue and into the mouth of your lover (Jong 11)

and because “it [is] necessary that you never get to know the man very well” (Jong 11). In invisioning both the kind of romanticized sexual encounter associated with traditional feminine fantasy and no-strings-attached sex of traditionally masculine fantasy as being found in one experience, Jong revolutionized the way society as a whole viewed female sexuality.

Third wave feminism (typically thought to begin in the early 1980s and extend through the new millennium) pushed the second wave notion of the political nature of personal life in new directions. While “the personal” still referred to those issue important to the ways in which individual women lived out their everyday routines, more aspects of the personal became accepted forums for political expression. Popular culture was chief among the new areas of third wave activism, with the arrival of bands such as Bikini Kill on the cultural scene signaling the birth of so-called “riot grrrl” culture, an arena in which girls could express their dissatisfaction with a culture in which they felt oppressed and ignored by combining traditional forums of creative self-expression like music, art, and theatre with the political ideals important to them. Bikini Kill’s “Riot Grrl Philosophy” has this to say about the importance of popular culture within political expression for young females:

Doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like

racism, able-bodyism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism, and heterosexism figures in our own lives. (Bikini Kill 532)

In addition to forwarding the idea that popular culture is a valid avenue for one's political beliefs, third wave feminists also extended the idea of “the personal” by examining and commenting on female sexuality in new ways. As they saw it, the way to undermine a patriarchal social system was to dismantle it from the inside out by adopting its oppressive tools--such as insults about women's sexuality--and reclaiming them in a way that brought to light the everyday inequalities of sex and gender present in contemporary American society. Third wave feminists sought to regain control over as well as change the cultural meaning of these sexist insults. Many publications with this reclamation effort as their main goal appeared in the late 1990s and early 2000s, for example, Inga Muscio's *Cunt*, Leora Tanenbaum's *Slut!: Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation*, and *Bitch Magazine*, edited by Andi Zeisler and Lisa Jervis.

A related effort sought to reclaim not only words, but also actions. Since language comparing women to objects or animals has at its root a desire to control women's bodies in some way, women of the third wave sought to own their sexualities. In order to do this, they first had to dispel notions of female sexuality as wholly receptive and passive, and many felt that a change in viewpoint toward young female sexuality was necessary. While traditional views of this type of sexuality had been that it was to be discouraged; that young women were vulnerable to sexual attack; are likely to be taken advantage of by someone older; and that women, therefore, should be protected, many third wave feminists felt that this view of their sexuality wrested control of their bodies away from themselves and relocated this control to the norm-constructing patriarchy. These third-wavers viewed their sexuality not as something to be sheltered and protected by outside parties, but as something they could use and enjoy themselves

as they saw fit. For this reason, third wave feminists are often also called “sex-positive” feminists¹.

While many young women report that sex-positive third wave politics has resulted in a sort of liberation for them, there are others who view the sex-positive movement as a clever ruse of the patriarchy disguised as advancement for women². One of these women is Wendy Shalit, author of *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Claim It's Not Bad to Be Good* (2007), and widely-accepted founder of the contemporary modesty movement that she frames as “feminism's (mild) fourth wave” (Shalit 204). In an age when abstinence-only education is federally funded and more and more fathers across America are accompanying their young daughters to “purity balls” that encourage them to maintain their virginity until marriage, this conservative reaction to third wave values is not altogether surprising⁴. Though more traditional feminists question labeling this movement feminism at all, I would argue that its emphasis on choice and personal agency hearkens back to the feminist movement's origins, and that making the validity of its feminism determine its success overlooks larger cultural questions that should be addressed. If this movement is to be viewed implausible or unsuccessful, I would argue that that is the case not because modesty supporters employ faux feminism, but because they rely on commodified, reductionist cultural artifacts as the means by which they react to the third wave. For example, in *Girls Gone Mild*, Shalit uses such forms as the recipe and the teen magazine-inspired personality quiz to promote modesty. Both of these easily-produced formulas

¹ Some second wave radical feminists have argued that this facet of third wave politics does not exist in its own right, but instead, is a retread of sexual attitudes that they established earlier. Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter discuss this conflict at length in their book *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*.

² It should be noted that not all opponents of the sex-positive movement are politically or socially conservative. Susan Faludi, for example, outlines reasons to doubt the motives of sex-positivism in her article “Blame it On Feminism,” which appears as an introduction to her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*.

rely on opposing stereotypes of young women (the sheltered aspiring homemaker and the vapid, self-obsessed reader of publications like *Glamour* or *Cosmopolitan*), and therefore, neither is the way to constructively direct her message to teen girls.

As I suggested earlier, third wave feminism brought politics to popular culture. The body of this thesis will examine the feminism employed in a specialized niche of pop culture: films that adapt the plots of Shakespearean plays for a target audience of American teens, also called “Shakesteen” films. Given feminism's penchant for adaptation of the established, I believe that these kind of popular cultural adaptations are the most appropriate lens through which to examine widely-held views of young feminism. I will examine not only how the changes that these adaptations make in areas of plot and character reflect then-contemporary views on young feminism, but I will also examine two of the celebrities whose careers were established or furthered due to their involvement in Shakesteen film: Julia Stiles and Amanda Bynes. In my discussion of Stiles and Bynes, I will consider both the roles they played in Shakesteen films and their larger roles as celebrities whose actions influence their female teen audiences. Taken together, these things compose the women's “star-bodies,” defined by Angela Keam (who also coined the term “Shakesteen”) as a blending of the “professional and corporeal” associations of a particular celebrity to produce an overall public perception of that person (Keam 2).

Finally, after examining trends that have occurred thus far in representations of young feminism in popular culture, I will explore the future of young feminism in popular culture. Is it possible to widely and palatably market a movement that is so tailored to its participants' individual emotional and political sensibilities without somehow compromising the spirit of the movement itself?

CHAPTER TWO

FROM “QUEEN OF (SHAKES)TEEN” TO *GIRLS GONE MILD* : TRENDS IN FEMALE TEEN IDENTITY FORMATION

Julia Stiles's Star Body and Teen Identity Formation

According to her official fansite, Julia Stiles was born March 28, 1981 to John, who taught second grade in Harlem, and Judith, who made and sold ceramics, both of whom are “true radicals of the Sixties” (“Biography”). She grew up in a loft in SoHo that doubled as her mother's studio and therefore, “there was a constant stream of artists and aficionados of all races passing through.” By mentioning these facts about her “early years,” the site sets Stiles up as a free-thinking activist, even as a very young child. (“Biography”). The site continues its framing of Stiles as socially aware almost from birth by mentioning that she wrote letters to then-New York City mayor Ed Koch requesting more garbage receptacles for her local streets at age six. As the biography continues through her adolescence, it mentions that she “spent a lot of time writing” and “was a keen student of everything,” then gives way to a sort of prophecy in hindsight as it mentions that “she became infatuated with Shakespeare, actually placing a statue of 'the Bard' in her room. Odd, you might think, for a young girl - but then this young girl would star in three Shakespeare adaptations before she was 20” and become a new “Queen of Teen” as a result (“Biography”). She seems to have been nurtured specifically for a career not just in performance, but in a performance informed by activism and an appreciation for high class art, as her “infatuation” with “the Bard” seems to connote.

On the one hand, this fansite biography paints Stiles as almost fated for greatness: born to parents who both supported and participated in the arts and raised in the politically aware and creatively rich environment of New York City, she had no choice but to be precocious and vastly

intelligent. This is where the bias of the composer of the biography begins to make itself evident. It is impossible she was actually “a student of everything,” as the site claims, for example. The biography is not content to attribute Stiles's success to merely an accident of birth and environment, however, as is evident when it leads up to the beginning of her acting career by saying:

At 11, Julia's precociousness, her New York sass, her penchant for letter-writing and the notion instilled in her that she could do anything came in handy. Having been thrilled by a performance there, she wrote to the director of the experimental off-Broadway La Mama Theatre, enclosing photos of herself dressed up in different costumes and asking if they had any parts for child-actresses. And, as it happened, they did. (“Biography”)

This excerpt emphasizes certain character traits that were either essential to her or cultivated by her parents and/or the environment in which she was raised by mentioning that “Julia's precociousness, her New York sass, her penchant for letter-writing and the notion instilled in her that she could do anything came in handy.” It also attributes Stiles with a fierce independence that makes her stand out. It seems unrealistic to assume that many eleven-year-olds would have enough self-confidence simply to take pictures of themselves and ask theatre companies to hire them, sight unseen. While the positive spin of this biography is clearly at least partially due to the fact that it was written by someone who admires both Stiles and her body of work to a great degree, it is still worthy of analysis because it clearly maps traits that she is known for as a celebrity (she is politically aware, intelligent, independent and fiercely self-motivated) back to their apparent cultivation in her childhood.

While celebrity personae (especially those marketed to teens conscious of the latest trends) are arguably ever-evolving, certain personae are worth closer analysis due to their

functioning as representations of identities worthy of imitation during the time of their popularity. I will refer to these personae as “star-bodies,” using the term coined by Angela Keam in her article “The 'Shakesteen' genre: Claire Danes's Star-Body, Teen Female Fans, and the Pluralization of Authorship,” wherein she makes it clear that the body she is discussing “is both professional and corporeal”--there is a certain blending of the perception of the actor's body of work and her physical body or her as a person. Julia Stiles represents one of these bodies because of her dominant presence, not just in teen films of the late 1990s and early 2000s, but in a certain kind of teen film: adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, or “Shakesteen” films, to use another term coined by Keam to describe this popular turn of the century trend (Keam 2).

From 1999-2001, Stiles starred in three of these films -- 1999's *10 Things I Hate About You* (Dir. Gil Junger), 2000's so-called “slacker *Hamlet*” (Dir. Michael Almereyda) and 2001's *O* (Dir. Tim Blake Nelson). The fact that these three Shakesteen films placed Stiles on the celebrity radar of American teens sets her up as a different kind of teen actress: one who connotes the consummate Shakespearean actress: academic, talented, and highly cultured. The fact that these films are adaptations marketed primarily to American teenage girls in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, also makes Stiles a different kind of Shakespearean actress. Unlike Sarah Berndhardt or Ellen Terry before her, Stiles conceives of a more modern Shakespearean heroine; one that is independent, that questions the way the world around her is constructed, and, above all, one that is informed by feminist politics. Several of Stiles's non-Shakespearean film roles have also contributed to the perception of her persona as one that embodies this type of empowered, intelligent contemporary femininity, most notably 2001's *Save the Last Dance* (Dir. Thomas Carter), 2003's *Mona Lisa Smile* (Dir. Mike Newell), and the forthcoming filmic adaptation of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, in which she has signed on to play

Plath's fictional counterpart, Esther Greenwood. In this chapter, I will examine Stiles' star-body as constructed by her roles in these films as a force in the formation of teen identity.

Additionally, since Stiles's prevalence in the teen market tapered off in the early 2000s, I would also like to examine a more current trend in female teen identity formation—one that presents itself very differently than and is being marketed as reactionary to the type of teen identity represented by Stiles in her heyday as “queen of teen:” the modesty movement (“[Biography](#)”).

Stiles's Star Body Part One : Feminism

Gil Junger's 1999 film *10 Things I Hate About You* was Stiles' first starring film role as well as her first Shakespearean adaptation. In it, she is Katerina “Kat” Stratford, a senior at Seattle's Padua High School, whose classmates commonly describe her as a “heinous wench,” if her guidance counselor is to be believed. Like her namesake in Shakespeare's play, she rebels against social conventions, but she does so by opting out of her high school's dating culture, much to the dismay of her popular sister Bianca. Their father, an obstetrician who says he's “up to [his] elbows in placenta,” and, as such, has an extreme fear of his own daughters turning into the teen mothers he sees every day, takes advantage of Kat's choice by forbidding flirty Bianca from dating until her sister does (*10 Things I Hate About You*). Later in the film, the audience learns that Kat's choice to abstain from dating stems from a regretted sexual encounter with Joey Donner, the very boy whom Bianca desperately wants to date. Kat tells Bianca that that event changed her outlook on life, saying, “After that I swore I'd never do anything just because 'everyone else' was doing it. And I haven't since” (*10 Things I Hate About You*). In addition to showing that she is comfortable going against the status quo to suit her personal principles, this admission exhibits that Kat both is able and finds it necessary to exert control over her own sexuality, rather than letting it be dictated by a patriarchal power structure. In keeping with Kat's

choice to go against the status quo by refusing to participate in her high school's mechanism of normative relationship structure, the filmmakers use a number of obvious cues by connecting her with artifacts of twentieth century culture that carry strong feminist connotations. to. One character remarks to another that “she prefers angry girl music of the indie rock persuasion” and cites Ani DiFranco and Tori Amos as examples, Kat is seen reading Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and she has a discussion about Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* with the boy who is paid to date her so that Bianca can go to the prom. Each of these things is typically associated with feminism and is not necessarily either negative or positive. After hearing what kind of music her sister listens to and that she doesn't date, however, another character asks Bianca whether Kat is “a k.d. lang fan,” thereby insinuating that Kat is a lesbian and, in so doing, relying on the negative stereotype of the angry lesbian feminist.

In addition to being associated with cultural artifacts that have come to be representative of the feminist movement, Kat thinks of herself as a social activist. She suggests to her friend Mandella that the two of them boycott their school's prom because it is an “antiquated mating ritual,” and Mandella responds to the idea of a protest by saying, “Oh, goody! Something new and different for us!” (*10 Things I Hate About You*) This exchange both reiterates Kat's disdain for traditional gender roles and, because of the sarcasm with which Mandella delivers her response, lets the film's viewer know that Kat stages protests frequently (and most likely requests her friend's involvement just as frequently). Later in the film, when her English teacher asks for opinions on the assignment that they have just finished (reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*), Kat laments “the patriarchal values that dictate [her] education” and asks him why their curriculum does not contain more works by female authors. He responds, “I know how difficult it must be for you to overcome all those years of upper middle-class suburban oppression. Must

be tough. But the next time you storm the PTA crusading for better... lunch meat, or whatever it is you white girls complain about, ask them *why* they can't buy a book written by a black man!" (*10 Things I Hate About You*). This exchange makes Kat's penchant for protesting clear once again while also suggesting that, even as she claims to be oppressed as a woman, she is not aware of the social privilege afforded her as a White, educated woman. Many Womanist and Black Feminist thinkers have expressed this view of White feminists, most notably Kimberle Crenshaw in her discussion of the "theory of intersectionality," in which she posits that the oppression faced by Black women is compounded due to its overlapping in the areas of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw). While the film does still set Kat up as its protagonist, this exchange humanizes her by suggesting that her understanding of her world is limited by her own standpoint. In turn, Stiles is also humanized and made more approachable even as she is marked as socially informed. Because Kat is flawed, even less socially conscious viewers of the film can relate to her without feeling guilty about their lack of involvement.

In 2003, Stiles co-starred in another film that claimed to espouse feminist politics: *Mona Lisa Smile*, directed by Mike Newell with an all-female principal cast including Julia Roberts, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Kirsten Dunst, Ginnifer Goodwin, and Marcia Gay Harden. The film is set in 1953 and tells the story of Katherine Watson (Roberts), a California feminist who "is not married because she chooses not to be," accepts a post teaching Art History at Wellesley College, and, upon discovering that it is "a finishing school disguised as a college," seeks to change her students. Stiles plays student Joan Brandwyn in the film. Joan is set up from the film's beginning as the student most likely to break out of the patriarchal society in which "Wellesley girls" appear to be groomed to participate: in the film's first shot of her, she is smoking a cigarette. This is a symbol of defiance of social norms because, while many of the

film's young women smoke, it is not an acceptable practice in social situations outside the college's walls, as etiquette and poise teacher Nancy Abbey (played by Marcia Gay Harden) says several times in the film (*Mona Lisa Smile*). After the first shot of her, the next thing the audience sees Joan do is lead the rest of her classmates up to the door of the college's main hall, knock, and ask for entrance, proclaiming: "I am Everywoman!" (*Mona Lisa Smile*). When asked her purpose for wanting to enter the hall, she responds, "To awaken my spirit to hard work and dedicate my life to knowledge" (*Mona Lisa Smile*). It is significant that the film frames Joan as spokeswoman for her peers in this scene, just as the words she speaks are significant to her character. When taken together with the previous shot of her smoking, these three things make Joan a woman who is intelligent, driven, slightly rebellious, and not afraid to either go against the status quo or act as a leader. Not only does the character of Joan as read by her opening scenes resemble the star body of Julia Stiles herself, she also appears to be the perfect protégé or

Katherine Watson within the universe of the film. Watson herself seems to think so, and takes Joan under her wing, encouraging her to apply to Yale Law School after Joan reveals that that has always been her secret dream. Joan gets accepted to Yale, and it is here that her character's dilemma takes shape: she must either negotiate the demands of law school while being married to her "Harvard sweetheart" Tommy Donegal, or choose between law school and marriage (*Mona Lisa Smile*). Joan discusses this problem with Katherine Watson after Katherine visits her with applications for law schools that are "close enough to Penn (the school to which Tommy has been accepted) to have dinner on the table by five" in order to enable her to "do both" (*Mona Lisa Smile*). In this discussion, Joan both establishes her own agency in making the decision to forgo law school in favor of marriage, and seems to be accusing Katherine of being close-minded

in her desire to impart her feminist beliefs on her students. Joan's agency and her accusation of Katherine are most evident when she says the following:

I know what I'm doing and it doesn't make me any less smart. You stand in front of the class and tell us to look beyond the image, but you don't. To you, a housewife is someone who has sold her soul for a center hall Colonial. She has no depth, no intellect, no interests. You're the one who said I could do anything I wanted. This is what I want.

(Mona Lisa Smile)

In establishing the agency of a female role that is traditionally thought by many feminists to be unwittingly maintaining and enabling the patriarchal status quo as well as claiming that those who claim feminist beliefs often overlook the standpoint of the individual in favor of furthering a larger political agenda, Joan is prefiguring the views of many of the participants in the social movement popularly labeled as “the opt-out revolution.” In the *New York Times* article that brought the phrase into national parlance, Lisa Belkin defines the majority of this movement's participants as the women who have benefitted from the gains of Second Wave feminism by earning admittance to prestigious (and previously all-male) universities, risen in their respective professional ranks, and then made the active choice to “opt-out” of the workforce in favor of marriage and family (Belkin), much like Joan does in the film.

According to her official fansite, Stiles “considers herself something of a feminist” because “she won't take roles where all she does is fancy a boy.” The site accepts this definition of feminism without questioning it. It also mentions her involvement in a 2002 production of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* as proof of her personal feminist politics (“[Biography](#)”). Though those things have feminist connotations, the site's view of feminism seems to be reductive at best. Its first point of reference represents an entire social movement using very

specific cultural shorthand without explaining the significance of the latter within the former. Its second point of reference reduces women to their sex function. Both approaches are problematic.

Many scholars and critics of both *10 Things I Hate About You* and *Mona Lisa Smile* think that both films share the same reductive view of feminist politics. In her article “Taming *10 Things I Hate About You*: Shakespeare and the Teenage Film Audience,” L. Monique Pittman argues that “[the film] works hard to soften the obvious gender inequities of [Shakespeare's play], but in many ways silences honest and serious debate about gender in the process” (Pittman 146). She argues that the film does this by appropriating the rhetoric of choice and applying it to conformity, as I have previously mentioned, and says that this appropriation ultimately results in the assignation of agency “in the most traditional of ways—to the young men determining their destiny and coming of age,” though the film purports to be about “the young teenager capable of defying all social structures and forging a self in complete freedom from the world” (Pittman 145, 6). In other words, though the film appears to support the individual agency of its teen characters, it actually reinforces traditionally hierarchized gender roles that privilege male individuality and give female characters agency based on that of the males with whom they are in romantic relationships. In addition to its focus on agency, Pittman's article is particularly relevant to my examination of trends in teen identity formation because she includes and analyses responses to the film given by her own high-school English students, only two of whom (out of the thirty-five total students asked to write responses to the film) noticed that “gender roles are set up and played into, rather than looked at and examined” (Pittman 150, excerpt from student essay). Pittman concludes that “the ways in which the film manipulates its audience to embrace longstanding stereotypes of gender declares the success of the film in addressing its target audience” (Pittman 150), thereby claiming that commodification and maintaining the

status quo go hand in hand, and even suggesting that one necessitates the other. Because it will always be more marketable to be rebellious, however, it benefits those in power (in this case, filmmakers and studio executives in charge of marketing and advertising) to frame conformity as non-conformity.

Most critics of *Mona Lisa Smile*'s portrayal of feminism see this framing as the root of the film's problem, like *The Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw, who calls the film “a desperately insincere lite-feminist version of *Dead Poets Society*” (Bradshaw). Stiles herself responded to those who criticized the film's feminism in the very same publication, in an editorial entitled “Who's Afraid of the 1950's?” In the article, Stiles first explains the impetus for her writing it by recounting a meeting with a fan who told her that she “hated” both her performance as Carol in David Mamet's *Oleanna* and her performance as Joan Brandwyn in *Mona Lisa Smile*. Stiles assumes that the woman disapproves of Joan's choice to be a homemaker rather than attend law school and goes on to say that she “found the stranger's commentary curious, given that her vitriol was directed towards diametrically opposed representations of women [because] Joan is a conformist by nature, while Carol is unrelenting in her non-conformity to the point of being a masochist” (Stiles). She then transitions into a response to Cherry Potter's *Guardian* article “Frocks and Feminism.” In the article, published a mere three days before Stiles's own, Potter denigrates the “spate of Hollywood retro movies” that, despite their feel-good messages, seem to “forget feminism,” and instead, “seduce their audiences” with aesthetically pleasing period details, *Mona Lisa Smile* among them (Potter). In both assuming that her audience desires a simply-resolved film that follows the formula of “an unthreatening after-school special - like those television shows geared toward children, where the idealized protagonist makes the right choice, to set an example for viewers to follow,” and not returning to the fan's initial complaint,

but instead, using the anecdote as a way to respond to what she obviously views as a direct affront, Stiles appears to be talking down to the audience of her films. Indeed, she goes on to mention that the film would have only appealed to “those already familiar with feminist theory,” were it not for the “pretty frocks” and other details of which Potter espouses her disapproval.

Additionally, Stiles places herself on the privileged side of the intellectual deficit she laments in her target audience in several ways throughout the article. First, her title, “Who's Afraid of the 1950s?” seems an echo of the title of Edward Albee's landmark play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, which in turn, forces a mental connection to the writings of Woolf herself (probably most specifically to “A Room of One's Own,” in this case), a great deal of which dealt with issues of burgeoning feminist politics. The rest of the article reads like a college term paper, with Stiles first grounding the film in the sociopolitical and historical milieu “just prior to the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*,” citing that the film's characters experience “the malaise that Friedan outlined in that ground-breaking text,” and ultimately arguing that “to show a group of young women in the 1950s so quickly ascribing to a modern sense of empowerment would be historically inaccurate,” and that contemporary feminists should be able to look beyond one-dimensional labels pertaining to female roles, and in doing so, “challenge the notion that being a feminist is in opposition to being feminine” (Stiles). Stiles's diction and references to landmark feminist writers and texts mark her as academic and knowledgeable in the article, distancing her from her (apparently less academic and knowledgeable) audience just as her abrupt change in the focus of her argument at the article's beginning does. Additionally, her conclusion is that the important thing about feminist politics is not the choice that a woman makes about her social role, but instead, the fact that she has

multiple valid choices available to her both aligns her with Joan and makes her seem open-minded and progressive.

Stiles' Star Body Part Two: Positive Social Message

In addition to marking herself as feminist in both her roles and her personal life, Stiles has also come to represent a broader tolerance of other occasionally controversial social issues, particularly in her involvement in two onscreen interracial relationships in *Save the Last Dance* and *O*, both released in 2001 and directed by Thomas Carter and Tim Blake Nelson, respectively. In *Save the Last Dance*, Stiles plays Sara Johnson, a ballerina forced to live with her father on Chicago's South Side after the death of her mother in a car accident. Once there, she falls in love with Derek Reynolds, a street-smart African American hip hop dancer. Their relationship causes controversy within their high school, where Sara is accused of “taking one of the good [men]” and depriving the school's African American young women of a way out of their poor neighborhood as a result. Derek is an aspiring doctor and, over the course of the film, gets accepted to Georgetown University's pre-med program (*Save the Last Dance*).

Sean Patrick Thomas, the actor who played Derek, appeared on nationally syndicated radio show *Loveline*, hosted by comedian Adam Carolla and addiction medicine specialist Dr. Drew Pinsky, on January 15, 2001. Carolla and Thomas had the following conversation about Stiles:

CAROLLA: Sean is in this with Julia Stiles, who's now everywhere, by the way. Every time I turn on the TV, I see her. She has a good look. It's kind of a hot chick that you can get look. [...]

THOMAS: Ah, man. She's a cutie, man.

CAROLLA:[...] She's just got--she's good-looking, but she looks like you could get her.

There's something very appealing about that, as opposed to Catherine Zeta-Jones, who's real good- looking and you can't get her. I think I could get Julia. Or at least--

PINSKY: In your mind.

CAROLLA: In my mind I could, and that's--

THOMAS: I don't know about that , man. She's a tough nut to crack, definitely.

CAROLLA: No, I know. I know I couldn't. I'm just saying--

PINSKY: Don't take him literally. Please.

CAROLLA: No, I'm saying, the attraction--there's certain women who are very attractive because they have a beautiful but almost common look that looks like the common man could be seen with her. She's very beautiful but does not have that hifalutin' look. You with me on that?

THOMAS: I guess so, but I think she could have it if she wanted it. She just doesn't choose that aesthetic for herself, you know what I'm saying?

CAROLLA: All right, well, we'll just agree to disagree about that. (“Guest: Sean Patrick Thomas”)

This conversation is telling regarding the formation of Stiles' star-body for several reasons. First, the conversation verifies Stiles' celebrity (Carolla says she is “now everywhere,” in other words, she has a large public presence in the time at which he is speaking). Second, it places her as a certain kind of celebrity. She is coded as attractive and desirable, as all celebrities are in some way, but the specific kind of attractiveness attributed to her is important. Carolla differentiates between Stiles and more glamorous or “hifalutin’” celebrities like Catherine Zeta-Jones, which codes Stiles as attractive in an approachable way that is more edifying to the common man's

view of himself, when he says he “could get her in [his] mind.” Thomas agrees, but adds that Stiles projects that sort of attractiveness, not because she is not as attractive as celebrities like Zeta-Jones, but because she “doesn't choose that aesthetic for herself.” He gives her agency over her star-body with that statement. Finally, it is important that the conversation and the comments within it are made both by people who know Stiles primarily by media coverage and professional reputation (Carolla and Pinsky), and by someone who has worked with her on a film and, as such, knows her professionally and, at least to a certain extent, personally as well (Thomas). Therefore, the fact that there is commonality and synthesis between the two parties' views of Stiles says that her constructed star-body and her personal life share certain characteristics: approachability and a certain amount of control over her own public perception.

Stiles extended that control over her public image to the social issues within *Save the Last Dance* when she hosted an episode of the popular sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* on March 17, 2001. As is typical for each of SNL's weekly celebrity guest hosts, Stiles opened the show with a monologue. Also typically, the monologue begins with the host commenting seriously on how grateful he or she is to have been asked to host the show, or with the guest host mentioning whatever project they are promoting in conjunction with their appearance. Things quickly take a turn for the comedic, however, when the host is interrupted by one of the show's regular cast members, who then proceeds to make light of either the project being promoted, the celebrity themselves, or some combination of both. In Stiles's case, the latter is true. After she begins the monologue by announcing that she is proud to be a part of the show's landmark 500th episode, Tracy Morgan (a male, African American cast member) joins her onstage, saying that he loved *Save the Last Dance*. Morgan then proceeds to try to convince Stiles to rendezvous with him after the show is over. He notices the studio audience and tells them that “a black man gettin'

together wit' a white lady...ain't no *show* ("Julia Stiles' Monologue"). When Stiles responds that they are, in fact, on a television show and that she was merely acting a part in a movie in which she played a woman in an interracial relationship, Morgan continues to try to convince her to meet him later, saying that, "Once you go black, you *never* go back!" and accusing her of having "jungle fever." Stiles chides him for referring to "a horrible stereotype," and then Morgan apologizes and asks her to dance. She still refuses, citing that she is "a nineteen-year-old college student [whose] parents are watching," while he is married and has children. She then stage-whispers, "I'll meet you at Twin Donuts after the show," they dance together, and Stiles ends the monologue by announcing that episode's musical guest, as is custom to the show's format ("Julia Stiles' Monologue"). In this brief sketch, Stiles both makes light of and reaffirms her star-body. She self-identifies as both actress and college student, thereby pointing to her celebrity status and public association with academia, and differentiates between herself as a person and the roles she embodies, only to erase that distinction by the monologue's end. In doing so, she shows that she is conscious of the public's perception of her as well as comments that she is not self-important and does not take herself too seriously. By calling Morgan's exaggerated black patois and racial clichés stereotypical, she appears socially conscious. Again, the fact that he convinces her by the sketch's end does not negate that perception, but instead, makes it appear that while she is open-minded, she is not so politically correct that she is unable to joke around.

Also in 2001, Stiles continued acting the part of a woman in a controversial interracial relationship as well as took on another of Shakespeare's tragic heroines when she played Desi Brable in *O*, an adaptation of *Othello* set in Palmetto Grove Academy, a South Carolina prep school. It is an interesting coincidence that the name of the updated Desdemona character is a near-anagram of the word "desirable," since Desi represents fulfillment of desire within the film.

She is popular and beautiful, the daughter of the dean of the school, and girlfriend to Odin “O” James, Palmetto Grove's star basketball player. Other than Odin himself, Desi seems to be the only character within the film willing to question socially constructed norms regarding race, as in a scene near the film's beginning when, after Odin asks her to “play black buck got loose in the big house” while the two are in bed, they have a conversation regarding who is and is not allowed to use the word “nigger” (*O*). While Odin accepts his ability to employ racial slurs as innate to his condition as a black man, Desi sees this as problematic, and seeks to understand O's standpoint by having a conversation with him. None of the film's other characters question socially constructed norms in this way. While these script choices were doubtless made by someone other than Stiles herself, her enacting them adds to her star-body's association with forward thinking and the questioning of social norms.

Stiles' Star Body Part Three: Academics

Stiles' final role requiring her to craft a modern interpretation of a classic Shakespearean heroine was as Ophelia in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), which transplants Shakespeare's power struggle from the castles of feudal Denmark to the steel skyscrapers of the Denmark Corporation in twenty-first century New York City³. As arguably the most well-known of the Shakespearean tragedies, *Hamlet* certainly has academic connotations. These connotations deepen when considering the involvement of Stiles specifically, as the film's release corresponds with her enrollment at Columbia University, where she eventually graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature in 2005. In the film, Stiles's Ophelia is doomed from the start, as the

³ Though *Hamlet* was released before *O*, it was filmed after it. *O* was originally scheduled for release in April 1999, when it was delayed and eventually dropped by its original producers, who were reluctant to release a film that contained a school shooting in the wake of the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, CO. The film was eventually picked up by *Lions Gate*, who released it in 2001.

first solo shot the audience sees of her is in front of a large waterfall. That immediately calls to mind Ophelia's eventual death by drowning. From that point on, most of Ophelia's scenes contain water of some form or another. One of them, in which Polonius brings her to Gertrude and Claudius to inform them of the concerns he has about her relationship with Hamlet (corresponding to Act 2 scene 2 of Shakespeare's play) even goes so far as to have Ophelia fantasize about drowning herself, as if to speed up what we as the audience know is inevitable (*Hamlet*). Because this continued theme is established at the same time Ophelia is established as an individual character with the first shot of her by herself onscreen, she is always already dead in the context of the film. Even Stiles' official fansite supports this reading, as its only comment about her involvement in the film is that she “dies quite beautifully” (“Biography”). Thus, even as Stiles is a modernized Ophelia who wears urban clothes and carries a messenger bag as she rides her bike through twenty-first century New York City, she is simultaneously a sort of “everyophelia,” going beyond her own performance of the character to instead represent what it is to embody that character, and, in so doing, reminding the audience that many others have played Ophelia before, and many more will likely follow after. In being associated with a performance that includes this kind of Postmodern metanarrative, Stiles's star-body developed a deeper signification of Academia.

While she has certainly broadened her repertoire in recent years to extend beyond the limits of teen films, Stiles' most recently-announced upcoming project - a filmic adaptation of Sylvia Plath's fictional autobiography *The Bell Jar* - builds on the aspects of her star-body that her earlier career helped establish. Stiles is reportedly playing the lead role of Esther Greenwood, Plath's fictional counterpart (*The Bell Jar*). According to her official fansite, Stiles herself co-optioned the film with indepent production company Plum Pictures, and will act as an executive

producer (“Biography”). If true, this action seems to suggest not only that Stiles's star-body as socially conscious academic feminist is a fairly accurate one, but also that it is in keeping with the way she wishes to be publicly perceived of her own volition and because of values she wishes to support; not just as a marketable image or persona that fits what sells well at any given time.

The Modesty Movement

Julia Stiles is no longer primarily considered a teen actress by virtue either of her own age or that of the target audience of her more recent films; moreover, the type of teen identity that I have thus far examined as represented by Stiles and her ilk seems to have faded out of fashion at least somewhat in recent years. In contrast, the most current ideological trend in teen identity formation directly reacts against to the type of teen identity marked by Stiles' star body (one that signifies third-wave, sex positive feminist politics): the so-called “new modesty movement” (Shalit 1999). The most vocal champions of this movement by far have been Wendy Shalit and Laura Sessions Stepp. Both have published books that have come to represent the tenets of the modesty movement and its subscribers, with Shalit writing both *A Return to Modesty: Rediscovering the Lost Virtue* (1999) and *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Claim It's Not Bad to Be Good* (2007) and Stepp writing *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both* (2007). I will focus on Shalit's work in my examination rather than Stepp's because, while Stepp's book focuses on the preexisting “hookup culture” to which the modesty movement reacts, Shalit's work actually defines and explores the historical and sociopolitical roots of the modesty movement itself.

First, the movement markets itself as a reactionary one. Shalit makes this clear in the titles of both of her books. By addressing a perceived need to “return to modesty” and

“rediscover” it, Shalit implies that it was lost through some sort of wayward shift in mores, and that a cultural change is necessary to remedy this shift. She repeats that reactionary theme and focuses it on a particular part of contemporary culture she finds morally reprehensible in *Girls Gone Mild*. In order to understand the cultural commentary within that book's title (or, indeed, to write/perform it as Shalit did), one would have to have at least a passing familiarity with the *Girls Gone Wild* video series, directed and marketed by Joseph R. Francis and boasting over seventy titles, most of them multivolume. by Vanessa Grigoriadis describes Francis and his company as follows in her article “Wild Thing: Inside the Girls Gone Wild empire” :

Joe Francis has a gift. He can make more than half the girls he meets take their shirt off. He can make half of those girls take their panties off, too. He can make a straight-A student, prom queen, wife- and mother-to-be go outside a club with him, lift her skirt and show him the goods. All it takes, Francis has found, is a camcorder and one magic line: "Do any of you girls want a T-shirt?" The shirt is nice enough, a little white cotton tank with the logo of Francis' company stenciled on the front in red: girls gone wild. It's a brand that's become ubiquitous thanks to the late-night TV commercials selling the video series that Francis dreamed up. His company doesn't release sales figures, but it's been estimated that it sells 2 million tapes a year -- 2 million hour-long looks at naked college girls set to bad club music, costing anywhere from \$9.99, to \$29.99 for the wilder "uncut" versions (Grigoriadis).

Though he has been investigated by the Federal Trade Commission no less than six times since 2000 for “unfair and deceptive acts or practices and consumer redress,” Francis himself frames his seemingly exploitative business venture in terms of empowerment and freedom of choice,

saying that “the girls don't need much convincing to do their part” and “To a lot of young women, it's titillating to break the taboo and all the more thrilling to think that millions of people might see them doing it” (Grigoriadas).

It is this association of unlimited sex with empowerment that seems to concern Shalit and Stepp. Indeed, Shalit questions this association as it exists specifically within the *Girls Gone Wild* video series in the preface to *Girls Gone Mild*. First, she asks, “What does liberation mean to you”? (Shalit 2007 xi). Then, she addresses the problem of “our *Girls Gone Wild* culture” in a discussion of Debbie,

who experiences regret after doing a 'scene' for a *Girls Gone Wild* video. Her regret was not that the producer, Joe Francis, has made millions by using girls like her, while all she got for disrobing was a t-shirt. Rather, Debbie was upset about 'not doing it right' when, for some reason beyond her grasp, she couldn't get excited during the proceedings. (Shalit 2007 xii)

Shalit concludes that the ultimate problem is that “Debbie is publicly sexual while remaining utterly alienated from her own sexuality” (Shalit 2007 xii). In this excerpt, Shalit seems to place the blame for this negative trend in female teen sexuality on “culture,” which, as a culprit, is nebulous at best. Upon further examination of the passage, it appears that Shalit also sees a problem with the girls' perceptions of appropriate sexual response/behavior (as made evident by the disbelief with which she imbues the section about Debbie's disappointment with herself for being unable to “get excited during the proceedings”), as well as with the marketing of these skewed perceptions, which serves to fill the pockets, not of the girls themselves, supposedly empowered and enacting their freedom of choice, but of Joe Francis and his staff—all of whom are male and required to sign a contract stating they will remain single as long as they are under

his employment ([Gregoriadas](#)). Thus, the problem is that what is marketed as a liberating practice that allows girls to express their sexuality on their own terms actually functions as reinscribing a traditional mindset of patriarchal sexual control. In *Girls Gone Mild*, Shalit states that it is her aim to:

search for an alternative to our Girls Gone Wild culture. It's about finding a way to acknowledge sexuality without having to share it with strangers. It's about rediscovering our capacity for innocence, for wonder, and for being touched profoundly by others. My goal is not to attack those who want to be 'wild,' but rather to expand the range of options for young people, who I believe are suffering because of the limited choices available to them. (Shalit 2007 xii)

As a part of her desire to “expand the range of options for young people,” Shalit launched her website, ModestyZone.net, in 1996. ModestyZone claims that it is “for good girls in hiding everywhere,” and operates in conjunction with Modestly Yours, “a group blog by women who value modesty in its various forms” ([ModestyZone](#)).

While Shalit certainly discusses a culture different from the one encouraged by Francis and his empire in her book, it is worth noting that the culture she encourages bears certain similarities to the one against which she claims to be reacting. First, Shalit must agree with Francis's assertion that the notion of social rebellion is inherently attractive to girls in their teens and early twenties, as both her webspaces frame modesty as the newest form of social rebellion through both their content and their layout. For example, one of ModestyZone's monthly features is the “Rebel of the Month.” In keeping with Shalit's characterization of modesty as being in direct opposition to the rebellion that typifies popular sexualized culture, the site claims that its rebels “make [1950s icon of teen rebellion] James Dean look like a chipmunk” ([ModestyZone](#)).

The association of modesty and rebellion continues with an added dimension on Modestly Yours, where an animated sidebar contains an advertisement selling copies of *Girls Gone Mild*. In the first frame of the ad, the book's title is written in capital letters in shades of neon pink and green, with the final word backed by a flashing yellow shape that looks as if it is supposed to resemble an explosion. In the second frame, a picture of a copy of the book sits below neon pink, flashing type that tells the site's viewers to "Be daring. Keep your shirt on" (Modestly Yours). The colors, mock-exploding graphic, and text instructing the site's visitors to "be daring" in opposition to a culture that tells them they must take off their shirts in order to fit in and/or be thought desirable are obviously meant to present the modesty movement as avant-garde. Since the medium through which this message is being conveyed is advertisement, the notion of modesty becomes a commodity. Indeed, the online modesty movement relies upon commodity for its impact, with Shalit's webpages offering endorsements of and links to a number of websites that sell modest clothing, accessories, and swimwear. A few of the young entrepreneurs of these online businesses, such as Christa Taylor and Mary-Margaret Helma, have also been profiled as "Rebels of the Month" (ModestyZone)⁴. This specific commercialization of alternative femininity seems necessary in a capitalist society, because these young women and others like them are using their personal talents and resources to fill what they see as a void left by the larger fashion establishment. Much more disturbing, however, are the products approved by Shalit in the ModestyZone store. These products are not filling a perceived cultural need like the ones designed and marketed by modesty-minded clothiers, but instead, seem to serve as a forum

⁴ Christa and Mary-Margaret's clothing and designs can be found at www.christa-taylor.com and www.luthientinuviel.com/custom_modest_clothing.htm, respectively, while their "Rebel of the Month" profiles are at www.modestyzone.net/rebels/taylor.htm and www.modestyzone.net/rebels/helma.htm. Note that Mary-Margaret's online handle, "luthientinuviel" is a reference to JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, therefore, her desire to promote modesty could possibly have religious roots.

for Shalit (and her designers?) to comment on the evils of contemporary culture and to enforce her viewpoint with the help of antiquated gender stereotypes. For example, the website's unofficial mascot appears to be a cartoon cow named Bessy, who appears on several of the items for sale in the ModestyZone store. The fact that the modesty movement is a culturally reactionary one is made evident yet again by t-shirt designs featuring a blushing Bessy bending over to place her hands over the place where her udders would be, were they visible. Above her, a caption reads, “got modesty?” (ModestyZone). This design combines a fairly harmless cultural signifier with one that is much less so. First, the lowercase lettering and design of the caption is obviously meant to recall the popular “got milk?” campaign of the mid- to late 1990s. The harmful cultural signifier appears when the metaphor of milk and cows is applied to the site's target audience of young girls to arrive at the antiquated pro-virginity maxim “Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?” When read this way, the site's products do not empower young women to rebel modestly, but instead, they reinforce norms of patriarchal sexual control while making these young women think they are going against the status quo. Indeed, many women who self-identify as third wave feminists see the proponents of the Modesty Movement as “feminists who aren't,” as Julie Craig labels them in her article “I Can't Believe It's Not Feminism!” (Craig 116). In it, Craig criticizes Shalit and her supporters for benefiting from the gains hard won by their feminist foremothers while still encouraging a life lived under patriarchal control -- “a have-my-cake-and-eat-it-too whine that few realistic feminists have the time or patience to indulge” (Craig 124).

With both parties claiming female empowerment as their goal and saying that the other camp is operating under delusions of false control, with whom should their shared target audience (and society at large) agree? It is possible that that is not the right question at all.

Consider, for example, Randall Patterson's article "Students of Virginity," in which he interviews Janie Fredell, a Harvard University senior and a member of the student virginity club True Love Revolution (TLR). In the article, Fredell (who has garnered no shortage of praise from the contributors at Modestly Yours for her openness about her commitment to virginity) explains that she decided to join TLR after one of their socials was ridiculed in *The Harvard Crimson*, Harvard's student newspaper. Fredell says she was motivated to respond with an editorial because she believes "it takes a strong woman to be a virgin" (Patterson). After that editorial was published in *The Crimson*, Fredell gained notoriety on campus, which soon spread across the country as the story got picked up by other media sources, ultimately culminating in the event Patterson recounts as the conclusion to his article: a debate between Fredell and Lena Chen, a fellow Harvard student who is also a campus sex blogger (Patterson). According to Patterson, both Fredell and Chen are poised and articulate in the debate itself. Each espouses the desire for female empowerment, and though they differ in the ways they think that empowerment should be arrived upon, the women agree to respectfully disagree (Patterson). Given that both women seem to have acted with maturity and intelligence during the debate, Patterson's respective descriptions of them are disturbing. He meets the women for lunch when he conducts their interviews, and describes Chen as "a small Asian woman in a miniskirt and stilettos who ate every crumb of everything, including a ginger cake with cream-cheese frosting and raspberry compote," while Fredell, "when the dessert menu came, paused at the prospect of a 'chocolate explosion,' said, 'I may as well — I mean, carpe diem, right?' And then reconsidered — she really wasn't that hungry" (Patterson). Here, Patterson delivers descriptions of the women's eating habits with an implied nod to their respective sexual attitudes: Chen, liberated sex blogger, eats "every crumb of everything" including a dessert, while Fredell, self-flagellating virgin,

denies herself the dessert she really wants, which interestingly contains the word “explosion” in its name, no doubt causing the reader to connect this to the other kind of “explosion” Fredell regularly denies herself. Despite the fact that both women cite a common goal and treat one another with respect, Patterson's tongue-in-cheek, and I would argue, patronizing, conclusion insists on leaving a binarily-opposed image of them, thereby forcing his readers to choose to side with either the madonna or the whore and leaving them no middle ground for mutual respect. It is this attitude that causes me to question the root of the current divide between two camps of young feminists. Perhaps the problem is not that it is impossible for them to get along. Perhaps the problem is that it is of the best interests of the patriarchal media machine to keep one side from ever calmly relating to the other.

CHAPTER THREE

HOMEBOYS AND HATE-FUCKS: THE MALE HOMOSOCIAL, SEX, AND VIOLENCE IN
O AND *OTHELLO*Introduction

According to statistics collected by the United States Department of Justice in 2001, “at least 80 percent of all sexual assault is committed by an acquaintance of the victim.” While these crimes carry the same legal penalties as would an assault or rape committed by a stranger, many survivors of such crimes are reluctant to consider them serious sexual crimes because their assailant was previously known to them. While these relationships are often cited as grounds for complicated physical or emotional boundaries or rules, the official definition of acquaintance rape given by the Department of Justice is “sexual contact without consent,” meaning that the label also applies to situations in which consent is given, but subsequently withdrawn. This distinction gave rise to the “No Means No” campaign frequently employed in high schools and colleges, as the majority of acquaintance rape victims fall within those age groups (Department of Justice, 2001).

Like the aforementioned statistics, the film *O*, directed by Tim Blake Nelson and marketed as a “controversial modern-day version of Shakespeare's classic, *Othello*,” was released in 2001 (Lions Gate Films). In this chapter, I will question two of the labels under which the film was marketed: “modern-day” and “controversial.” With regard to the first, I will argue that the film actually reinforces the Renaissance-era notion of separate social spheres hierarchically divided by gender, most notably through its use of divisive camera shots and repeated circular and spherical images. As for the second, while I do not deny the social controversy caused by the film's content, I see a distinct discrepancy within the examination of

the film, both critical and scholarly, that led to its being regarded as controversial. Though critics and scholars paid much attention to the fact that the film frankly and graphically depicted school violence, they were far less interested in a scene in which the Othello character, high school basketball star Odin “O” James, acquaintance-rapes the Desdemona character, Desi Brable.

Gender Separation and Hierarchy

While the terminology regarding the concept of the gendered division of society into two “separate spheres” is chiefly thought to have originated in the Victorian period (Sedgwick 20), it is undeniable that this social separation was enforced during the European Renaissance as well, whether or not it was called by that name. Typically, women were confined to the domestic sphere, while men occupied the world of business and industry outside the home. Indeed, period society enforced this separation early for Renaissance-era boys—around six or seven years of age—at which point they were “breeched,” or allowed to wear pants, and then subsequently taken to join a trade or go into the King’s service, depending upon their social class. Prior to their breeching, boys of the era dressed in gowns much like the ones worn by their female contemporaries. Wearing pants thus became the first outward symbol of boys’ transition from childhood toward manhood, and in conjunction, their movement (both physically and metaphorically) from the female-dominated domestic sphere to the male-dominated professional one (Laqueur 90). In *Othello*, Shakespeare centers male social action within the military, while the female action (performed primarily by Desdemona and Emilia) takes place in and around Othello and Desdemona’s home. In *O*, the action is transferred to Palmetto Grove Preparatory, an upper-class South Carolina high school. While the school itself is coeducational, the majority of the film’s action occurs within the context of the school’s boys’ basketball team, of which Odin “O” James is the star player. Odin has everything that his teammate and friend, Hugo,

wants: acceptance, popularity, the school dean's beautiful daughter, Desi Brable, who, along with the things I have just mentioned, is also identified as a goal to be achieved in the world of the film.

The structure of *Othello* is divided along gender lines, with the majority of the play's action up until act 4, scene 2 occurring either with the men performing military operations or with the women talking in Desdemona and Othello's home. Much like the military in *Othello*, the Palmetto Grove basketball team functions as a simultaneously exclusive and inclusive social space. The majority of the team's players maintain a tight community. They are each other's "boys," as Hugo and O say repeatedly (*O*). They have uniforms and nicknames that denote their insider status and are considered "the best [the school] has to offer" by their peers (*O*). These signals not only serve to keep the players in their social group, but also serve to keep others out. One of the ways that the film establishes and maintains the simultaneous exclusion and inclusion from which its gender hierarchy stems is through the use of camera shots and angles to both trouble O's position within the team and to divide the male characters from the female ones. At the film's beginning, tracking shots of one hawk in the midst of many doves sustain the play's animal imagery by recalling the fact that much of Othello's othering in the world of the play takes place through bestial comparisons. Iago calls him a "black ram," and "a Barbary horse" in the first scene, and more animal comparisons follow (1.1.94 and 122). The film complicates this othering, however, through the monologue that accompanies the shots of the birds. While anyone with knowledge of the play would assume the hawk represents O, because of the aforementioned animal references and their racial implications, it is Hugo (the Iago character) who desires to be set apart as the hawk in the opening monologue: "I want to soar above everything and everyone," he declares (*O*). Hugo thinks that O occupies this exclusive position, and sees the basketball

team as one way to accomplish that position for himself. Indeed, the film's first action shots are of the team in play, establishing it (specifically, and the male sphere more generally) as the film's most important social organizing principle. O does seem to be set apart because of his position on the team, as when Coach Duke (who is also Hugo's father) presents him with that year's Most Valuable Player award, saying that Odin “is like a son” to him (*O*). The team is the first social organizing principle in which O is distinguished and Hugo is othered, and I would argue, the one that ultimately carries the most importance to Hugo due to his intense desire to feel loved by his father. He never overtly expresses this desire either to himself or to any of the other characters in the film, however. Instead, he manifestly orchestrates his plan to usurp O's position by attacking another facet of his social persona: his position as Desi Brable's boyfriend.

Immediately following the tracking shots of the birds that occur during Hugo's monologue, there are quick, unfocused shots of the crowd watching the game. Women are evident, but the camera does not focus on a woman either clearly or for a substantial amount of time until the first shot of Desi, in which she is shown with her hand on Odin's arm. In this shot, she acquires agency separate from the other female spectators, although only through her connection to Odin. In addition to establishing female agency as conditional upon male agency in the film, the early placement of these shots in the film as a whole establishes the importance of O and Desi's romantic relationship within Palmetto Grove's social structure.

The film uses gender separation not only to divide its men from its women, but seemingly also to comment on appropriate forms of femininity, chiefly through its depiction of the Emilia character, Emily. In *Othello*, Emilia is sexually frank and observant as she tells the previously sheltered Desdemona that “[men] are all but stomachs and [women] all but food; / To eat us hungerly, and when they are full, / They belch us” (3.4.100-102). In the next act, Emilia shows

an awareness of her own sexuality and its accompanying power when she asks, “for the whole world,...why, who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? / I should venture purgatory for't” (4.3.74-5). Later in the same scene, after Desdemona doubts that there are women who would act in such a way, Emilia seems to foreshadow the desire for gender equality found in the arguments of many second wave feminists when she questions a double standard governing the socially appropriate actions of men and women:

Let husbands know

Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,

And have their palates both for sweet and sour,

As husbands have. What is it that they do

When they change us for others? Is it sport?

I think it is: and doth affection breed it?

I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?

It is so too: and have not we affections,

Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?

Then let them use us well: else let them know,

The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.91-101).

In this speech, Emilia acknowledges that the influence of the male sphere is a strong and negative one in two ways. First, it is “affection⁵,” or habit (in any case, learned, or “affected” behavior) that causes men to exercise control over their wives. This notion is at odds with Renaissance views of men as quick-tempered due to their being governed by warm humors in

opposition to their colder female counterparts, and instead fits in with twentieth century psychological studies that show that people who are exposed to abusive attitudes and behaviors for prolonged periods of time, especially children who are physically or emotionally abused, are much more likely to become abusers themselves. Second, she addresses the double standard of acceptable/unacceptable action. Emilia seems to imply that if women do wrong, it is only because they are imitating the actions of men, and the wrong or “ill” is wrong not because of the nature of the act itself, but because a woman performs it rather than a man.

While Shakespeare's Emilia arguably acts as one of his most protofeminist characters because of her candid observations regarding the social construction of gender relations, *O*'s Emily is barely a presence in the film until her final scene, when she confronts Hugo about his plot, and he shoots her. In her previous scenes, she either willingly sublimates herself to Hugo, as in a sex scene I will discuss in more depth later, or is seen in conjunction with Desi as roommate or friend, never the focus of a scene herself. For example, when *O* comes to visit Desi before a game, saying that he cannot “play without seeing [his] good luck charm,” and presents her with the scarf around which Hugo's plot takes form, *O* also presents Emily with a gift: a CD that she immediately proceeds to play using a portable CD player. While the fact that he gives her a gift as well could be used to prove her worth as an individual character in the film, the subsequent action of the scene negates that argument. After putting the CD in the player and connecting a pair of headphones, Emily covers her entire body with her comforter to avoid seeing (and being seen by) *O* and Desi, who are kissing intensely on Desi's bed just few feet away. In effect, she disappears even as she is in the same room.

⁵ A double meaning could be at work here. In addition to referring to affected behavior, “affection” also implies passion or strong emotion (OED). When taken together, both meanings imply that male abuse of women is motivated by multiple, simultaneously occurring forces, and not just biological/humoral ones.

Additionally, when the two women are seen together, it is impossible not to notice the visual contrast between Rain Phoenix (Emily) and Julia Stiles (Desi). While Stiles is tall, blonde, and lithe, Phoenix is shorter and darker, with broader facial features. This physical contrast mirrors a stage convention that sought to differentiate easily between the two women in Shakespeare's play according to Carol C. Rutter, who writes about their relationship in a chapter of her book *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage* (Rutter 148). In the chapter “Remembering Emilia: Gossiping Hussies, Revolting Housewives,” Rutter analyzes a particular performance of the play (Trevor Nunn's 1989 stage version) through the lens of Emilia and Desdemona's “gossip,” language that is confined to the domestic female sphere, and, as such, gendered feminine. Rutter argues that Emilia is a convincing rhetorician in her own right by citing the speech from act 4, scene 3 that I discussed previously. What prevents Emilia's intelligent rhetoric from being heard and derailing Iago's plot, Rutter claims, is the fact that her language is unacceptable outside of the female sphere. The gendered separation of the play allows for its treachery and deceit to occur (Rutter 173-7).

Carol Thomas Neely also discusses Emilia's role in the play in her article, “Men and Women in *Othello*,” in which she posits that Emilia best represents what she argues is the play's main theme: the conflict between men and women (Neely 80). By replacing Emilia the sharp-tongued, self-aware housewife with Emily the soft-spoken roommate, the film suggests that only passive femininity is viable, but even that is debatable, as both women die at the end of both the play and the film. This appears to suggest that it is not their femininity that dooms them, but their desire to engage with members of the male social sphere.

Other scenes make it clear that, in the universe of the film, romantic relationships of a sexual nature are not a vehicle to happiness or emotional fulfillment and should be discouraged.

For example, in a scene in which Desi's father, Dean Brable confronts Desi and O about rumors regarding their sexual relationship, he is continually shown between them, either framed in the middle of the shot or in a shot/reverse shot that alternates between he and O and he and Desi. He is operating as a physical block to their heterosexual union. While it could possibly be argued that he is doing this to protect his daughter from someone he sees as a threat and not because of an anti-sexual statement, that too suggests gender hierarchy and ownership. Additionally, we cannot ignore the location of the film. Because Odin is the only black man in a South Carolina school, it is possible to take Dean Brable's interference not only as discouraging a heterosexual relationship, but as discouraging an interracial one as well/instead, because of the typical cultural association of fear of miscegenation with the American South.

Circles and Spheres

The film further intensifies the importance of separate gendered social groups or spheres through its extensive use of circular and spherical images, the first of which is the main title itself: a white "O" on a solid black background. The image of white on black provides a contrast that connects it to the film's dominant theme of the inclusivity/exclusivity binary. The title is shown without any accompanying sound, which signifies its importance as a symbol within the framework of the film; and, in a sense, instructs the audience to focus on the image without the added distraction of music or dialogue. Other circular and spherical images which appear throughout the film and enforce the importance of strictly defined social structures include the circles painted on the basketball court, as well as the spherical basketball, both of which represent the confining social structure of the basketball team. Indeed, the film itself is circular in structure, as it opens and closes with the same monologue in which Hugo discusses his desire to "soar above everything and everyone" (O). Though these spheres and circles are repeated

throughout the film, I would argue that the circular image most important to the film's contemporary reinscription of the separate spheres ideology is that of the circular mirror hanging above the hotel bed where O and Desi have sex.

After Odin confronts Desi because Hugo suggests she is cheating on him with school womanizer Michael Casio, the two of them have an argument which eventually leads to Desi inviting Odin to a hotel to have sex with her in order to solidify their relationship. Upon their arrival at the hotel, she says to him, “I want you to do what you want with me. I want you to have me however you want. I give myself to you the way you want me. Don't hold back” (O). At first, Desi occupies the dominant sexual position. Just before she can climax, however, Odin rolls them both over so he is on top. When they roll over, he positions himself in front of a circular mirror. As he looks into the mirror, the scene changes to a series of quick flashbacks, all of Desi and Casio, until it changes once again, and O's reflection morphs into Casio's. At this point, he locks eyes with Casio, and then proceeds to get progressively rougher until Desi screams repeatedly, a look of obvious pain on her face, and asks him to stop. He does not, and once he orgasms, the scene is over, with the last visual being of Desi's stunned face, her mouth forming an “o” of pain and surprise and her eyes wide, as if struggling for breath. This circle complicates my earlier reading of the film's circles and spheres as mere representations of the separate spheres ideology because of all of its associations. Even as Desi's facial expression at the end of the scene represents pain, it evokes thought of orgasm, another kind of circle due to its positioning as completion of the sexual act, which in turn evokes the fairly circular nature of the vagina. With its many layers of meaning, this circle blurs the line between the male and female social spheres. It is still inclusive, as it binds Desi and O together in ways that are both physically and emotionally painful, but it is not exclusive. Desi's face at the end of the sex scene serves to

reinforce the effects of the violence from which it resulted; to remind the film's audience that they have seen and experienced an act that should be private, and yet they were not excluded.

This scene combines the notion of separate spheres with hierarchized gender roles to violent results. First, Desi clearly places herself on the lesser-valued side of the gender binary by using language that connotes ownership and submission to refer to their sexual experience. Second, Odin affirms his own privileged position in this sexual hierarchy by asserting his power in related physical and mental ways: he assumes the dominant position (both physically and emotionally) and, in so doing, denies Desi the control she was previously exercising over her orgasm. In addition, the circular mirror (a symbol of exclusion/inclusion, as are the films other circles and spheres) along with other parts of the scene, makes it clear that the focus is not on the heterosexual union of O and Desi, but instead, on a power-fueled homosocial connection between the men of the film in which women serve as physical/emotional intermediaries. First, since Odin orgasms only after locking eyes with the image of Casio in the mirror, he essentially has sex not only with Desi, but also with Casio. Because Odin causes Desi pain while he intends to harm Casio, Desi herself serves only as an intermediary in what is, for all intents and purposes, a homoerotic act motivated by the desire to exert power.

Finally, it is important to note that O and Desi's violent sex act occurs immediately after an analogous, albeit less graphic, scene between Hugo and Emily in which, after physically laying her down on his bunk bed, he climbs on top of her and the couple kisses as the stolen scarf covers Emily's mouth. This visual is obviously a reference to the murder of Desi that will occur in the film's final act, just as the look on Desi's face prefigures the frozen expression of a victim of strangulation. The hinted violence is intensified, however, by the language that Hugo and Emily use in the preceding moments. First, when trying to convince Emily that stealing the scarf

is “just a prank” and they are only “borrowing” it, Hugo distracts Emily by saying he'd “like to borrow” her as well (O). His use of the word “borrow” reduces her to an object that he can use to suit his purposes whenever he can obtain it and return when he has finished, thereby creating another, more complicated circle within the framework of the film. Additionally, the fact that Emily refers to Hugo's actions as “romance,” saying that she would have stolen something sooner had she known what would result, is disturbing. This conflation of romantic love with violence mirrors the situations of many victims of acquaintance-rape. Emily grossly misinterprets Hugo's motives. The fact that this scene transitions immediately into the O/Desi acquaintance rape further proves that Emily is just a mechanism by which Hugo can obtain the scarf, and he is aroused not by her presence, but by the fact that, with possession of the scarf, he now holds power similar to the power he associates with O. Just as Cassio is the focus of O's rape of Desi, O is the focus of Hugo's sexual dominance of Emily. The women in these scenes do not serve as partners in eventual heterosexual consummation, as they may first appear to. Instead, they are passive objects through which an ultimately homosocial desire can be enacted.

Women as Currency in a Male Homosocial Environment: Criticism and History

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick first established the notion of women as the conduit through which a male/male relationship is maintained in her book *Between Men : English Literature and Homosocial Desire*. There, Sedgwick posits that “the emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality... [cannot] be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole” (Sedgwick 1). Sedgwick acknowledges that the term “homosocial” typically refers to platonic activities or relationships between those of the same sex, and that to frame the term as “potentially erotic is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual” (Sedgwick 1).

It is this sexual fear, she says, that motivates men to channel their homosocial desire through women.

When this fear is expressed by men who desire power in a heteronormative society, as Hugo and O do in their respective sex scenes, the women that represent that heteronormative power become commodified in to a sort of currency that can be traded and that brings power to whomever possesses it at any given time, much like the handkerchief in *Othello* or the scarf in *O*. Both Tina Mohler and Karen Newman have noticed this trend toward using women as currency of power within ultimately homosocial relationships in other Shakespearean plays. In her article “‘What is thy body but a swallowing grave?’ : Desire Underground in *Titus Andronicus*,” Mohler hypothesizes that “the metaphorical rape of men is dependent on the literal rape of women” in *Titus Andronicus*. She says that Chiron and Demetrius's rape of Lavinia is in fact a rape of Bassianus, and that by brutally physically and sexually assualting her, they are actually harming Bassianus, who is trapped nearby in a large pit in the ground that Mohler suggests operates as a metaphorical vagina or womb (Mohler 24-5). Therefore, though Lavina is being physically raped, Chiron and Demetrius are actually exerting power over Bassianus, and because of his emasculated position, ultimately raping him, much like O's raping of Desi ultimately serves as an expression of the power he desires over Casio.

Karen Newman extends the theory of woman as homosocial intermediary to that of woman as currency within a male homosocial world in her article “Portia's Ring: Unruly Women and Structures of Exchange in the Merchant of Venice.” In it, Newman argues that Portia herself is a commodity to be exchanged between the play's men, as well as the fact that she wants to appear to adhere to her lower social station by giving Bassanio a ring (Newman 20). As in Judeo-Christian tradition, the circular ring represents completeness and the joining of two people in

marriage, where they will then be considered “one flesh” by God, as in Genesis 2:24. This oneness takes away each member of the relationship's individual identities, exchanging them for one combined identity. Since the marriage ceremony also typically involves the wife taking the husband's name as an outward symbol of their new mutual existence, it is safe to assume that it is the woman's individual identity that is absorbed by the man. Odin reenacts this identity absorption in *O* when he places a green rubber band on Desi's finger, lamenting that they cannot have “the real thing” yet but saying that it will be satisfying to “pretend” until they can (*O*). In giving her a circle that represents not only marriage and all of its cultural associations, but also his own identity within their world—the name his peers have given him is a circle, after all—*O* expresses a desire to control Desi and make her his in the eyes of others.

The Problem of Contemporary Response to the Film

While the sexual fear discussed by Sedgwick, Mohler, and Newman does not seem misplaced in a modernization whose backdrop is the high school sports team (an environment in which one's individual worth and agency is inextricably bound with that of the team), it is its combination with violence towards women, as well as the fact that that violence seems to have gone mostly overlooked by contemporary scholars and film critics alike, that makes the film's contemporary cultural position a precarious one. The vast majority of reviews and scholarly critiques of the film focus on its portrayal of race and/or school violence, with all that I could find mentioning school violence in general, and most mentioning the Columbine High School shootings in particular. These shootings occurred on April 20, 1999, in the same month that *O* was originally scheduled for release by Miramax, which subsequently dropped the film. It was not released until two years later, after it was picked up by Lions Gate Films. It can be assumed that the people behind the film's release were concerned that seeing a shooting onscreen so soon

after a similar national tragedy would be traumatizing to viewers. Most scholarly articles on the film seem to agree with this view. In his article “Othello: A Hawk Among Birds,” Steve Criniti analyzes the ways in which Nelson's film stays true to and departs from the Shakespearean text, citing this issue as an important one to critics of the film, many of whom “have noted that Nelson and [writer Brad] Kaaya are too true to the play [in terms of plot, not language] to make the film work in this age and medium” (Criniti 115). Criniti focuses specifically on the film's one repeated appropriation of the play's animal imagery: the depictions of a single hawk within a group of seemingly lazy, disaffected doves to represent how unlike his Palmetto Grove classmates Odin is. Though the doves certainly represent Palmetto Grove's entire student body, Criniti narrows his focus to Hugo and Casio when discussing Odin's relationships and the power struggles therein. His one prolonged mention of the O/Desi relationship occurs in a paragraph that barely skims over their violent sexual encounter, in which he says O “preys on Desi” (Criniti 119). While this word choice both connotes violence as well as fits in with the overarching subject of his article, its animalistic associations seem to disregard human responsibility for action and do not address rape in clearly defined language.

Gregory M. Colon Semenza provides the same mix of cultural criticism and analysis of male-gendered violence in greater depth in his article “Shakespeare after Columbine: Teen Violence in Tim Blake Nelson's *O*.” The article chiefly acts as a defense of Nelson's choices to show school violence frankly without commenting on it directly. Semenza remarks particularly on the filmmakers' choice to end the film with “the stock imagery and symbolism of an increasingly familiar American scene” including “aftermath coverage” with its “chaotic whirl of sirens and flashing camera bulbs” and, most important to my discussion of the film, “the seemingly indifferent juvenile offender who is escorted slowly to the back of a patrol car”

(Semenza 100). While I agree with Semenza's reading that, by ending the film this way, Nelson “transfers to film...the characteristic indeterminacy of the Shakespearean play text and makes a case for its social functionality” (Semenza 101), I would argue that the repetition in this scene of Hugo's voiceover monologue from the film's beginning in which he claims that “one day, everybody's gonna pay attention to [him]” doesn't render him indifferent but instead--like Shakespeare's Iago refusing to “speak word” after the violence of the play's final act (5.2.310)--shows that Hugo is exercising control over his surroundings as best he can, just as he has throughout. He has not changed at all.

Additionally, while I think that Semenza is correct in his defense of the film's violence as being “neither gratuitous nor sensational” but rather “haunting and particularly relevant,” the parts of the film that he covers in his article make it seem as if only violence committed by men against men is “haunting” and “relevant,” and that violence against women is unremarkable. Though the subtitle of his article is “*Teen* violence in Tim Blake Nelson's “O” (emphasis mine),” suggesting that violence committed by or against teenagers is the unifying theme of his discussion of the film, Semenza spends the majority of the article's twenty pages discussing Hugo and O and their roles in the school shooting, and only a paragraph on the depiction of acquaintance rape. Even though he clarifies that O “abuses Desi both verbally and physically” (Semenza 114), he does not hold Odin responsible for his actions in the scene. Instead, Semenza writes, “Hugo has infected his mind” (Semenza 114). While it is true that Hugo seeks to control Odin just as Iago does Othello, that should not and does not excuse the fact that all of these men turn to violence to exercise the control they feel they have lost over the one person whom it is socially acceptable for them to control: a woman. In a similarly evasive rhetorical move, Semenza uses reviewer Amy Taubin's terminology (“hate-fuck”) to refer to “what may be the

film's most disturbing and controversial scene” (Semenza 114), but comments in a note at the article's end that it is used “instead of 'date rape' [what I am terming acquaintance rape] or 'rape'” because it is “a slang term for vicious sex between consenting parties,” and that “the terminology is a problem in all three cases [because while] 'hate-fuck ignores the fact that Desi eventually pleads Odin to 'stop,' 'date rape and 'rape' ignore the fact that the sex is consensual until the very last moment” (Semenza 121). As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the U.S. Department of Justice defines rape as “sexual contact without consent,” rendering it irrelevant whether or not consent was given at any point. As long as consent is withdrawn, the situation constitutes a rape. Semenza's reluctance to use Taubin's language--which, while it does not label the scene a rape, is certainly more acceptable than the lack of comment made by other film critics because it does acknowledge the violence of the sex act--mirrors recent court decisions to not use the word “rape” in rape trials due to the possibility of it offending jury members (Mabin 2007).

After this insensitive and incomplete reading, Semenza attempts to cover his previous oversights regarding the film's treatment of gender by claiming that the film actually values Desi as a character more than either O or Hugo because “the first and last words one actually hears in *O* are Desdemona's” due to the fact that the film opens and closes with her aria from Verdi's opera *Otello* (Semenza 117). Though the inclusion of the aria does mean that the film opens and closes with Desdemona's words, I would argue that the way in which those words are conveyed actually silences Desdemona rather than making her a more vocal character within the universe of the film. Because the aria is played in its original Italian, it is unlikely to be understood by the majority film's target audience (American teenagers). Because of this language barrier as well as the cultural associations opera entails--propriety, higher class, a certain coldness--making

Desdemona speak in this way actually serves to silence her in terms of the film's attempt at modernization.

If the film's delayed release (and the fact that that delay has been a focus of both scholarly and critical coverage of the film) suggests concern about audience reaction, then the language employed by reviewers of the film makes this concern a certainty. A number of the film's reviews mention its delayed release, and all of them describe the film with terms such as “modern retread” (Roger Ebert for the *Chicago Sun-Times*), “Shakespearean transferral” (Todd McCarthy for *Variety*), and “retelling with modern dialogue” (Mick LaSalle for the *San Francisco Chronicle*), deliberately placing the film as a new twist on an old tale. This apparent sensitivity to audience response and deliberate valuing of the contemporary time period and language seems to be at cross purposes with the lack of attention to the film's violent take on heterosexual sex. While reviewers are required to justify MPAA ratings and typically list warnings about any adult content at the review's end, the majority of them just list “sex” or “sexuality” in that capacity, with Ebert including the slightly more accurate tag “strong sexuality” and McCarthy archly commenting that the film includes “what Shakespeare called 'the beast with two backs'.” I could not find a single review that warned viewers that the film contained a rape. The only review I could find that discussed issues of sex and gender in any sort of detail was in the *Village Voice* in which Amy Taubin describes the sex scene I have discussed between O and Desi as “a hate-fuck.” In it, Taubin claims that the film's “association with Columbine masks what is genuinely moving and transgressive about *O* : the interracial romance between Odin and Desi” (Taubin 2001). While her partial focus on the issue of gender deserves recognition, it is disappointing that the review tapers off after that, making the “interracial

romance” more culturally significant than the “hate-fuck,” and possibly even dangerously conflating the two (Taubin 2001).

Indeed, the filmmakers themselves seem to be encouraging that the film be viewed as reflective of current cultural attitudes; a new way to comprehend an old story—one that needs to be told in light of current events. The film itself remarks on the common view that Shakespearean texts in themselves are somehow incomprehensible and in need of updating in order to be understood by modern audiences as in one scene set in English class when Hugo is asked to respond to a scene in “Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*,” and quips in response, “I thought he wrote movies” (*O*). Additionally, the special edition DVD comes packaged with with a “classic silent *Othello*” (Lions Gate Films), which seemingly operates as a traditional companion to *O*'s easier-understood update. Tim Blake Nelson himself wrote an article for the *New York Times* entitled “There's a Price You Pay for Getting Too Real: Delay,” in which he tracks his involvement with the film, saying that, upon his first exposure to the script, he threw it away without even reading it because of what he saw as the film industry's habit of “ruining ...classic texts by teening them down” (Nelson, 2001). Nelson directly addresses both the film's violence and the possible problems of Shakespearean adaptation when he writes:

There were five shootings in the year or so leading up to photography on "O," and the names of the schools' towns had become shorthand for what seemed an epidemic of teenage violence: Jonesboro, Pearl, Eugene, Springfield, Edinboro. It suddenly occurred to me that a high school setting could be not only a credible environment for a Shakespearean tragedy but, at least if set in America, the most appropriate one as well. I had always felt, even before shooting the film, that audiences would approach "O" with the same suspicions I had when it was first

described to me, and that one of its challenges would be to win them over. With this in mind, our central aim involved, above all else, never pandering. The hope was that in re-imagining a very serious work without deviating from its plot (kids would kill each other in "O"; there would be no happy ending), we could make an R-rated movie for a younger audience with very adult sensibilities. (Nelson, 2001)

In acknowledging both a need to “win them over” and “never pander,” Nelson acknowledges that he expects the film's teen audience to have preconceptions about Shakespeare and what/how it is supposed to be (read: academic, high, disconnected from their everyday lives), but also implies a sort of respect for the intelligence of his audience that may have been lacking in what he calls “teened down” versions of classic literature (Nelson, 2001). Additionally, by referring to the play as “a very serious work” and saying that it was very important to “re-imagin[e] it without deviating from its plot,” Nelson implies that there is some sort of lesson within the plot with which it is imperative that twenty-first century American teenagers become familiar (Nelson, 2001). He does not discuss the film's sexual violence at all in the article, focusing instead on the school shooting and the fact that the envy that Hugo and the other Palmetto Grove students have for Odin stems from him being an “embodiment of hip-hop culture in their midst” (Nelson, 2001).

In examining the comments of the film's principal cast in interviews included in the DVD's special features, it is clear that they took Nelson's direction well. They not only emphasize the educational importance of the film for contemporary American teens, but also concentrate almost entirely on the male sphere in their discussion of the film. When asked to comment on Desi as a character, Julia Stiles remarks that “ she's so trusting...it's almost masochistic. It's what makes Othello treat her the way he does” (*O*) This statement is notable for

several reasons. Most importantly, her use of the word “masochistic” as well as the fact that she says Desi “makes Othello treat her the way he does” effectively makes Desi's death her own fault and absolves O of responsibility for his actions. Viewing Desdemona in this way reflects the comments of foundational Shakespearean scholar A.C. Bradley, who made similar observations regarding Desdemona in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*, first published in 1904. The fact that Stiles espouses this view marks her as someone educated in traditional Shakespearean scholarship. Additionally, Stiles calls the character of Odin by his original Shakespearean name. Taken together, those two parts of her character description seem to say that Shakespearean stories and the early modern norms from which they came are so ingrained within current Postmodern society that, even when those stories are modernized, it is impossible to distance them fully from the culture in which they came to be.

Like Stiles, Phifer and Hartnett discuss the modern relevance of the film and center their discussion around its male sphere. Phifer echoes Nelson's hopes that the film will “ provoke discussion and understanding,...bridge the gap between generations [and] get parents and kids conversating [*sic*] about violence” (*O*), thereby further emphasizing the film as an educational tool. In the rest of the interview, he comments on the film's portrayal of drug use and the position of star athletes in high schools. He does not comment on O's treatment of Desi. I understand that this could (and more than likely, does) relate to the questions asked by an off-camera interviewer, but ultimately, the cause for the omission is not as important as the fact that it was made.

Though Phifer's neglect of the female sphere in his discussion of the film is certainly disturbing, it is Hartnett who offers the greatest amount of commentary on the importance of the male sphere both to the film as a whole and to his character, Hugo, specifically. First, when

asked to describe his character, Hartnett says that Hugo is “overly emotional, wounded, smart, and manipulative,” and while there is “nothing wrong with that” because “[people] can relate to all those things,” it is “piling all of them up” that makes Hugo “dangerous” (*O*). These comments blame Hugo's manipulation of those around him not on Hugo himself, but on his environment. Hartnett furthers this argument when asked about the film's drug use, as he responds by saying, “Drugs, race, all the stuff that gets talked about in school, those are just cop-outs for the real issues...He's missing a lot of love [because] his dad is recognizing someone else as his son” (*O*). Not only does Hartnett seem to partially degrade the educational purpose of the film as interpreted by Nelson, but he also places the responsibility for the violence of the film squarely on the collective shoulders of its dysfunctional male power system by saying that Hugo's problems stem from the fact that his father claims O as his son instead of Hugo himself.

Conclusion

In her book *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee*, Celia R. Daileader describes and examines the historical prevalence and significance of a concept she terms “Othellophilia.” In questioning the furthering of what she calls the “Othello myth,” Daileader wonders why “in Anglo-American culture from the Renaissance onward, the most widely read, canonical narratives of inter-racial sex have involved black men and white women, and not black women and white men” (Daileader 8). She suggests that the race switch has to do with guilt over “the slaveholder's secret”-- the repeated rape of black female slaves by their white owners (9). While race has not been the primary focus of this paper, I would like to engage with another of Daileader's main points that I think benefits from the same logic she uses in her treatment of race. In her discussion of the play's crime, she remarks “that relatively few objections to Shakespeare's politics in this play have focused on its

treatment of domestic violence...seems worthy of comment” (Daileader 2). She sees a problem with the fact that most consider the play's crime to be adultery rather than “wife-murder,” just as I question the modernity of a society that objects to a film's portrayal of school shootings but not of acquaintance rape (Daileader 2). I would argue that the oversights of O's commentary on gender—both by its critics and by the film itself—have their roots in the same sort of cultural avoidance as the racial switch at the heart of “Othellophila.” Because filmmakers and critics consciously worked to comment on what they saw as historical wrongs of the genre—disrespect for the intellectual abilities of teenagers and the assumption that race is an innate contributor of violence—they ultimately sacrificed a fair treatment of women, choosing to suggest that the existence of the film in the twenty-first century automatically makes it pro-Feminist. Because of this assumption, women are doubly erased in the film. They do not just act as intermediaries within a homosocial structure, but instead are both physically and culturally removed from the film's action and replaced by men.

CHAPTER FOUR

“A REAL MAN IS DIFFICULT TO FIND”: GENDERED IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN
SHE'S THE MAN

In his review for the radio station *Westwood One*, Bill Bregoli calls Andy Fickman's 2006 film *She's the Man* “*Mean Girls* [with] a classic twist” (Bregoli). The language of this review creates a binary opposition that privileges the contemporary teen movie archetype over its “classic” Shakespearean source; moreover, the review's language evokes comparison not to all contemporary teen films, but to a particular subgenre heralded and represented by Mark Waters' 2004 film *Mean Girls*. The film, based on Rosalind Wiseman's 2002 nonfiction parenting manual *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*, follows former home-schooler Cady Herron's journey through her first year at North Shore High School as she works to sabotage The Plastics, the school's most popular and most envied clique. Over the course of the film, Cady eventually becomes Plastic herself and has to cope with how she has changed, ultimately learning that “Calling somebody else fat won't make you any skinnier. Calling someone stupid doesn't make you smarter. All you can do in life is try to solve the problem in front of you” (*Mean Girls*).

The fact that Bregoli's review comparing *She's the Man* to *Mean Girls* appears on the back of the film's DVD release implies that filmmakers wish for the film to be viewed similarly--having a positive sociopolitical message to convey to its target audience of teen girls. This categorization is not implausible, given that the film was written by Karen McCullah Lutz and Kirsten Smith, authors of *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), which relocates Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* to a Seattle high school and turns Katerina, the titular shrew, into Kat Stratford, a “ball-buster” who listens to Ani DiFranco and reads Betty Friedan. *10 Things I Hate About You* was widely criticized for its portrayal of teen feminism, with many critics having one

or both of the following problems with the character of Kat : firstly, the fact that she listened to or read those things did not necessarily make her a feminist, and secondly, she is never actually seeing reading or listening to those things within the context of the film (Pittman 140). Her feminist reputation seems to be just that--a reputation. While critics originally touted the film as pop culture with the potential for social change, it is now typically viewed as a candy-coated presentation of political issues.

While *10 Things I Hate About You* ostensibly makes it acceptable for girls to challenge the status quo of high school gender roles through an awareness of feminist politics, the positive message of *She's the Man* appears to be one of gender equality : “Amanda Bynes proves that girls can do anything guys can do in *She's the Man*,” a statement from the film's official website proclaims (www.shestheman-themovie.com). Writers Smith and Lutz echo this sentiment in the film's DVD commentary when they explain that the original conflict of the film involved Viola playing Hamlet in a school production, but that “proving she could play on a boys' team gave it more of that female empowerment thing” (*She's the Man*).

Marketed as “inspired by William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*,” the film tells the story of Viola, a talented soccer player who, repulsed by her mother's desire that she become a debutante, impersonates her brother Sebastian at prestigious Illyria Academy after her school's girls' soccer program is cut in order to join Illyria's team and prove her worth as an athlete to her soccer-playing ex-boyfriend Justin. After the girls' team is cut and the coach refuses to let them try out for spots on the boys' team, Justin agrees with the coach's statement that “You're all excellent players, but girls aren't as fast as boys, or as strong, or as athletic...It's scientific fact. Girls can't beat boys. It's as simple as that” (*She's the Man*). When Viola reminds Justin that, just the day before, he told her she played “as good as half the guys on the team,” he feigns incredulity in

front of his teammates before switching to anger and declaring, as if he is the angry parent of an unruly child, “Viola! End of discussion!” to which she responds, “Fine. End of relationship” (*She's the Man*). This exchange establishes the film's main conflict: it juxtaposes Viola, who represents self-assured, young femininity, with the exaggeratedly closed-minded, patronizing masculinity represented by Justin and the Cornwall coach, who seem not only to view women as inferior athletes, but to attribute this inferiority to innate biological difference. This argument recalls those employed by opponents of Title IX, first ratified by the U.S. Department of Labor as part of the Education Amendments of 1972. Section 1681 of the amendment forbids “discrimination on basis of sex under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1972). While Cornwall Academy is a fictional private school, and therefore would not be under the jurisdiction of Title IX if it were a real educational institution, the fact that similar biologically essentialist statements are made by figures representing the values of this institution and those opposed to the amendment nonetheless serves as a notable piece of cultural commentary which seems to suggest that, though Title IX has been legally enacted and enforced, the existence of the biologically-essentialist viewpoint remains a large political problem that needs to be addressed on a deeper ideological level.

How well does the film address this problem? It's clear that the overtly biologically essentialist arguments offered by the Cornwall coach are to be taken lightly given their hamfisted, over-the-top delivery. The lines are delivered with a knowing smirk to a crowd of preening male soccer players, who are clearly less intelligent than the free-thinking Viola), but even so, the use of the word “athletic”--a type of ability one can possess regardless of gender--bridges the gap between “scientific” arguments about the relative speed and strength of the sexes

based on biological differences and a socially constructed sexist ideology. While some may argue that this over-the-top prejudice exists for a broader purpose within the universe of the film (in order to endear the viewer to Viola's cause), the alternative to this unfair treatment does not seem to be much of an alternative at all when examined closely. If Cornwall represents the gender constraint that Viola's mother, coach, and ex-boyfriend impose upon her, then it follows logically that Illyria should represent a newfound freedom from those constraints, in accordance with the typical function of the pastoral in Shakespearean comedy. This is not so in the film. While the Illyria coach (played by well-known footballer Vinnie Jones, formerly of Sheffield United and no doubt cast because of his star-body's relevance to the film's subject matter) states that they are “not sexist here in Illyria” when trying to convince the referee that Viola is allowed to play on the boys' team according to the official rulebook, he repeatedly and derogatorily refers to his male players as “girls” when chiding them at practice, thereby employing a less-obvious form of the biological essentialism used by the Cornwall coach. This linguistic choice makes his defense of Viola seem motivated entirely by selfishness: he is defending her not because he believes in gender equality, as he claims, but because he thinks she is a skilled enough player to get him the victory over Cornwall that he desires. An admittance of this fact instead of a reliance on a weak, supposedly political argument would better suit the empowerment argument the film claims to have.

Construction of Femininities in the Film

In addition to the cultural issue of female representation in athletics, the film also seeks to comment on viable forms of femininity in contemporary society by juxtaposing femininities that seem to be negative because their goals are centered around their appeal to other (mostly male) people (Mrs. Hastings, Monique) with those that seem to be positive (Viola, Olivia, Eunice)

because they let their own choices and desires define what they want. One of the main ways the film constructs its femininities is through different styles of the clothing worn by its female characters. In the beach soccer game during the film's opening scene, Viola plays wearing a navy blue and yellow bikini and short denim shorts. Her actions show that she is physically strong and athletically capable, and her outfit, by combining dark colors and comfortable fabrics with possibly provocative cuts, connotes a certain strong sexuality.

The connection between Viola's athleticism and her awareness of her own sexuality is clear in the scene that immediately follows the soccer game. Justin lauds her athletic ability by saying she is “as good as half the guys on the team” and credits himself for teaching her to play. Viola corrects him by saying, “Probably more than half,” kisses him, then insinuates he isn't the only teacher in their relationship when she says, “You couldn't kiss at all when we first started going out, but I've taught you well” (*She's the Man*). Viola elevates herself above the majority of the boys in terms of athletic ability while also switching the positions in the power binary Justin has established: where he places himself in the role of teacher and her in the role of student, she makes herself the teacher and him the student. While Viola's self-confident sexuality is certainly empowering to a degree, this binary reversal makes it potentially problematic. First, by reversing the binary instead of breaking it down, Viola does nothing to improve the hierarchical social ordering principle in place; she merely privileges a different party. Secondly, her proud description of herself as Justin's sexual “teacher” aligns her with members of the contemporary, young third wave feminist movement who have been criticized for their “sex-positive” brand of feminism by both society in general and older feminists, those who think that they are not liberating themselves and owning their sexuality as they claim , but instead, that they

are reinforcing the patriarchal stereotype of woman as a temptress who uses her sexuality to get what she wants.

In their book *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards seek to define Third Wave feminism and what they see as misconceptions about young feminists. In the book's lexicon, Baumgardner and Richards define “Third Wave” as:

the core mass of the current women's movement in their late teens through their thirties, roughly speaking—the ones who grew up with Judy Blume books, *Free to Be...You and Me*, and *Sesame Street*. Another way of looking at the Third Wave is as the “daughters,” both real and metaphorical, of the Second Wave, the women who read *Ms. Magazine* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and lobbied for *Roe v. Wade* and the ERA. (Baumgardner and Richards 401-2)

Jessica Valenti, founder of the popular weblog Feministing.com, adds a more sociopolitical definition to this historical one in her book *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*, in which she claims that young women who identify as feminists today “do it [read: have sex] better” because they realize that their bodies and sexualities are not commodities, but theirs to control as they see fit, and that they are less likely to buy into “cultural myths of purity and virginity” that operate as ways for the patriarchal hegemony to control female sexuality (Valenti 28-30). Viola's consciousness of and desire to control her own sexuality as evidenced by her discussion with Justin on the beach in the beginning of the film seems to ally her with sex-positive Third-Wave feminists as defined by Valenti.

The Problem of Paul Antonio

The montage during which Viola's friend transforms her into Sebastian complicates the reading of her as representative of third wave feminism, however. As Viola and her friends Mia and Yvonne try on wigs, mustaches, and beards of comically varying lengths and colors, a cover of "Love is All Around" is performed by pop-punk band The Tea Queens. This song is most well-known as the theme to the *Mary Tyler-Moore Show*, and helped the show represent a new segment of society (the single, self-sufficient working woman) when it aired in the early 1970s. As such, it became a sort of popular second wave feminist anthem (Dow 32). Setting Viola's initial gender transformation to this song aligns her with what Mary Richards culturally represented: a woman on a new social frontier who is questioning the mores of her world in order to "make it after all," as the song says. Sebastian expresses the same sentiment to Viola just before he leaves to play with his band in London. He asks, "If you wanna chase your dreams, sometimes you gotta break the rules, right?" (*She's the Man*). Is Viola really "breaking the rules"? Even if she is flouting social norms by impersonating her brother, the presence and character of the apparently gay hairdresser Paul in this scene make her position as great social rebel a dubious one.

The transformation scene is the audience's first visual introduction to Paul Antonio (we hear his voice previously as Viola pleads with him to help her, but do not see him until the actual transformation begins), who functions as Viola's fairy godmother (so to speak), as well as her guide to what it means to be "the man" of the film's title. Paul is a hairdresser at the Christophe salon--most likely a reference to the real Salon Christophe, an upscale establishment in Beverly Hills that has catered to a rich and famous clientèle "for over twenty years"-- (www.christophe.com). As such, it is important to note that this reference connotes style and

class. Additionally, the alteration to the logo is particularly indicative of Paul's position within the universe of the film, as well as his character's position within the genre of the teen movie with a positive message. In the film, the “o” in “Christophe” is a combination of the male and female symbols. While this symbolism could easily be a comment on the questioning of gender roles/traits done by the film in general, its direct association with Paul and his role as enabler of gender change is a loaded one. While the film never has either Paul himself or one of the other characters “out” him as a gay man, he is seen holding hands with Andrew, who appears to be his date, at the ball at the end of the film⁵.

Even before the ball, however, Paul is connected with a number of signifiers of a certain cultural representation of homosexuality⁶. He is always well-dressed and groomed, much more so than any of the other male characters in the film. While this care of his appearance could possibly be attributed to his age and occupation (as a hairdresser, he would likely be expected to stay abreast of current styles and fashions, and because he has a full-time job, it can be assumed that he is at least a few years older than Viola and her peers, since they all still attend high school), when this particular sense of style is combined with his capacity as a source of wisdom on what it means to be a (presumably straight, in Sebastian's case) man, Paul seems to embody the fulfillment of the contemporary mindset, epitomized by the television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, that gay men possess knowledge to make straight men better somehow. The official website of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* states that its goal is to “treat each new guy as a head-to-toe project” the result of which is that “soon, the straight man is educated on everything from hair products to Prada and Feng Shui to foreign films. At the end of every

⁶ Paul's last name, Antonio, could also carry connotations of homosexuality, as Joseph Pequigney hypothesizes in his article “Two Antonios: Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*.”

fashion-packed, fun-filled lifestyle makeover, a freshly scrubbed, newly enlightened guy emerges” (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy Online*). This attitude seems to mirror Paul's, as well as to justify his character's minimal development. Unlike Damian, the character from *Mean Girls* who is fleshed out and humanized beyond a mere gay stereotype because of his relationships with the other characters (even though the audience is informed upon his first appearance that he is “almost too gay to function”), Paul is introduced in the transformation scene, talks to Viola on the phone once after that, and does not appear again until the climactic soccer match, where he appears to be accessorized by Mia and Yvonne, who are wearing outfits that match his. His pairing with Andrew at the film's end is never explained, though it appears to be a result of the adaptation's depiction of the common multiple marriage at the end of Shakespearean comedies, summed up in DVD commentary by director Andy Fickman as “why everyone gets paired off at the end” (*She's the Man*). Thus, Paul's presence in the film seems mainly to exist to make the film seem culturally hip and forward even as it complies to Shakespearean dramatic conventions, rather than to make a serious comment about the fluidity of gender or to question social heteronormativity.

Clothing and Constructed Femininity

While the women of the film exhibit this fluidity of gender to a very limited extent because each of them only seems to embody a single identity (as opposed to Duke Orsino, who is allowed to embody multiple valid masculinities simultaneously), it is necessary to note that the primary way in which the film differentiates between these various valid and invalid femininities is through the clothing that each woman wears. It is important that the sporty bikini and shorts is the first outfit in which the film's audience sees Viola, as it serves both to establish the kind of strong, sexually aware femininity she represents and set that femininity up as the one most

worthy of emulation of the ones depicted in the film, as well as to contrast that femininity with other types seen later in the film, most notably those enacted by Viola's mother, Mrs. Hastings, Sebastian's girlfriend, Monique, and Illyria Academy's resident nerd, Eunice.

If Viola represents young, sex-positive, self-confident femininity, then her mother models (and wishes for her daughter to model) a kind of femininity that is the polar opposite: stilted, passive, and above all, rigidly conforming to the norms of her upper-class social circle. Mrs. Hastings's first appearance in the film comes when Viola returns home just after learning that her team has been cut. She is dressed in a blue linen suit and pearls, clothes that simultaneously evoke both high social standing and traditional, restrained femininity. She is obviously meant to seem off-putting and over-the-top to the film's viewers from her first scene, when she enthusiastically unveils two full-skirted, copiously-ruffled gowns that she would like Viola to wear to the Stratford Junior League's Debutante Ball. This scene serves two purposes. It identifies Mrs. Hastings as a proponent of the traditional femininity represented by both the ball gowns and the event to which they are to be worn; and the fact that Mrs. Hastings seems to either be unaware of or chose to ignore her daughter's aversion to all things debutante suggests that the film's audience should view her as out of touch, a member of an older generation, one whose values are perhaps “archaic,” as Viola labels the debutante tradition (*She's the Man*). In addition to valuing traditional femininity, Mrs. Hastings likewise privileges traditional masculinity. She makes this clear when, after Viola mentions she “dumped” Justin, she asks, “But why? He's so handsome and rugged and chiseled and *great!*” (*She's the Man*). By using words like “rugged” and “chiseled” to identify Justin, Mrs. Hastings not only shows that she values traditional masculine stereotypes, but objectifies him in a way that makes her seem more like a teenage girl with a crush than a protective mother who wants her daughter to date the right sort of boy. While

this complicates her femininity, and arguably makes her a more well-rounded character and not just a stereotype of the overprotective high-society mother, it also undeniably serves to make her type of femininity undesirable in comparison with that of Viola, who obviously does not need Justin to make her feel validated, no matter how “chiseled” he may be.

If Viola is meant to represent the struggles of the third wave feminist, what then, is the connection between that movement's “both real and metaphorical” Second Wave mothers and Mrs. Hastings's traditional, passive femininity? The comparison appears to break down here, as Mrs. Hastings certainly does not seem to embody the struggles for equality lived out by second wave feminists. In fact, her involvement with such traditionally-gendered social organizations as the Junior League as well as her apparent valuing of the association of masculinity with strength and femininity with weakness seems to negate such an association. Instead, she seems to represent someone who has profited from the achievements of the second wave, but without acknowledging, or perhaps even being aware of, those achievements. She is a wealthy divorcée with no apparent occupation, no doubt existing quite comfortably on the alimony payments afforded her because of rights won by second wave feminists. In that view, the comparison applies to a limited degree, though it still ultimately distances the empowered, current Viola from her dated, out-of-touch mother.

While Mrs. Hastings holds Monique up as an embodiment of the sweet, passive debutante, Monique herself seems to exist in the film to allow for the *Mean Girls* comparison under which it was marketed. Unlike Viola, Olivia, and arguably even Eunice, she has no Shakespearean counterpart. Though Monique partly serves as the catalyst for Viola's scheme to impersonate Sebastian (upon seeing Viola from behind as she's dressed in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans, she mistakes her for Sebastian, even going so far as to remark, “You look *scary alike*

from the back”) and is therefore necessary to further the conceit of the film, she is viewed positively only by Mrs. Hastings (the film's other representation of confined femininity). Monique seems to serve chiefly as a foil to Viola and the other two characters who enact acceptable femininities in the film, Olivia and Eunice. Like those girls, her femininity is represented most obviously by her clothing, which is almost exclusively low-cut and tight-fitting. While Viola's semi-provocative fashions seem to evoke empowerment because they are combined with self-confidence and strength, Monique's clothing and physical appearance have a less-positive connotation because of her self-important attitude. When she shows up in the cleverly-named Illyria pizzeria, Cesario's, to look for Sebastian, and Andrew Aguecheek tries to flirt with her, she angrily responds, “Girls with asses like mine do not talk to boys with faces like yours” (*She's the Man*). She not only bases her own self-worth entirely on her physical appearance, but applies the same standard to her choice of boyfriends. It is no wonder that, in an instance of teen movie poetic justice, Monique is escorted by Viola's pompous ex, Justin, to the debutante ball. The fact that Monique's plot is wrapped up in such a way seems to set her up as sort of cautionary tale in keeping with the film's attempt at didacticism regarding female empowerment: if young girls invest themselves fully in embodying a femininity as superficial as Monique's, then their entire lives will be just as superficial, even if they look perfect by their society's standards.

In contrast to Mrs. Hastings and Monique, who do not have Shakespearean counterparts and seem to embody negative femininities, Olivia and Eunice, who are appropriations of *Twelfth Night's* Olivia and Maria, respectively, seem to enact positive femininities in that they have respect for themselves and others and do not appear to gauge self-worth in terms of their involvement in a heterosexual relationship. Is there a connection between their Shakespearean

source material and their positive femininity? If so, it seems to be counterproductive to the film's privileging of the teen-movie-with-a-message archetype. Regardless of whether or not such a parallel exists, it is essential to note that while Olivia and Eunice both enact positive forms of femininity, they do so in different ways and arguably, to different degrees because of the way their costumes place them within different social positions within the high school hierarchy.

In keeping with the film's construction of femininity through costuming, Olivia is marked as different from the film's other physically attractive women by her style of dress. Instead of Monique's overt sexuality or Viola's athletic one, Olivia embodies a softer, slightly more modest sexuality by wearing t-shirts and denim skirts in pastel colors. Her sexuality becomes more overt after she is made an object of the male gaze enacted by Duke Orsino, when he sees her walk into the school cafeteria and turns his head so as to look at her without her knowing. This film does not frame his viewing of her as objectification, however, as evidenced by Duke's disgusted "Don't talk about her like that!" when Viola-as-Sebastian sees him staring at her, and, desperate to pass for one of the guys, crassly remarks, "Look at the booty on that blondie!" (*She's the Man*). Duke's demand that Olivia be treated with respect seems to suggest both that he views her as a person rather than a sex object (as Viola-as-Sebastian seems to assume he will) and that he has feelings for her. While Duke's defense of Olivia certainly calls Viola-as-Sebastian's preconceived notions of a necessarily misogynistic masculinity into question, other aspects of the boys' characterization of her complicate the audience's view of Duke, and, in conjunction, the way his masculinity is constructed.

In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia is in mourning because her brother has died, as she tells Feste in Act 1, scene 5. In *She's the Man*, however, Andrew tells Viola-as-Sebastian the following about Olivia: "Until recently, she was dating this college guy, but he dumped her, and I hear she's a

total mess right now. [Her] confidence [and] self-esteem [are] way down . Toby then interjects, “Yeah, so in man words, it's time to pounce!” (*She's the Man*). These statements do several things to undermine Duke's sensitive masculinity. First, it turns Olivia into a prize for which men are competing. The mention of the “college guy” not only marks her as desired by other men, but by a higher class of men than Duke and his friends, who are still high school students. Andrew and Toby also employ the language of a certain kind of competition: hunting, wherein Duke is the hunter and Olivia his prey, as in the exchange between Orsino and Curio in 1.1 of Shakespeare's play. Also, Toby says that the words he uses to describe the situation are “man words,” thereby not only constructing a exclusively masculine language, but also characterizing it as predatory. Because Duke does not create the metaphor of Olivia-as-prey, it could be argued that his friends exist as a sort of foil for him and that they intensify the effects of his caring, sensitive masculinity rather than negating it. However, Duke's contribution to the conversation follows Viola-as-Sebastian's question about the identity of Malcom,(a hanger-on turned stalker of Olivia's who seems to be a combination of Shakespeare's Festes and Malvolio) who has just entered the cafeteria and seated himself next to Olivia. Duke quickly asserts that Malcom is “not competition” and “a total geek,” and while he does not objectify Olivia as blatantly as Andrew and Toby seem to, he still places himself above Malcolm in a hierarchy of masculinities as well as employs the same language of sport. Why, then, is Duke able to embody multiple masculinities at once, when, to exhibit multiple viable femininities/feminine sexualities, the film must show multiple women?

In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia's attendant, Maria, is funny and sexually frank, as well as quite clever. In Act 1 scene 3, she jokes with Sir Andrew that his hand is “dry” after shaking it (1.3.55) She is, in effect, questioning his masculinity by calling him impotent, which shows that she is

both knowledgeable of contemporary sexual lore and not ashamed of possessing this knowledge. She also masterminds the plot to humiliate Malvolio in front of Olivia by having him appear lovesick and insane. In contrast, Eunice (who I view as analogous to Maria due to her social rank and her eventual romantic involvement with the Toby character) is the school nerd, outfitted with the stereotypical glasses and headgear, and breathily promising Duke that she will “be the best lab partner [he] ever had” (*She's the Man*). While it is certainly true that Eunice herself is a sexual being, her sexuality is not seen as strong or self-assured by the film's audience as Maria's is in the play. Instead, Eunice's sex drive is played for laughs, as when, near the end of the film, she bluntly informs Toby that she “know[s] tricks,” and the next shot follows the two down to the ground, where they begin kissing in earnest (*She's the Man*). She is the stereotypical horny nerd, much like those made famous by Anthony Michael Hall in teen films of the 1980s (*The Breakfast Club*, *Weird Science*) and continued by Alyson Hannigan's Michelle in the *American Pie* trilogy of the 1990s. Though her strong sexuality is depicted humorously, unlike Viola's, I still include Eunice within the categories of positive femininity because she enacts this femininity of her own volition and to satisfy her own sex drive, not in order to conform to her perception of the sexual desires of others, as Monique and, to a certain extent, Mrs. Hastings, do. Additionally, despite her archetypal character, it could be argued that Eunice perhaps has more personal agency than Maria because of Maria's social position as Olivia's attendant. Indeed, when discussing the film's Shakespearean references in a featurette entitled “Inspired by?” director Andy Fickman mentions that Olivia's friend, who only appears in several scenes, has fewer than five lines the entire film, and is never actually referred to by name, is called Maria (pronounced “Ma-ree-uh” according to typical contemporary American pronunciation, not “Ma-rye-uh” as in Shakespeare's play) “to keep that character in there” (*She's the Man*). This

comment seems to devalue Maria's confident sexuality (she is essentially erased and her Shakespearean name is mispronounced), which contradicts the supposed “girl power” message of the film as mentioned by the writers.

Construction of Masculinities in the Film

The film's definition of what positive masculinity entails certainly seems to be more complicated, more multidimensional than its definitions of easily-delineated negative and positive femininities. Additionally, Viola seems to let male stereotypes shade her portrayal of Sebastian, and she seems never to settle on how her/his masculinity should be performed. This is clear due to Amanda Bynes' ever-changing accent in the film, which, according to reviewers, spans the vocal spectrum from “effeminate Alabaman” (Phipps) to “like she's on the phone to the school office: 'Viola is sick today, and this is her mother speaking.'” (Ebert). This noticeable variance seems to comment that masculine stereotypes do not represent how men behave; that “a real man is difficult to find,” as Olivia complains. What then, constitutes a “real man” in the context of the film? The phrasing of Olivia's complaint is important when seeking an answer to this question. A real man is not “hard” to find, which would carry connotations of traditionally masculine sexuality due to the phrase's containing the word “hard” - a possible reference to erection. Instead, the film values masculinities that are less traditional, and seemingly more evolved or modern because they have the ability to show emotion, like Duke's fear of Malvolio, the escaped tarantula, or Paul's crying at Viola's entrance into the debutante ball. Writers Lutz and Smith confirm this goal in a segment of the DVD commentary called “The Wrap Up” in which people whose involvement was central to the film are asked to offer last words, by saying, “ We just want to promote romance and good times and shirtless, sensitive boys. We like those” (*She's the Man*). This blatant admittance of male objectification complicates whatever presence

of “that female empowerment thing” that exists in the film by merely reversing the power binary rather than truly questioning the gender system in place. Thus, though the emphasis on empowered women and sensitive men may cause the film to appear forward-thinking in regards to socially constructed gender norms, that emphasis seems to exist not because of the film's desire to make a statement about the construction of those norms, but because of the marketability of its seemingly progressive ideologies.

Amanda Bynes's Star-Body

Like the film's girl-power message, which seems in actuality to be more about niche marketing and a slightly underhanded reinforcement of stereotypically boy-crazy teen femininity, Bynes' star-body, while built on depicting her as strong and funny, but most importantly, as a typical teen girl, appears to have more to do with the kind of image sells to the female teen market at any given moment than a desire to positively effect the audience to whom the image is being sold⁶. Billed as “having a knack for slapstick reminiscent of Lucille Ball” (*They've All Got It*), Bynes began her career at a comedy camp under the tutelage of Richard Pryor and Robin Williams⁷. She then acted in several local Southern California theatre productions such as *Annie* and *The Music Man* before catching the attention of executives at children's television network *Nickelodeon*, where she was cast in the kids' sketch comedy show *All That* alongside future *Saturday Night Live* cast member Keenan Thompson in 1996. Bynes quickly became a fan favorite on *All That*, which resulted in her being given top billing and control of original characters on *The Amanda Show*, which ran on *Nickelodeon* from 1999-2002, and became Bynes' gateway from bit sketch player to comedic film lead in projects like *She's the*

⁷ All biographical and career information has been taken from Bynes' Internet Movie Database page (www.imdb.com/amandabynes), as her official website (www.amandabynes.com) is “Under Construction” and all of its information has been removed.

Man and *Sydney White* (a 2007 adaptation of *Snow White* set in a California college sorority⁸).

Some of the original characters on *The Amanda Show* seem to have contributed to Bynes' "Everygirl appeal" as cited by *The Boston Globe* in 2006 (Tomlinson). For example, two of her most popular original characters were Judge Trudy, an obvious send-up of television's "Judge Judy" Scheindlin who always ruled in favor of children who brought their parents to her courtroom no matter the crime, and Penelope Taynt, an obsessive fan of Amanda's who would do anything to gain entrance into the star's presence while predictable hilarity ensued (*Amanda Show*). Both of these characters represent parts of Bynes' constructed "Everygirl" star-body. First, Judge Trudy plays into the fantasies of young children who desire to switch the parent/child power dynamic. If Amanda is playing a character who supports this, then, in the eyes of her fans, she must have the same sorts of problems with her parents as they do with theirs. Amanda is *just like you*, an average American kid. Penelope Taynt adds a different dimension to Bynes' star-body. Penelope functions to make light of Bynes's celebrity, while at the same time, glorifying it. While the lengths Penelope goes to to meet Amanda are absurd (disguises, fake voices, and silly gadgets galore) and she never reaches her goal (the same security guard carts Penelope off of the show's set at the end of nearly every incarnation of the sketch), and though it is sugar-coated by humor and pratfalls, the message of the sketch is abundantly clear: Amanda is a celebrity. She is *not just like you*, an average American kid, and don't think you can get close to her or be like her, because that is not going to happen, the sketch ultimately tells fans.

⁸ The reviews for *Sydney White* were so terrible that they prompted *Entertainment Weekly* to retract their previous comment comparing Bynes to Lucille Ball, causing them to remark instead that she may be in need of "a career time out" in their September 20, 2007 online issue (<http://popwatch.ew.com/popwatch/2007/09/amanda-bynes.html>).

Bynes continues this contradiction of approachability and celebrity in her most recent project: a clothing line for the retail chain Steve and Barry's. The line, *dear by Amanda Bynes*, is composed of affordable casual wear (hoodies, skirts, pants, tanks, tees, and accessories, all on sale for less than \$10 apiece) and, due to its selection and pricing, presumably geared toward Bynes' target audience of young teen girls. In a video on the line's official website, Bynes echoes Viola's sex positive femininity by saying she has helped create "clothes that let your personality breathe without hiding or covering up." She also echoes the same shaky message of apparent girl power by exhorting her consumers to "Be quirky. Be intelligent. Be entertaining," and then immediately instructing them to "defy labels" (www.dearbyamanda.com). The first two imperative statements of that series appear to be liberating and encouraging to their young female audience by contradicting the norms of a kind of young femininity which exists mainly to satisfy the stereotypical fantasies of young boys. If these young girls are "quirky," they do not conform to a feminine ideal as constructed by males, but instead, exhibit a degree of individuality in the way in which they present themselves to others. If they are "intelligent," they do not allow themselves to merely agree with or parrot the opinions of others because they possess the reasoning skills to form opinions of their own. While those statements sound liberating at first, the ad's third statement counteracts them. By telling the girls to whom it is targeted to "be entertaining," it commodifies them by reducing them to an act that exists entirely for the (possibly sexual?) gratification of the audience of their entertainment. The fourth and final imperative, "Defy labels," blatantly contradicts the previous three, all of which instruct their audience in proper behavior through concise adjectives that could easily be used to "label" someone. Bynes (or possibly the writer of the ad) appears either to have been unaware or to have disregarded this contradiction due to its presence in the final product (which, it should be noted,

is itself marketed under a distinctive label). While Bynes' performance of multiple identities (and her encouragement of the same within her target audience) could be viewed as a positive embrace of multiple valid femininities by some, I would argue that its commodification ultimately transforms Bynes' star-body into one that actually reinforces the female status quo it purports to negate.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: CAN SEX-POSITIVE FEMINISM EXIST IN POPULAR CULTURE? OR
 HOW I LEARNED TO STOP LISTENING TO THE BIG NAMES BUT STILL REFUSE
 TO JUST FOLLOW MY SEX DRIVE

While I can't articulate the exact happening that resulted in the birth of my personal feminism (my “click moment,” in the words of my third wave peers, or my “coming to consciousness,” according to my second wave predecessors), I do recall a point in my life when I realized that my thought processes had started to change. I was raised Southern Baptist, and partly because of this, was brought up with fairly traditional conceptions of gender and socially acceptable roles for men and women. Though I was always a bit uncomfortable at home, even in familiar surroundings, I was not exposed to many views that conflicted with those until I left for college at sixteen. Once there, I met people who held religious and political views to which I had never been exposed before, people who were as passionate and articulate about the things in which they believed as I felt I was, and as I wished my high school classmates could have been. I was just as challenged and inspired inside the classroom as out of it. The second semester of my sophomore year, I signed up for Dr. Greg Fraser's Practical Criticism class. The course (a requirement for all declared English majors) was an introduction to semiotics and literary theory and had a reputation as a weed-out class, one where all the particularly difficult professors were instructed to give the students their best.

In our first group meeting, Dr. Fraser asked us to tell him what we'd heard about the course. When no one responded, but instead all opted to avoid his gaze in hopes that he wouldn't call on us, he confirmed our fears by relaying an anecdote from the previous semester in which he said a student had been so nervous about the day's impending “quest” (a hybrid of a quiz and

a test) that she vomited in the middle of the classroom. At the time, I would have sworn that this event actually occurred. Now that I have taught a few classes myself and know how often initial intimidation results in the students' respect, I tend to chalk it up to effective pedagogical strategy (Perhaps not particularly good pedagogy, but effective nonetheless). While this event is not directly related to my discovery of my personal feminism, the latter could not have existed without the mindset of newness, challenge, and respect instilled in me by the former, and therefore, knowledge of it is both relevant and imperative.

For our final paper in the course, we were to analyze Shelley's *Frankenstein* through one of the theoretical lenses we had studied over the course of the semester (Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Postcolonialism, Deconstruction, and so on). When I initially received the assignment, I was set on performing a Postcolonial reading of Frankenstein's monster. We had just finished a short unit on Said, and, in a fit of overachievement, I had obtained a copy of *Orientalism* from the school library and read it over a single weekend (an unconscious act of preparation for my eventual graduate school experience, perhaps?). Before each paper, Dr. Fraser asked us to write and turn in a list of five Driving Theoretical Questions (DTQs) that we were interested in examining in greater depth. When it was time for me to write DTQs for *Frankenstein*, however, I could not escape issues surrounding Victor and Elizabeth: why science is privileged in the novel while poetry is weak and feminized, why his parents present her to him as a gift rather than just telling him she is his newly-adopted sister, and (the question I ultimately endeavored to answer in my final essay) why the novel's men are allowed, and indeed, expected to explore the world around them, while the only way its women are permitted to do so is by reading letters written by the men. As I composed that essay, I thought extensively about the subordination and feminization of reading. I thought about how it was used to enforce and spread

male views of the world in Shelley's novel as well as how my reputation as a reader operated in my own family, who I always felt interpreted my proclivity for the written word as passive and detached, which was definitely a far cry from the inspiration and passion I frequently experienced when reading. In considering my relationship to books and reading in this way, I realized that nearly every paper I wrote concerned women's issues of some kind, whether they were my first awkward attempts to define feminism in literary characters or an analysis of some male character's attitude toward his female counterpart. While I certainly had (and still have) a lot to learn after this realization, and while I am not sure I even knew to label it as feminist thought at the time, looking back, I do consider that moment and that class to be a turning point in my life as a feminist. In fact, my fascination with the connection between feminism and teen culture most likely is related to the fact that I awakened to my own feminist consciousness in my teen years.

This thesis determines that all of the incarnations of teen feminism I examined are inadequate. That they draw too much from stereotypes either of teen girls or feminists or both simultaneously raises the question: How can we change pop culture's version of teen feminism so that it rings truer to the spirit of the movement? Furthermore, is that kind of change even possible? In order for the tenets of a political movement to be furthered successfully within popular media, it seems to me that that marketability necessitates a certain degree of commodification, which will doubtless be to the detriment of what would otherwise be a richer, less reductive political message. In my search for a viable reform for young feminism, I initially looked to how others had worked to solve the problem of feminism's future in the recent past.

First, I examined Betty Friedan's 1981 prospectus for feminism, *The Second Stage*. Since I always thought Friedan's strong point in *The Feminine Mystique* was her willingness to

empathize with and give voice to women whose contemporary society painted them as a mindless herd that made no significant contribution to their world, I was confused and disappointed by her attitude toward the then-young and emerging third wave. In the introduction to the 1998 reprint, Friedan writes that she was “both amused and frustrated by the chatter from some young feminists now about a 'Third Stage,' when the fact is, we still haven't reached the second stage” (Friedan xv). While I do understand that this opinion and the anecdotes about young feminism that follow in the introduction chiefly serve as a means for Friedan to articulate the inspiration for the book's title and establish the extended metaphor that delivers its goal, it seems to me that Friedan's tone leaves something to be desired, especially given the empathy she showed to marginalized women in her previous work. The diction of the quote I've mentioned seems patronizing and dismissive instead; Friedan is “amused” but not motivated because she sees the young women's concerns not as legitimate catalysts for political action, but as mere “chatter.” As I was disappointed with Friedan's views on the validity of the third wave, I began to look for other feminist visions for the future.

In an April 2008 address to students at Harvard University, well-known, oft-contested feminist Camille Paglia stated her personal grievances regarding the current state of feminism as she narrated a chronology of the movement's past failures and successes, as well as asked a long series of questions about the feminist movement and its parameters. The ones most relevant to my argument here are:

What precisely is feminism? Is it a theory, an ideology, or a praxis (that is, a program for action)? When we find feminism in medieval or Renaissance writers, are we exporting modern ideas backwards? Who is or is not a feminist, and who defines it? Who confers legitimacy or authenticity? Must a feminist be a member of a group or conform to a

dominant ideology or its subsets? Who declares, and on what authority, what is or is not permissible to think or say about gender issues? And is feminism intrinsically a movement of the left, or can there be a feminism based on conservative or religious principles? (Paglia 4)

In her attempts to answer these questions, Paglia posits that the root of the problem she perceives with today's feminism is two-fold. She identifies three concepts to which current feminism is indebted that are “often omitted in accounts of feminist history:” the ancient Greek tradition of civil liberties, Western capitalism, and religion (Paglia 12). She then calls for a reformation of university-level Women's Studies curricula, saying that the current system is “victim-centered,” and therefore infantilizes women where it claims to attempt to further their sociopolitical agency (Paglia 13). The connection between the two facets of Paglia's argument seems to be an extension of my claim that the problem of current young feminism lies within a reluctance on the part of mainstream feminism to admit the extent of its own chronologically reactive tendencies. Paglia adds that mainstream feminism lacks an awareness of the extent to which its existence depends upon the existence of patriarchal social organizing principles. In other words, without patriarchal norms and institutions to react against (and, Paglia argues, to use to further the feminist cause) feminism would no longer have a strong sociopolitical platform from which to espouse its idea(l)s. In her discussion of the reactive nature of feminism, Paglia lauds Wendy Shalit and other supporters of the modesty movement for “defending their individuality and defying groupthink and social conventions,” and even as she admits to being “a veteran of pro-sex [what I am terming “sex-positive”] feminism who still endorses pornography and prostitution,” claims that Shalit and her supporters practice “true feminism” (Paglia 16). I am surprised at my own reliance on Paglia here, and even more surprised that I find her suggestions

for improvement level-headed and practical. I typically tend to think of her feminism as one that conflicts with my own, especially after having read *Sexual Personae*, which I thought talked down to women and did not fully acknowledge the existence of female sexual agency.

After my expectations were defied yet again, I began to question my willingness to rely on those who I had come to view as women whose feminist viewpoints I should consider when forming my own. Instead, I decided to see if I could find an example of sex-positivism in popular culture that did not compromise its politics, but rather, did what it set out to do. I decided to examine the work of Susie Bright (aka “Susie Sexpert”), who is a sex advice columnist/blogger as well as being an author of women's erotica and the editor of three of the five current editions of *Herotica*, “collection[s] of women's erotic fiction” that aim to satisfy female sexual curiosity in a way that (typically male-centered) mainstream pornography does not (Bright 1994, vi). I chose Bright's work for two reasons: she is one of the first feminists to self-identify as sex-positive, and she not only theorizes academically about how women's erotica furthers the sex-positive cause, she also is directly involved with selecting erotica that she feels meets a sex-positive standard as a compilation editor. I felt that examining both facets of Bright's work would ultimately help me to determine whether or not the practice of sex-positive principles in a literary setting matched with their theoretical articulation.

First, I examined both Bright's guide to emotionally fulfilling eroticism, *Full Exposure: Opening Up to Sexual Creativity and Erotic Expression*, and a compilation of entries to her sex issue blog, *Sexwise*. In *Full Exposure*, Bright opens the book's introduction by proclaiming that everyone has a “personal erotic identity” and that “the power is in owning it” (Bright 1999, 1). After articulating that her book's goal is for the reader to discover and appreciate his or her erotic identity, Bright reveals more about the tone of the book with her personal “erotic manifesto” : “I

want to connect with people who live, make love, nurture, battle, dream, sing and sacrifice with the sense that sex is more than just flesh, but hardly an ethereal affair” (Bright 1999, 2). This was certainly not the kind of manifesto I expected from the book at all, and the unexpected part helped me gain what I think is a more well-rounded view of the goal of the sex-positive movement. By using participation in a list of near-universal activities as criteria through which she will gauge the people with whom she desires to connect, Bright makes it clear that she thinks her brand of sex-positivism could benefit a wider range of people than just those who happen to self-identify as feminists. Indeed, the inclusivity of what Bright sees as erotic/sexual is felt more deeply when the list I just mentioned is examined in terms of the individual words that are used to refer to erotic activities. “Make love” is certainly an expected inclusion given the book's intended subject. “Live” and “battle” could be seen as erotic in broad terms. “Nuture” and “dream, sing, and sacrifice,” however, seem too abstract or spiritual to be associated with a notion with such close ties to the physical and tangible as the “erotic creativity” of the book's subtitle. This seeming discrepancy is not one at all, as Bright makes clear later in the book when she writes that sex is not just about intercourse, but that every human being can experience “erotic energy” when performing any number of everyday tasks such as reading, cooking, spending time with family or friends, or just taking time to be alone with his or her thoughts. The activity need not be something traditionally thought to be erotic (though, Bright says, erotic energy is certainly spent in those ways as well). All that is required is a passionate attachment to the action being performed, and according to Bright, a person can experience the same sort of physical/emotional release as they would during intercourse (Bright 1999, 6-7). She even relates anecdotes (in both her life and those of others) in which some exertions of “erotic energy” in traditionally mundane activities results in orgasm, though that need not always be the case.

In addition to calling traditional definitions of erotic activities into question, Bright also calls for a revisioning of gender roles in order to allow for greater freedom in erotic expression. She hypothesizes that women are commonly culturally encoded as children through the kinds of things that are socially acceptable to be marketed to them--“Kewpie babies,” “sunset and waterfall posters” and “teddy bears” are some of Bright's examples--and the cultural portrait of women that this style of marketed innocence and unfettered emotion produces is one that prevents some women from viewing their desires to be sexually aggressive as normal or appropriate (Bright 1999, 60-2). Bright sees a similar kind of marketed masculinity being sold to males. She tells the story of a male childhood friend who deeply cared for his G.I. Joe by building a small bed next to his own for the doll to sleep in. Bright reports that “his parents saw this act of love and threw his beloved Joe in the trash” (Bright 1999). Just as women are wholly expected to perform in appropriately passive ways, it did not matter that this young boy was playing with a military-themed toy or that his preferred method of nurture involved amateur carpentry. Because he occupies a female role by caring for his plaything, it must be taken away from him.

Bright's solution to this binarily-opposed conception of appropriately-gendered action is not merely to flip the binary, but to bring about “a complete transformation” that she also terms “a before-and-after culture makeover” in which a type of social give-and take is born that allows women to be more masculine and men more feminine by whatever degrees they feel comfortable enacting (Bright 58). While I find her appropriation of beauty-industry language somewhat disturbing in this context, I do admire her willingness to push for vast social change, though I wish there had been some sort of plan for achieving the more blurred definitions of gender Bright posits as her goal.

Though I was encouraged by the picture of gender Bright tries to paint in *Full Exposure* and agreed with her endeavor to override the all-too-pervasive social message that “sex is the dirtiest thing you can do,” I was disappointed to find that both some of her other writings and the majority of the stories in her most recent editing effort (*Herotica 3*) tend to neglect furthering the former message of gender equality rather than binary difference and focus almost exclusively on the latter message of unrestrained sex and desire. For example, In one of the articles in her book *Sexwise*, entitled “Femmchismo,” Bright details her personal journey within the world of women's erotica. She begins the article by defining women's erotica as “fiction that exhibits the very real changes that have occurred in women's sexual interests and desires (Bright 1995, 37.) After that fairly broad definition, she tells of her desire for a sex-positive language specific to women's erotica and eventually settles on the term “femmchismo.” To Bright, “femmchismo” means “the aggressive, seductive, and very hungry sexual ego of a woman” (Bright 1995, 38). While I object to the fact that this coinage is merely a feminization of a word that connotes blatant masculine sexual expression, I do agree with Bright that the kind of “erotic arrogance” connoted by machismo is often denied women for reasons having to do with appropriately-gendered sex roles. However, I ultimately think her word choice goes against the need for social change she articulates in *Full Exposure*: that divisions separating gendered notions of appropriate sexual behavior should be blurred rather than just forced to switch sides.

Bright seems to contradict herself even more when she begins to explore the place of orgasms in women's erotica. In “Femmchismo,” she laments that mainstream pornography often sees male orgasm as its ultimate goal without “seeing inside [a woman's] explosion” (Bright 1995, 38). She seems to avoid the outright binary reversal that merely privileging female orgasms over male ones would produce when she adds:

I still believe a woman's climax makes a good bottom line for women's erotica. But now I have other angles to consider. There are other aspects of women's literary libidos that show their colors just as brilliantly as any hot-pink orgasm. (Bright 1995, 38)

These “other aspects,” however, don't seem to be the focus of the stories contained in *Herotica 3*, originally published in 1994 and the series' most recent to be edited by Bright. While the stories do explore sexual situations widely considered taboo in porn or eroticism targeting women, such as group sex (“My Date with Marcie”), sex with one's boss (“The Boy on the Bike”) sex with one's student (“Academic Assets”), sex with a transperson (“Tennessee”), masturbation by a disabled person (“Table for One”), and bloodplay (“Trust”), all of the stories seemed to feature female orgasm as their ultimate goal--their climax, you might say. Different entries in the compilation make different word choices-- women “come,” “fragment” and reach “the point of no return” (Bright 1994, 146, 155, and 142)--and some of the sexual experiences depict are narrated fantasies in which an actual sex act does not occur, but each story is focused around a female orgasm in some way or another.

For example, “Table for One,” by Blake C. Aarens, tells the story of a wheelchair-bound woman who, after her girlfriend Joanne cancels a date in which she wants the unnamed narrator to “meet her for dinner and then be her dessert,” goes home to masturbate (Bright 1994, 138). Initially, this exercise in self-pleasure seems to be more about expression of personal spirituality than physical release. Before beginning to masturbate, the narrator lights candles. This is not, however, merely an attempt to set the mood for her actions. She specifically chooses the candles for their spiritual properties: “a red one for identity, a white one for purity, a purple one for gaiety, and a dark cherry-red one for well, you know, lust” (Bright 1994, 139). The narrator then

lights incense and lets the smoke pour over her until “[her] whole body smells like a church,” all while being observed by “the moon Herself” (Bright 1994, 139). She then calls on the goddesses of the Earth and moon, as well as the goddesses of all four cardinal directions. Here, it is important to note not only the narrator’s emphasis on her spirituality, but also that that spirituality seems to be a specifically female-centric one. When combined with a desire to masturbate, all of these details suggest adherence to the principles of “erotic creativity” Bright outlines in *Full Exposure* and *Sexwise*. At this point in the story, sexuality and spirituality act as compound ways for the narrator to express her erotic energies. Later, however, the story contradicts this theme. After she masturbates to the point of orgasm, the narrator hears her answering machine turn on. It is Joanne explaining that work obligations kept her later than she originally expected. The narrator (who we now know is named Amani from Joanne’s salutation on the answering machine) then picks up the phone and tells Joanne she “decided to call it an early night” and “is already in bed.” Joanne seductively responds, “Oh, you are? Do you think I could join you?,” Amani agrees, and at the story’s end, is “await[ing Joanne’s] arrival” (Bright 1994, 142-3).

This turn in the story’s action seems to defeat its original focus because Amani’s sexual expression, or her expenditure of erotic energy, to use Bright’s terminology, is no longer about her individual spiritually motivated expression of eroticism, but instead centers that desire for erotic expression on another person. One could argue that the story does not compromise Bright’s previously articulated goals for erotic expression because orgasm does not seem to be either the focus of Amani’s spiritual/erotic expression or the goal of Joanne’s impending visit. I would respond to that argument by saying that orgasm is the visit’s implied goal, specifically by the story ending with the word “arrival,” which of course, is a synonym for “coming.” While

Amani's desire for subsequent orgasms seems to exemplify "femmchismo" as articulated by Bright, I believe that Bright's blueprint for controlling one's own eroticism would have been better satisfied by the story had Amani declined Joanne's invitation and remained satisfied in her individual spiritual/erotic experience.

As editor of this compilation, Susie Bright must have had a great degree of authority over the stories chosen to compose it. With that in mind, the compilation seems to go against the tenets of erotic creativity she set out in her other works. While I'm willing to attribute some part of this apparent theoretical discrepancy to the order in which the books were published (*Herotica 3* and *Sexwise* in 1994 and 1995, while *Full Exposure* wasn't published until 1999, therefore Bright's philosophy could have changed somewhat), ultimately, I have come to view Bright's work as another example of sex-positive popular culture that compromises the values that it claims to possess.

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