

Fashionable Bondage: Sartorial Symbolism in The King's Whore (1990)

by Debbie Olson

*"A fetish is a story masquerading as an object."
Robert J. Stoller, M.D.[†]*

In her article, "All The Rage," Elizabeth Wilson asserts that: "Fashion [is] nothing [more] than woman's bondage made visible" (29), worn to validate and fetishize a woman's subordination and objectification for the theorized male viewer. The elements of costume in film have been recognized as an important part of the film's project, holding a significant amount of theoretical insights. In her introduction to *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, Jane Gaines points out that costume in cinema "Performs some of the same functions that lavish description performs in literary fiction . . . which in turn encourages identification and involvement" in the spectator (19). Costume helps construct and reinforce the fantasy realm that film creates. We've all heard the saying "clothes make the man," and in a different way, women's clothing in film functions as a coding device to construct an ideal woman for the male viewer, in essence "making" the woman into his fantasized image, realized in order to feed male fantasy and accentuate his scopoc drive to possess her, if only within the confines of his imagination.

The importance of the visual impact of women's costuming in film, which is central to the construction of the fantasized female image, cannot be overlooked. As Gaines describes in "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story," costuming is an integral part of the film's narrative: "Costume detail was 'fixed' in the Panofskian sense in that it stood, again and again, for the same thing, and could be counted on to provide the most basic information about a character for the spectator, that is, it typified"(187), becoming an essential signifier for the subconscious support of the patriarchal domination of women, as well as an important part of the progression of the film's narrative.

Women's costume in film sometimes serves, paradoxically, as both signifier of a female character's status as object of the male gaze and as an expression of her use of that objectification to, if not defy a film's patriarchal narrative, at least make herself known within it. In many film romances, part of the process of constructing the couple, and thereby establishing the woman as the subordinate in the pair, is reinforced by having the male "dress" the female; in essence marking her as his possession. She then becomes an object that he constructs to please his gaze, his desire. *Pretty Woman* (d. Garry Marshall), starring Richard Gere/Edward and Julia Roberts/Vivian (in her star-making role) uses costume extensively to affirm the project of the film. The famous scene in which Edward gives Vivian a wad of money and sends her out to purchase an "appropriate"

gown for a fancy evening painfully pits Vivian against plastic Barbie-doll Rodeo Drive boutique clerks who are expensively and fashionably outfitted. In contrast, Vivian's hip-boots, mini skirt, and hot-pink shirt work to reinforce the social stigma of lower-class women, especially prostitutes, as unworthy of improvement: "I don't think we have anything for you. You're obviously in the wrong place. Please leave." The film's message is apparent in the contrasting fashions, emphasizing Vivian's outcast status and working to disempower her through her lack of acceptable attire. It is only later, when Edward accompanies Vivian to the Rodeo drive boutiques to purchase a new wardrobe, that Vivian can achieve legitimacy through vestments. But Edward goes even further and chooses all of Vivian's outfits, effectively dressing her, while she happily defers to his opinion, allowing him to remake her according to his own desire. Clothing is used in the film to reinforce patriarchal expectations of the only acceptable type of femininity—one that is chosen and affirmed by men. Vivian must be remade, disempowered from her relatively autonomous position of prostitute ("We say who, we say when, we say how much"), and placed within a traditional monogamous and patriarchal relationship in order to be suitable as his love interest.

Women's clothing in film can be coded in different ways as well. When a woman who has been "dressed" chooses to use the sexual allure of the chosen outfit in order to influence the male, the costume then becomes an integral part of the diegesis, much like a sword is an extension of a knight; a shawl, a blouse, or a sensually moving skirt can become a weapon of seduction-- ironically used as an instrument of power-- and one way a "dressed" woman can even the odds within her objectified position. Women's costuming can work to enhance a woman's autonomy, becoming a part of her ownership, however limited, of phallic power. Teresa de Laurentis has suggested that "the psychoanalytic model theorizes it [sexual difference] in an ambiguous and circular way: on the one hand, sexual difference is a meaning-effect produced in representation; on the other, paradoxically, it is the very support of representation"(16). In the psychoanalytic model that de Laurentis asserts, difference creates the fear of castration in males which is reproduced in cinema, thereby reinforcing sexual differentiation between men and women and creating anxiety in men that they must rectify by reestablishing their sexual dominion. Yet a woman's use of her own objectification as a weapon against phallic power, in effect controlling the phallus through her iconographic representation as portrayed on screen, supports her objectification at the same time as she draws power from that objectification. While the naked form of a woman is an erotic signifier for the male gaze, it is actually less powerful than the seductively clothed female form, which acts to enhance the mystery of woman. The costume on screen works to intensify her sexual control over men as it titillates and stimulates male fantasy, creating a paradoxical desire as men are empowered by dressing the woman to fit their fantasies while at the same time made vulnerable by giving in to the seductive power of the woman they have constructed.

A woman who dresses herself (an expression which conveys that she owns her desire) can use clothing as an extension of her sexuality in order to influence the men around her. The recent remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair* (d. John McTiernan), starring Pierce Brosnan/Thomas Crown and Rene Russo/Catherine Banning, offers an example of a film's vestimentary codes at work to accentuate sexual difference and woman-as-other as Banning's clothing marks her as a castrating female. Her various costumes display her independence as she flaunts her sexuality in order to control situations, and yet the film's goal is to place her firmly back into the traditional subordinate position as the diegesis moves her into a patriarchal romance with Crown. Banning first introduces herself to the viewer with a well-placed stiletto-heeled leg, split-up-the-side skirt, very visible garter-belt (which the camera, traveling up her body from the initial view of her shoe, pauses to emphasize), dark glasses and a fur coat (signaling her control of "the beast," i.e., the phallus) hanging loosely over her shoulders. She is in control and the viewer knows it. Her clothing speaks before she does, emphasizing her autonomy and sexuality all rolled up into one dominating female, as she effectively castrates detective Michael McCann (Dennis Leary) by pointing out the flaws in his theory of the crime. When he surmises that she was sent by an insurance company he laments: "Great. Now I'm stuck with you on my back" and Banning replies, with a seductive grin, "Aw, don't worry Lieutenant, you might enjoy it."

During the final scenes of *Thomas Crown*, Banning realizes that Crown has actually been in control of events and that she was "played" throughout the entire film. Crown allowed her the illusion of autonomy only to use it against her to reposition her into a traditionally subordinate position, thereby regaining his phallic authority and reassuring the male viewer that even a confident and powerful woman can ultimately be controlled. Banning's final outfit conveys the duality of inner strength (maleness) and flowing grace (femininity) -- tight-fitting, black turtleneck and leggings, covered by a long pumpkin-orange overcoat-- very different from her previous collection of sensuous outfits. The color black displays power and independence, yet the visual emphasis on the fall-colored pumpkin coat denotes her upcoming "fall" out of autonomy and into a classic female position, the warm hue evoking traditional visions of domesticity and family--the viewer can almost smell the apple pie as s/he internalizes the sartorial implications of the comforting pumpkin shade. During the last scene, Banning's final threat as she snuggles within Crown's embrace on the airplane, "If you do that again, I'll break both your legs," leaves the viewer exhilarated with the expectation of future sparring for control within their relationship; but as the film has demonstrated, even a strong woman cannot be allowed to subvert male power and own her desire: Crown will always be victorious.

Other examples of vestimentary coding that work to reinforce traditional gender paradigms are found in some of Alfred Hitchcock films, which frequently punished strong female characters, such as *Marnie*, whose numerous costumes are essential in conveying her lack of a true identity and thus her failure to claim

subjectivity, along with *The Birds*, where Melanie is confined to a single suit throughout the entire film, demonstrating her imprisonment in a childlike naiveté. As Gaines points out, costuming “tends to disappear as it confirms commonsense notions” of what women should be (204). Marnie’s pale green outfit indicates her puerile identity as she has not yet been dressed/possessed by man. Within a film’s project, the extra-diegetic elements of women’s costume work to naturalize the patriarchal couple, as is the case in *Marnie* and *Pretty Woman*, and the expected subordination of women to phallic control, forcibly if necessary, as in *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *The Birds*¹. Viewers become sutured into the unconscious message of a character’s costuming without really noticing the manipulative meanings behind, say, strategically placed shoes, a red lace scarf, or a bouclé jacket in a pet shop². Women’s costuming is especially significant because of the psychoanalytic dependence on visual representation as a signifier of a person’s accepted sexual position in society.

One important dimension of the politics behind women’s costuming can be seen in the period film. For the male viewer, elaborate period dress comes with preconceived notions about more firmly defined traditional gender roles. The male viewer expects women who wear elaborate Medieval, Renaissance, or Victorian gowns to be iconographic of a truly subordinate femininity, thereby reinforcing a male nostalgia for the subservient woman of by-gone eras. Some period films utilize costuming to code women into being deserving, if not exactly willing, recipients of male domination, as Claire Johnston argues in, “Dorothy Arzner: Critical Strategies,”:

behind the film’s apparent coherence there exists an ‘internal tension’ so that the ideology no longer has an independent existence but is ‘presented’ by the film . . . instead of its ideology being simply assumed and therefore virtually invisible, it is revealed and made explicit. (38)

A period film reconstructs a past ideology that works on the male viewer’s inarticulate yearning for lost phallic power, especially strong in our age of feminine independence, and is a powerful tool in the continued revalidation of patriarchal dominance. Within this ideological nostalgia, the period film also works to manipulate the female viewer into desiring her own domination.

The 1990 film *The King’s Whore*, (d. Axel Corti), exemplifies especially forcefully such use of iconographic costuming and vestimentary coding to reinforce dominant ideology. A collaborative European work starring Timothy Dalton/the King (Vittorio) and Valeria Golino/Jeanne, the film uses its costuming to create a subconscious semiotic arousal in the viewer as it works to reinforce the narrative’s theme of erotic obsession. In *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Teresa de Laurentis believes the status of women in the West is a result of woman being the “very ground of representation, both object and support of a desire which, intimately bound up with power and creativity, is the moving force of culture and history.” She further argues that the image of woman in Western

discourse necessitates her captivity by the male, whether physically or symbolically, and that language “built from a dream of woman, [is] built to keep woman captive” (13). I would extend de Laurentis’ argument and suggest that female clothing, and particularly the costuming in *The King’s Whore*, is used as a device to enable the male viewer to express his masculine desire to hold women captive and to experience scopophilic possession of the desired object through the fetishistic male gaze. The film’s use of the visualized eroticism of Jeanne’s objectification and subsequent surrender to the King’s sexual demands affords an opulent theoretical example of sartorial symbolism, culminating, I would argue, in one of cinema’s most darkly sensual and intensely erotic scenes revolving around a female garment.

The diegesis of *The King’s Whore* traces the plight of a newly married young woman, Jeanne de Luyes, from an impoverished but noble family, who becomes the unwilling object of the King of Piedmont’s erotic desire. Against her will she becomes the King’s mistress through the duplicity of her husband and his family, as well as with the support of the Church. The film is based on a fictionalized account, *Jeanne Putain du Roi* by Jacques Tournier, of the historical figure Victor Amadeus II, the ruler of a small duchy of Savoy from 1675-1730. Victor Amadeus was a consummate statesman who

carried through a programme of reforms which completely transformed the state he ruled, increasing revenues, strengthening its military power, enhancing the central government’s control over the periphery, and completing the process of drawing the privileged orders into the service of the state . . . As a result, by 1730 the Savoyard state was one of the most efficiently run monarchies in Europe. (Symcox, 7)

But Victor Amadeus II was a “solitary, imperious, [and] violent” man who’s “single-minded pursuit of his objectives” both politically and personally made him a dangerous adversary, especially to the women he desired (71). *The King’s Whore* illustrates Victor Amadeus’ volatile personality when he becomes obsessed with the wife of his chamberlain, a young innocent woman in love with her husband. Through the King’s exploitation of his powerful position, she becomes his reluctant victim throughout the film.

The film’s beginning introduces a theme of capture and imprisonment as Jeanne and her family travel by coach to a convent to commit her dowryless sister. The procession is intently watched by a fox hiding in the grass. At the convent, a nun symbolically closes a barred iron gate and the new novices are seen lying prone on the cold stone floor, arms extended crucifixion style, each head covered by a white cloth, effectively erasing their identity. Kneeling, Jeanne’s sister leans her head backwards, hanging her luxurious crown of hair over a cloth held by two nuns while a third begins to cut it. In a Freudian sense, the cutting of a woman’s hair represents the suppression of womanhood in the cold sterility of the convent; where a permanent state of forced sexlessness and submission prevails. Jeanne

cries out at the spectacle, “No! They’re being buried! Alive!” horrified by the convent’s occlusion of female sexuality.

These opening scenes establish the relationship between clothing and bondage and capture, diegetically emphasizing Jeanne’s fear of confinement and loss of womanhood. As Jeanne returns home and to her bedroom, she is astonished to see it strewn with various articles of her clothing while the fox sits on her bed growling at her. Victor Amadeus II was known as the “Piedmontese Fox” and the opening scenes which center on the fox pursuing Jeanne through her bedroom far before the viewer is privy to the King’s meeting Jeanne and his subsequent obsession for her, is a clever use of extra-diegetic symbolism (Symcox, 10). It is no accident that the “fox” invades Jeanne’s bedroom, the place of her future imprisonment.

The film manipulates clothing to signify the King’s obsessive need to possess and control Jeanne and to reaffirm the King’s adulterous intentions. At Jeanne’s first meeting with him, the King unnerves her, but it is during the ballroom scene that she comes to realize the extent of his lust for her. The dancers are all dressed in white adorned with silver or gold, and faces partially covered by white half-masks and white make-up. The half-masks are symbols of secrecy and half truths, perfect representation for those at court who are the epitome of duplicity and deceit (Barthes, 83). The King’s mask is particularly telling with its hawkish nose, an angle which draws the viewers attention upward to his predatory gaze on Jeanne. The irony of the film’s use of white (symbol of purity) amidst the iniquity of court lust, political as well as sexual, becomes obvious when the King approaches Jeanne and asks her to dance. Their exchange is a repartee of his double-entendre’s and her innocent responses, as the true state of the King’s growing obsession for Jeanne is revealed:

King: “You’ve been very cruel.”

Jeanne: “Not on Purpose.”

King: “You’ve shown people what it is to be happy . . . you’ve shown how much he [Jeanne’s husband] has to lose, which makes me wonder, does he have the strength to keep it?”

Jeanne: “He has.”

King: “Good. Because people can be very unscrupulous---when they see things they can’t have . . . I mustn’t monopolize your time. They’re jealous, they all are. Jealousy can be very destructive. Very destructive.”

This exchange is especially disarming as the gold cords across the top and bottom of Jeanne’s stomach emphasize her late-stage pregnancy. A pregnant woman viewed erotically is antilogous because in a state of pregnancy “[a] woman’s sexuality is reduced to the ‘natural’ function of childbearing, somewhere in between the fertility of nature and the productivity of a machine”(de Laurentis 20). A pregnant woman is not traditionally viewed as an erotic object, but rather as the ultimate expression of female utility and of her possession by a fertilizing

male, and the film's portrayal of the king's erotic obsession of a pregnant woman helps to heighten male fetishistic desire. In a Freudian sense, pregnancy can be considered the ultimate control of the "other" by men as the fetus becomes an extension of the male phallus, that is, having been implanted within her womb it controls the woman/mother by its very presence. It is through this exchange that Jeanne, as she turns around to look at all the faces staring at them, begins to comprehend the depth of the King's *hantise d'elle*.

The male gaze in *The King's Whore* is a compelling part of the King's obsession for Jeanne and his face is frequently shaded in dark red hues or cast in dim half-light as his piercing eyes watch her. During the first church scene, Jeanne turns and tells her husband she wishes to leave because "he's staring at me!" The camera cuts to a grating where the glitter of the King's eyes catch the light; he watches her like a predator watches its prey. But before she can go, two nuns appear at Jeanne's side and lead to another room where she enters a confessional booth. Once again the camera shows a grating, dividing Jeanne from a priest who tells her of the King's great passion for her and of her duty as his subject to allow him to possess her. Jeanne is visibly shaken: "A King, even a King should not covet his neighbor's wife" as she doubles over in pain. Another priest steps up and assures Jeanne that she would be blameless in the eyes of the Church and God, affirming her double victimization to both the king's patriarchal desire and the Church as a patriarchal institution, despite her lawful marriage. As the nuns lead Jeanne away, obviously in labor, she tells the priests that she will try to forgive the king as her screams echo both the impending birth and her fear of the King's obsession, now sanctified by the Church. This scene reinforces woman's fear of the forced sexlessness of the Church seen at the outset of the film. The film presents two possibilities—being whore to the king or the Church's sterile asexuality. The Church thus becomes the enemy of womanhood, an avenue of emptiness as it was in the film's beginning. The film plays on Roland Barthes notion of "emptiness repletion," and the type of ecstasy that is fostered, being described by the "metaphors of being empty and being full . . . emptying subjects out to fill them up again"(xxiv), as the moment of Jeanne's labor, an emptying, is signified by the proposition of an unwanted union with the king, a filling up. The costuming in this scene is starkly contrasted with the previous dance scene as everyone is wearing black, and in the context of the Church and its contradictory endorsement of adultery (while asexual nuns sing in the background), black here signifies surrender, death, and powerlessness.

The film constructs the Church as the ultimate manifestation of patriarchal authoritarianism, fulfilling a dual role as both protector of the patriarchal sacrament of marriage and as the procurer for the King, especially in the chapel where Jeanne meets the Queen for the first time. In this scene, Jeanne's dress is now reminiscent of her youthful innocence at the beginning of the film. Her hair is covered in white and she has abandoned the dark mature colors and revealing bodices of her married gowns in favor of a heightened pale blue dress which accentuates her innocence. In contrast, the Queen is wearing somber hues, a

heavily jeweled necklace, and a black lace veil. The film subverts the Church's expected position of moral arbiter, effectively removing one barrier that stood between the King and his sexual possession of Jeanne, and instead uses the Church and its own symbols to persuade Jeanne to acquiesce. The Queen kneels in front of the alter directly under a statue of the Virgin Mary and as the Queen turns to look at Jeanne, the multiple female images convey the age-old suffering of women as the victims of male dominance. But this scene also underscores the seeming *rightness* of female subordination as the positioning of the Queen directly under the statue of the Virgin Mother places Jeanne in the opposing position as the rebel. The Queen asks: "Is it for my sake, yes?" as Jeanne's reason for refusing to sleep with the king. The significance lies in the Queen's admonishment: "Jeanne, we are not that important, we are women. The King is important," which, coupled with the Queen's positioning, reaffirms female subordination.

The powerful vestimentary symbolism becomes an integral part of both the *mise en scene* and the narrative for the remainder of the film. When the King finally confronts Jeanne, the scene reveals a hollow-framed wooden figure positioned behind him: a dressmaking shell outfitted in a corset and skirt. The image of the shell-woman becomes strikingly visible throughout key moments in the film, as does the corset itself, advancing the film's project by way of a haunting female image wrapped in bondage that becomes a visual code for Jeanne's state as the captured object of male desire. In this scene, the king informs Jeanne that he will have her, but he insists that she must come to him; he will not force her. Though traditional romantic films hold the "bliss of genitality" as "the *end* of desire,"³ *The King's Whore* goes beyond the attainment of sex to reach its narrative closure: instead it seeks the total surrender, body and soul, of the unwilling female object to the dominant male subject (Shumway, 10).

The King's Whore works on the female spectator by forcing her to identify with the objectification of Jeanne, first by establishing the powerful position of the desiring subject (King =ultimate power); second, by having the church sanction the King's adulterous desire for her; and third, by depicting the intensity of Jeanne's defiance of the King throughout the entire film, which paradoxically enables the female viewer to enjoy her own objectification, made acceptable through Jeanne's resistance. Jeanne's resistance creates for the female viewer the illusion of not succumbing to her objectification while at the subconscious level desiring to be possessed. In *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, E. Ann Kaplan describes "the passivity revealed in women's fantasies is reinforced by the way women are positioned in film. . . .[women are] made to participate in what is essentially a masochistic fantasy"(28). Furthermore, Jeanne's resistance is so entrenched within the film's diegesis that it becomes a point of identification for the female viewer, an identification that "represent[s] different sides of her desire and aspiration" (Mulvey, "Afterthoughts" 76). She desires objectification by the male protagonist, but to *appear* to own her own desire, she must resist.

After their first night together, Jeanne's status as king's possession becomes for her an instrument of power. She now significantly exhibits her eroticized objectification under the king's possessive gaze to achieve her own goals, demanding that the King dismiss all of her husband's family from his court. However, she does not insist on the dismissal of her husband, who may continue with his duties as the King's chamberlain. As noted earlier, the act of dressing a woman is an important demonstration of male power and possession and in the imbalance of power in this erotic triangle, it is Jeanne's own husband, Count de Verue, acting as an *agent* for the King, who is in charge of her re-dressing. This creates an interesting irony, as Jeanne's husband must create and choose clothing to put another man's possessive mark upon a woman who is legally his own. The King takes pleasure in asserting his power to re-dress Jeanne as he orders de Verue to put more blue among her new gowns. De Verue's act of re-dressing both castrates his own phallic power at the same time, as agent of the King, he is forced to affirm another's phallic power through clothing he is tasked to provide.

The dressmaker's shells, carried by Verue's servants, are prominent here, especially a corseted one exemplifying Jeanne's captivity as fashion. One dressmaker shell is symbolically positioned between Verue and the King, accentuating the woman as object of male competition. By creating a character who occupies a position of ultimate power, the film forces the viewer to identify with the dominant male rather than the husband, even though the dominant male (the King) breaks all social rules. The film works to establish the corset as a symbolic surrogate for Jeanne, to fetishize the corset which is then later used to heighten "voyeuristic looking, [both] intra- and extra- diegetically . . . especially evident in those moments of contest and combat . . . at which a narrative outcome is determined through a fight" (Neale, 16). In *The King's Whore* the outcome of each battle between Jeanne and the King results in her rape.

The next scene is an example of the effective removal of the woman's power to control her own image, even while she believes she has the ability to control it. In "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse," Kaja Silverman explains that fashion "exhibitionism always implies woman's subjugation to a controlling male gaze . . . Sartorial extravagance was a mark of aristocratic power and privilege . . . a mechanism for tyrannizing" which the King uses here to manipulate and exercise his power over Jeanne's husband (139). Jeanne, in front of a mirror and dressed only in corset and skirt, manipulates her "to-be-looked-at-ness"⁴ as her husband enters the room to begin the process of her outfitting. When de Verue stares at Jeanne, she grabs a cloth and covers her breast, thwarting his gaze. The camera then switches to the King who is in a dark room watching intently behind a two-way glass mirror. The film uses erotically charged red light which closes in around his face, partially obscured as he engages in his voyeuristic stare. The king's face is reflected onto the mirror, creating a superimposed image that is first seen alongside Jeanne and then moves to hover over her and de

Verue, suggesting his control of their destinies: "The image of a woman in front of the mirror, playing to both the male look and her own, has become a familiar metaphor of sexual oppression"(Silverman 139). While Jeanne attempts to control her husband's gaze, she is unwittingly the object of the King's gaze, underscoring her lack of subjectivity. As Kaplan explains:

The female body *is* sexuality, providing the erotic object for the male spectator. In the woman's film, the gaze must be de-eroticized (since the spectator is now assumed to be female), but in doing this the films effectively disembody their spectator. The repeated masochistic scenarios effectively immobilize the female viewer. She is refused pleasure in that imaginary identification which, as Mulvey has shown, repeats for men the experience of the mirror phase. The idealized male screen heroes give back to the male spectator his more perfect mirror self, together with a sense of mastery and control. In contrast, the female is given only powerless, victimized figures who, far from perfect, reinforce the basic sense of worthlessness that already exists. (28)

The female viewer is forced to identify with Jeanne's objectification; in fact, the voyeuristic fetishization of Jeanne's image, allow the female viewer to feel pleasure as the object of the King's secret gaze. The red lighting and audible sound of the King's breathing heighten the eroticism of the scene, which culminates in Jeanne donning Dalton/the King's blue coat, his vestimentary possessive mark, as the camera pans upward emphasizing his eerily omnipotent image.

In the first rape scene the King has been languishing on the bed watching Jeanne, who is dressed only in a corset and skirt. He comes up behind her and places a beautiful jeweled necklace around her throat. The jewels drape across her chest to hang invitingly in her cleavage as the King's hand begins to caress her corseted breast, as she stiffens, unresponsive to his touch. The King, frustrated with her coldness, grabs her, throws her to the floor and begins to forcibly kiss her as his insistent hands rub her corseted breast. As he begins to rape her, Jeanne scratches him; he pulls back to strike her and as his powerful arm swings down the scene abruptly changes to an explosion and the battlefield where Jeanne's husband has joined the ranks.

This shot, from rape to battlefield, works to "involve an imaginary structuration of vision . . . [which] also activates the aggressive component of imaginary processes" (Doane, "Woman's Film", 70). The male viewer is free to continue imagining, and deriving pleasure from, Jeanne's rape as "current ideologies of masculinity involve so centrally notions and attitudes to do with aggression, power, and control" that the male viewer's desire for the imagined sexual possession of Jeanne continues onto the battlefield. In the male viewer's subconscious the bedroom and battlefield are one and the same (Neale, 11). The structuring of these scenes bring to mind both the scopophilic power of an earlier

violent scene where the King, again frustrated by Jeanne's unresponsiveness, shouts at her "What are you? A stone?," then beats her, drags her naked from the bed, and throws her out the door into the hallway. The extreme domination that the film espouses touches a dark instinctive male desire for physical power and possessive control and, according to Mulvey, as "The male spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" ("Visual Pleasure" 63).

The film begins by enlisting sympathy for Jeanne's situation as victim of the King's obsession, but its diegetic evolution compels the female viewer *to desire* the ultra-masculine King. However uncomfortable the violence is in these two scenes, unconsciously the violence appeals to the male propensity for total control over the object of their desire, the female "other", while at the same time the scenes reinforce patriarchal goals by "permit[ing] the female spectator to enjoyably experience a . . . confrontation with male brutality"(Studlar, 31).

As the film nears its end, the King's attempt to control Jeanne has reached a powerful and darkly erotic climax, and revealing its most graphic sartorial symbolism to reinforce Jeanne's position as fetishized object of male desire. Jeanne has finally escaped the King and his rage finds unique vestimentary expression. The scene begins with the King gazing out of the ruins of their bedroom (destroyed by war), a burned-out shell that was his lover's nest and her cage, accompanied extra-diegetically by deep base tones; pounding and tense. He roots around the closet, finds Jeanne's soiled corset, now empty like the dressmaker's shells. He caresses it, places his head in its center and breathes deeply of its scent, rubs his face around it, his longing for Jeanne escaping in deep guttural moans. In frustration, he throws the corset to the floor, drops down on top of it and begins to undulate, making love to it, possessing the corset as he once possessed Jeanne. The camera angle cuts to floor level like a handi-cam, rocking unsteadily as it closes in on the king's tortured face, emphasizing the scopophilic sensuality and sexual despair of the moment. This scene is uncomfortably voyeuristic, even masturbatory, likening the viewer's desire with the King's desperate attempt to fuck the corset-as-Jeanne. Because of the film's manipulation of the viewer's desire, the impact of the King desperately trying to possess Jeanne through her corset is somehow more intense, driving home the scopophilic identification of the male viewer with the most intimate desires of the on-screen male subject. Interestingly, for the female viewer, the undulations of the King upon an article of her own clothing intensifies her desire to *become* that object, to be fully possessed by patriarchal dominance.

Conclusion

Throughout the film, the corset represents both Jeanne's bondage and her resistance to the King and appears significantly during confrontations between

the King and Jeanne, and the King and de Verue. When Jeanne is raped earlier by the King, the relevance of the corset becomes apparent as his later symbolic “rape” of the corset demonstrates the intensity of his obsessive need to brutalize and dominate her, as well as a signaling his declining power over her. The film’s use of sartorial symbolism illustrates Kaja Silverman’s point that vestments function as an “important . . . implement. . . for articulating and territorializing human corporeality—for mapping its erotogenic zones and for affixing a sexual identity”(146). Jeanne’s identity, particularly her status as the King’s whore is intrinsically fashion-coded, as the corset and Jeanne become intertwined, culminating in the King’s desperate attempt to reclaim Jeanne through her fetishized corset.

At the film’s end, the King has been paralyzed, and feminized, in a duel with Jeanne’s husband⁵ and is shown hanging by leather straps in a monstrous wheelchair-like contraption, surrounded by his son and ministers. The camera slowly pans from the King’s feet, which are suspended a few inches above the ground, and pauses significantly at his groin area—emphasizing his now useless sexual organ, its uncontrolled lust the cause of his downfall. But more importantly, the camera continues moving upward revealing a symbolic vestimentary reversal: the King is now wearing a leather corset, to which the straps that hold him to the frame are connected. He is now the castrated captive, a result of his own obsession and, like Jeanne earlier, is wearing the symbol of his imprisonment. While Jeanne has returned of her own volition in the final scene, her outfit of colorless breeches, coat, hip boots, and shorn hair masculinizes her.

The film’s conclusion effects an overall role reversal in its main players: the beastly, ultra masculine King is now reduced to a feminized shell; and Jeanne, the innocent victim of desire, returns to him on her own but wrapped in the vestimentary illusion of masculinity. However, Jeanne’s symbolic choice of male dress, and particularly her shorn hair, speak more of an internal defiance of her own love for the King. She even walks to the other end of the room before turning and quietly saying “I love you,” almost inaudibly, as if he were again forcing her.

When Jeanne articulates her love for the King, the film’s message is clear: she should have recognized a good thing when she had it. As Richard Burt explains in “The Revolting Renaissance: Hard Men, Hot Blood(i)ed Women, Fabulously Glamorous Losers, and Other Seductive Cinematic Pleasures”:

While some version of an opposition between normal and perverse desire is inescapable, uncritically held assumptions about the normalcy of desire, both female and male, have effectively foreclosed consideration both of the loser woman and of the female desire of the loser women characters . . . What brings the women characters in these films [Burt includes *King’s Whore* here] under the rubric of the loser is that romance is narrated as

disaster and ruin . . . More specifically, these films put on display not only bloodied women as spectacles but an erotic female fantasy about dismemberment of the male body (decapitation [or paralysis] as castration . . .), namely, that men may be turned on by this fantasy. (3-4)

King's Whore does indeed replay the patriarchal strategy of constructing the female character in such a way as to direct her, and the female viewer, to be so victimized that her only recourse is to desire her victimization, for Jeanne to give in and return the King's love as the only means to fulfillment. But the film's manipulation of desire *denies* the female viewer by diverting her desire back to the patriarchal character, leaving the female viewer yearning for a return to that feeling of "to-be-looked-at-ness," to be the object of (the un-paralyzed) the King's venerated gaze. Following Burt's theory, the blame for the failed romance of *King's Whore* is thus shifted to Jeanne's for not desiring what she was supposed to desire at the outset (3). The film's patriarchal ideology structures male desire for a return to the era of subordinate femininity as it also works to create a nostalgic female viewer who looks longingly back at the patriarchal male: an ideology reinforced by the King's paralysis—an unacceptable condition that forces the female viewer to blame herself for his demise and regret her rejection of her earlier objectification.

Sartorial symbolism contributes largely to the ideological message of the film's diegesis as it works to manipulate viewer desire and reinforce the patriarchal dominance of women through the visual emphasis of the representational use of costuming, particularly the corset. The psychological coding that costuming creates, especially in the period film, is a necessary component for the manifestation and reinforcement of traditional gender roles, even going so far as to make male violence seem desirable, or in Freudian terms, the "apparent monstrosity [of violence] reveals the irresistible power of sex and sexual attraction to render the loathsome desirable" (Bottigheimer, 81). Though fashion itself may change, its symbolism spans the boundaries of time, continuing to reinforce patriarchal dominance and creating a sense of timeless affinity between women, a sisterhood if you will, by creating a "naïve referentiality" that puts "quotation marks around the garments" used in film that work to reinforce female subordination (Silverman 150). Such costuming use is coded to naturalize the belief that a women's desire has always been her subjugation to a dominating male: whether she realizes it or not.

Notes

¹ In *Birds* the phallic control is not necessarily male, but instead is represented by nature, acting as the phallus, to punish those who do not bend to the law of nature, or the law of the father. Almost all of the bird attacks are on women, with the exception of Dan Fawcett's death in which the focus is on Mitch's Mother's reaction to her discovery of the body.

² The shoes Marnie places in her pocket after she has stolen money from the safe in Mark's office symbolize her autonomy. As a thief, she is constantly on the move (shoes, feet) and at that moment in the film she controls her own life. But, a shoe then falls from her left-hand pocket, signally her eventual loss of control over her destiny to a man she will be forced to marry; the shoe falls from the pocket of the 'wedding' hand. In *Thomas Crown*, Rene Russo shows up at a black and white ball wearing a deliciously erotic black lace gown but with a red lace scarf as adornment; red signaling both her defiance of rules and her intention of seducing Crown. In the first scene's of *Birds*, Melanie Daniels is wearing a bouclé (a nubby, fuzzy yarn) sweater-jacket that mimics fur, immediately associating her with the animals that surround her in the shop.

³ In "Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage," David Shumway describes the "bliss of genitality" as a Hollywood ideological device that heightens desire in romantic films. Hollywood romances hold the attainment of desire as the death of that desire, once the object has been obtained which culminates in marriage, and so the films are constructed to end with the couple living "happily ever after," an illusion of eternally blissful consummation.

⁴ In Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she describes the act as "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact"(62).

⁵ The King orders de Verue to fight, but Verue states that he will not fight his king. The King then begins beating Verue (in front of Verue and Jeanne's child) until he agrees to the duel. But as soon as the King faces a possible death blow from Verue, he plays on Verue's loyalty: "I am your King." Verue turns away, assuming he has won, and the King raises up and stabs Verue repeatedly. Throughout the film, the King stretches the limits of male behavior within the phallic code of masculinity, in which men may fight for possession of a woman, but must always be honorable towards each other. The film never allows the King to suffer the consequences of stealing another man's wife. However, by killing Verue under such dishonorable circumstances the King's paralysis, a feminization, seems to be a most fitting punishment for his breach of the male code of honor.

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