

“Queering Masculinity: Sexual Dissidence as Anti-bullying discourse in Kimberly Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry*”¹

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In 1999, Kimberly Peirce’s film adaptation of Brandon-Teena’s life became a critical and commercial hit, propelling issues of transgender identities and homophobic violence into mainstream culture. More than ten years after its release, the effects of homophobia on LGBT youth have again been thrust into the spotlight following the shocking rise of suicides in this demographic. Faced with sexual bullying, harassment, and the threat of violence, many LGBT youth have lost hope that there may be a future without the constant torment of homophobic intolerance. Internet campaigns like the “It Gets Better Project”² and “The Trevor Project”³ have emerged to provide a motivational space where young LGBT people can find support and inspiration that their lives will get better—that love, happiness, and personal fulfillment can be realized within their lifetime. The spirit of these hugely popular campaigns is not only to provide inspiration to troubled teens, but also convey a subversive counter-discourse to pervasive social intolerance of gender and sexual alterity. In this regard, anti-bullying campaigns take up the subversive potential of Brandon-Teena’s legacy by positioning LGBT identities at the forefront of cultural discourse. By bringing social awareness of the day-to-day struggles of LGBT youth into mainstream culture, these campaigns continue the dissident spirit of Brandon-Teena’s courage to live beyond the hostile realities of homophobic society.

In 2010, Dan Savage, the founder of the “It Gets Better Project,” and his husband posted an internet response to the suicide of Billy Lucas, a 15-year-old high school student who was bullied for being gay.⁴ In the video, Savage encourages young LGBT individuals to not lose hope, that a future “filled with joy and family and pleasure” is possible.⁵ While Savage’s message of hope has been criticized for its lack of practical engagement with the problem,⁶ the enormous popularity of the internet project is testament to the growing awareness of LGBT bullying in popular culture. The recently released documentary *Bully*, directed by Lee Hirsch, and its social action campaign “The Bully project” is another example of the emerging discourses surrounding anti-bullying advocacy.⁷ While the spirit of these campaigns is to raise awareness, inspire hope, and advocate for social action, there remains an unaddressed issue in regards to the ideological foundations of interpersonal violence that is being overlooked. What Kimberley Peirce’s film *Boys Don’t Cry* highlights, and what I intend to address in this paper, is the urgent need to challenge the ways in which dominant culture is both complacent about and complicit in the securing of masculine dominance by violence. To ignore patriarchal ideology in its binary configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality is a fatal mistake that results in the violent deaths of young people. Rather than accepting violence as normal and natural by justifying its perpetrators as “boys being boys,” we have to understand violence as part of a continuum of homophobic intolerance that is entrenched within the dominant patriarchal socio-cultural order. As long as patriarchal masculinity remains the status quo, individuals will continue to perform their gender through predation, intimidation, and aggression; they will continue to target and punish those who are different from the norm, projecting their fears of inadequacy onto those

who are vulnerable and marginalized; they will continue to repress their emotions, and use their bodies as weapons or instruments of patriarchal power. In short, as long as masculinity is socially constructed in opposition to femininity and homosexuality, there will be some individuals who commit violence in conformity with normative gender roles.

As theorist Jonathan Dollimore affirms, “homophobia is endemic in contemporary society.”⁸ The shocking statistics detailing harassment, violence, and self-harm among LGBT teenagers confirms this view: 9 out of every 10 LGBT students have experienced harassment;⁹ more than 1/3 have reported physical violence; and 1 out of every 3 LGBT children or teenagers has attempted suicide.¹⁰ Homophobia is not just pervasive in our culture; it can be seen as engrained within dominant social norms. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the ideological foundation of homophobia derives from the gender norms of hegemonic masculinity.¹¹ Specifically, the binary structure of gender within patriarchal culture preserves gender hierarchies by marginalizing queer subjectivities as unnatural, pathological, and subordinate. By relegating LGBT identities as Other, patriarchal masculinity maintains its aura of power and privilege. Homophobic suppression of those individuals who do not readily conform to gender norms is performed through a spectrum of violent actions: from verbal harassment, gay slurs, and bullying to extreme acts of assault, sexual violation, and murder. This process of marginalization and victimization of the Other is legitimized through gender ideologies and a deeply rooted psychological fear and denial of one’s own alterity. When patriarchal society engages in strategies of victim-blaming, disavowing or silencing victim testimonials, and pathologizing the Other as hysterical and deviant, this needs to

be understood as a projection of its own anxieties and a screening or veiling of its own crimes, its own inherent toxicity that poisons and corrupts our ability as a society to become more inclusive and egalitarian.

The dominant gender ideology of patriarchal masculinity is centered on the structural binary oppositions of sex and gender: specifically, male and female, masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality. These divisive labels are used to exclude certain groups from fully accessing the power and privileges of the hegemonic elite. Contrary to popular belief, theorists like Sedgwick, Michael S. Kimmel, and Dollimore have argued that binary oppositions such as these are not stable, reliable or coherent identities, but rather an ideological invention used to conceal the inherent instabilities and dependencies that exist between the seemingly divergent terms. In regards to hegemonic masculinity, Sedgwick, Kimmel, and Dollimore contend that male heterosexual subjectivity repudiates homosexuality as pathological, unnatural and inferior, depending on the alterity of homosexual or feminized Others to define and construct itself. To suggest a relationship of dependence, instability, and interconnectedness exists between dominant and marginal gender identities is to counter the exclusion and persecution of the Other. Recent gender theorists deconstruct and destabilize dichotomies that perpetuate homophobia and misogyny by identifying how “antithetical” Otherness in fact “inheres within.”¹² In this way, the repressive ideological norms of patriarchal structures are shown to be fragile constructs threatened by internal instabilities and contradictions. When binary oppositions are blurred and divisions of sex, sexuality and gender threaten to collapse into one another,

there are both positive and negative consequences: on the positive side, liberation from what Roland Barthes calls “the binary prison” can result in a “free play” of meaning and sensuality.¹³ however, the reverse is also true. The instability of binary terms can also provoke defensive antigay sentiments of the oppressive sexual system, by triggering fear, denial, and violent repudiation of sexual or gender alterity.

The threat posed by the destabilized binary logic of the dominant patriarchal social order is centered on what theorist Michael S. Kimmel calls the “unmasking” of masculine gender identity.¹⁴ Specifically, Kimmel describes the psychological foundations of homophobia in patriarchal society as a fear of oneself being exposed as “not [a] real man.”¹⁵ It is this fear of revelation and recognition that within oneself there can be found the trace of homosexuality and effeminacy that motivates the psychological processes of denial, repudiation, and suppression.¹⁶ Along with an overriding feeling of fear, hegemonic masculinity is characterized by its collective denial of sameness with the Other and projection of one’s undesirable qualities onto the Other: in this case, onto LGBT individuals. Thus, male subjectivities that are commonly perceived as stable and coherent are revealed to be fraught with anxieties and fears that are commonly suppressed or sublimated into homophobia and gender violence. The quintessential example of this occurs in Peirce’s film *Boys Don’t Cry*, where two young men, John and Tom, react with homophobic violence once they discover Brandon’s subversive blurring of the patriarchal binary structure.

In 2001, the film journal *Screen* featured a series of articles by authors who critically assess the film's depiction of transgender identity under the mainstream constraints of popular cinema. Whether viewed as a neo-noir crime story, a reinvented Western, a romance, a bio-pic, a docudrama, a road-movie, or a melodrama, Peirce's film adaptation of the events leading up to Brandon Teena's death has become a part of popular culture. The mainstream popularity of the film has elevated Brandon to iconic status, "the stuff of legend."¹⁷ Following the critical readings of Michelle Aaron, Judith Halberstam, Lisa Henderson, Melissa Rigney, Gary Morris, and Katherine Monk, I highlight the subversive power of Brandon's sexual dissidence as he unsettles the dominant ideologies of patriarchal culture. With focus on how the dominant social order upholds the boundaries of gender identity through homophobic violence, I situate Tom and John's violence as a punitive response to not only Brandon's gender and sexual subversion, but also their own anxiety over the queering of masculinity. In this way, I hope to draw attention to the continuum of interpersonal violence that extends from school-yard bullying to rape and murder, where it is our society's acceptance of masculine violence as "normal" or "natural" which needs to be addressed as directly responsible for the persecution of those who do not readily adhere or fit into hegemonic gender norms.

Brandon's subject-position as a female-to-male transgender individual destabilizes the norms of binary logic. Although biologically female, Brandon lives as a man and those around him also recognize Brandon as man, that is, until his secret is discovered. Brandon's appearance and behaviors conform to hegemonic masculinity; along with

John and Tom, whom he befriends, Brandon chases women, drinks beer, gets in fights, and engages in risky macho posturing, as exemplified in his participation in bumper-skiing and a barroom brawl; as Gary Morris states in his film review, these are the “rituals of men,” the actions that must be performed in order to be part of “the male world.”¹⁸ Brandon also stuffs his pants or wears a phallic substitute to mimic the presence of a penis. In these ways, Brandon readily conforms to hegemonic masculinity by adopting all the external appearances and practices of normative masculinity. In this regard, Peirce’s depiction of Brandon’s masculinity brings to light the social construction of gender identity, as well as the imposition of conformity in masculine self-fashioning. As Margo Jefferson states, Brandon “remind[s] us that every boy has to practice being a boy.” Indeed, every boy or man has to prove himself through gestures, attitudes, appearances, initiations, and actions in order to claim the power and privileges of manhood.

Brandon’s acceptance by John and Tom also conveys the importance of mutual identification among men who are alienated from dominant culture. The male characters are products of a regional culture where conformity, boredom, and privation are all part of the conditions that breed a violent and oppressive masculinity.¹⁹ John and Tom, as well as the female members of their social circle, are all identified as “wall people,” a name that Morris defines in his review as “social cast-offs...who hang out against the wall of an all-night market waiting for something to happen.”²⁰ Implicit in this identity as “wall people” is the boredom of living in a small town and the economic privation that prevents these characters from escaping their bleak environment, as well as the social

ostracism they experience from the rest of their community. Indeed, drinking and drugs seem to be the only form of escape available to these characters who are otherwise stuck in a dead-end town. Brandon, John, and Tom routinely commit crimes, most often stealing cars; John and Tom have spent time in jail for car theft. Brandon is also incarcerated for not showing up in court, as Teena Brandon, on car theft charges. This connection between criminality and masculinity can be read as a symptom of what Roger Horrocks calls “masculinity in crisis,” the pathological condition of some men’s alienation and sense of lack in relation to the power and privileges of hegemonic masculinity. Horrocks argues that the majority of men feel a sense of powerlessness, particularly economic powerlessness, which in turn, leads to feelings of inadequacy, impotence or castration.²¹ When men fear they are inadequate, they may act out in symptomatic behavior: criminal acts, alcoholism, drug addiction, and violence. Indeed, as Horrocks states, “violence [is] a means to prove [one is] a man—through actions that are culturally sanctioned or promoted as masculine.”²²

Among the men, the power dynamics of patriarchal culture are enacted through their interpersonal relationships. Specifically, it is possible to read the relationships between John, Tom and Brandon as hierarchical, involving rivalries for power. In John’s and Tom’s homosocial bond, John is conveyed as the dominant male, whereas Tom is characterized as the follower. John and Tom use intimidation and threats of violence constantly to disavow any feelings of weakness or inadequacy. They torment Brandon psychologically, perceiving him as weaker or more effeminate. John and Tom will subsequently use terms of emasculation to refer to Brandon, such as “little man” or

“little dude.” John and Tom also boss Brandon around, telling him to “clean the ashtrays” when they see Brandon helping out around Lana’s house.

Brandon’s acceptance into John and Tom’s social circle is threatened not only by the potential discovery of Brandon’s past, but also by Brandon’s succession of John as the primary man in Lana’s life. The fact that Brandon begins a romantic relationship with Lana, a young woman living in Falls City, directly contributes to the tension and rivalry between John and Brandon. John makes his proprietary claim evident to Brandon when he states, “You gotta remember, little man, this is my house.”²³ Not only does John position himself as the patriarchal figure of Lana’s family, but also conveys his dominance over Brandon by belittling his manhood. Yet, the fact that Brandon, a so-called “little man” has effectively bested John in the contest for Lana’s love also places John’s dominant patriarchal masculinity into question. The fact that Lana clearly desires Brandon only adds to John’s jealousy and possessiveness, which in turn escalates the violent and erotically-charged exchanges between the two men. While tensions exist between John and Brandon as homosocial rivals for the same girl, it is John’s questioning of Brandon’s sex and gender that instigates his overt violence. Uncovering Brandon’s past as “Teena-Brandon” through a newspaper article and then discovering a pamphlet on sexual identity crisis when snooping through Brandon’s bag, John and Tom’s hostility toward Brandon grows into violent hysteria. John and Tom are repulsed by what they imagine to be Brandon’s sexual deviance. In their homophobic reactions, there is anger and resentment that they have failed to perceive Brandon’s difference all along. Indeed, they had fully accepted Brandon as one of their own, inviting him into

their masculine fraternal bond. In regards to John and Tom's own sense of masculine gender identity, this failure to differentiate Brandon's deviance from their own normative masculinity exposes the inherent instability and interconnectedness between patriarchal binary oppositions. In this way, Brandon's queerness, that is, his subversion of the binaries that construct gender and sexuality, is equated with falseness and deception by those who accuse him of lying about his identity. In this way, the violence of John and Tom is a punitive response to not only Brandon's gender and sexual subversion, but also their own anxiety over the queering of identity.

Fuelled by homophobic rage, John and Tom confront Brandon accusing him of perversion and sickness. They go on to call Brandon a "fucking pervert," saying that he has a "sick psycho brain," that he is brainwashing Lana, and infecting her with his "sickness."²⁴ The language used within this scene highlights the normative definitions of sex and gender, from which Brandon's transgender identity is labeled abnormal, pathological, and perverse. Within the constraints of John and Tom's binary logic, there is no acceptable deviation between one's anatomy and one's gender identity. Brandon's transgender identity sparks violent hostility in John and Tom because not only does Brandon not fit into the binary structure of patriarchal gender norms, but also by destabilizing the boundaries, Brandon's identity has also put John and Tom's own masculinity under threat. In this regard, Brandon's transgressive blurring of sex, gender and sexuality is perceived as a danger that must be contained. John and Tom, as well as Lana's mother, are threatened by Brandon's influence, to such an extent that they fear that Lana will somehow be infected. As Lana's mother states, "We're just tryin' to

save you,” with the implication that her daughter needs saving from the dangers posed by Brandon’s transgressive sexuality. What is really at stake within this intense confrontation is the destabilization of dichotomous sex/gender norms and the subsequent homophobic response used to contain or suppress this perceived threat.

Throughout the film, Peirce presents a counter discourse to binary divisions of homosexuality and heterosexuality through her blurring of normalcy and deviance. Specifically, Peirce puts into question John and Tom’s seemingly stable masculine gender identities by illustrating their instability and interconnection with Brandon’s queerness. As critic Michelle Aaron argues, there is a “weirdness” or “queerness”²⁵ that is present in each man. Both John and Tom are ex-cons, a fact that implies their own prior experience of social marginalization as well as the powerlessness and victimization of imprisonment. Both men also engage in self-destructive activities: Tom engages in self-mutilation and is a pyromaniac, while John, we are informed, has “no impulse control.”²⁶ As noted by Katherine Monk, Tom’s self-mutilation is represented sympathetically to the audience, showing his sense of “pain and helplessness;”²⁷ John’s fatalism is also represented by a certain degree of pity. Indeed, there is an overall feeling of sorrow for these characters who are trapped within the constraints of the social, economic, and ideological impoverishment of Falls City.

Taking this argument one step further, Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, the directors of *The Brandon Teena Story*²⁸ pose the idea that it is not Brandon who is suffering from a gender identity crisis, but rather John and Tom. As Melissa Anderson states within her

review of the films, the “heterosexual identity inhabited by people like John Lotter and Tom Nissen—an identity so fragile that, when threatened by Brandon’s ‘masquerade’ of masculinity—knows no other response than violence.”²⁹ This suggestion that John and Tom are suffering from a crisis of their own masculine gender identity reinforces the reading that what they are really disturbed by is not Brandon’s perversion, but rather the recognition of their own alterity. Instead of empathizing with Brandon as an individual who is also socially marginalized, John and Tom project their gender anxieties onto Brandon, using him as a scapegoat for their own fragile sense of masculinity. They then proceed to subject Brandon to inhumane acts of violence and cruelty, proving that it is not Brandon who is sick or disturbed, but rather John and Tom whose defensive hypermasculinity is revealed to be pathological and disturbing.

Not only are John and Tom repulsed by what they imagine to be Brandon’s sexual deviance but also, in their homophobic reactions, they are angry and resentful that they have been duped. With regard to John’s and Tom’s own gender anxiety, this failure to differentiate Brandon’s deviance from their own normative masculinity exposes the instability of and interconnectedness between these. John and Tom take up the position of guardians or protectors of patriarchal gender norms when they forcibly restrain Brandon in the bathroom, and examine his genitals. In what Judith Halberstam calls a “quasi-medical scrutiny of Brandon’s body,” John and Tom roughly examine Brandon’s anatomy and subject Brandon to “a violent mode of looking” that she identifies with “castration” and “the male gaze.”³⁰ Within this violent act of looking, John and Tom are able to reinforce their binary logic, by confirming Brandon’s biological sex as female. In

this way, they not only humiliate Brandon by stripping him of his masculinity, but also attempt to reify Brandon's gender within essentialist terms. The scene culminates with John and Tom forcing Lana to also look at Brandon's genitals; yet instead of confirming John and Tom's oppressive and violent gaze, Lana yells at them "to leave *him* alone!"³¹ Lana's use of the pronoun "him" to describe Brandon presents a counter discourse to John and Tom's oppressive sexual essentialism. In this way, we can see how Lana and Brandon's love for each other contains the potential to transcend the oppressive constraints of societal norms and binary logic.

John and Tom's violent re-inscription of femininity onto Brandon's body does not end with the public disclosure of his genitals, but rather culminates with the act of rape. As certain critics have suggested, Brandon's violation through visual scrutiny and his rape are symbolic forms of castration, whereby Brandon is violently severed from his masculine subject-position. Rachel Swan writes, "We may see this rape as the moment in which John and Tom castrate Brandon, thereby restoring his vagina as a female orifice."³² Swan's reading of the rape confirms the view that John and Tom see themselves as guarding or protecting dominant gender norms, where "the rape repositions everyone according to their 'god-given' gender."³³ Not only does the rape reinscribe Brandon as a woman, but also it enables John and Tom to "[reaffirm] themselves as men."³⁴ Melissa Rigney's reading of Brandon as "a masculine-identified woman" also draws upon the film's representation of "symbolic castration"³⁵ wherein John and Tom's rape of Brandon is an attempt to "normaliz[e] Brandon's body and...realign categories of sex and gender."³⁶ Rigney's interpretation of Brandon's rape

also reinforces the idea that John and Tom are threatened by Brandon's subversion of gender norms. Specifically, she suggests, "through...the violence done to Brandon's body" John and Tom eliminate "the threat to [their] masculinity...Brandon is no longer the 'better boyfriend' or the better man, but is instead a victim."³⁷ In this sense, the act of rape can be viewed as a means of containing a subversive threat to the established order. By constructing rape as a form of symbolic castration used to reaffirm the normative alignment of sex and gender, Peirce implicates John and Tom's rape of Brandon as an act of extreme conformity to the dominant patriarchal social order.

Rather than seeing John and Tom as unruly monsters, Peirce represents their violence as exemplary of hypermasculine conformity. The concealed endorsement of homophobia and misogyny within the dominant social order is exposed once Brandon reports his rape to police authorities; instead of defending Brandon's rights, the police officer's interrogation can be seen as yet another form of rape or castration. The police officer bullies Brandon, subjecting him to humiliating questions and further degradation. Sheriff Laux, who interviews Brandon following his rape, also dehumanizes Brandon in his mistreatment of the case. Specifically, Laux refers to Brandon as "it"³⁸ and does not protect him from John and Tom. As an example of homophobia, Laux's statement reveals the failure of the law authorities to protect Brandon's rights owing to their inexcusable intolerance of Brandon as a transgender individual. Laux's questioning of Brandon also has the effect of re-traumatizing him. Indeed, in many ways Laux's questioning seems to support John's suggestion that Brandon "brought this on [him]self," that everything that happened to Brandon was somehow his fault. Indeed,

with the exception of Lana, everyone accuses Brandon of lying to them, believing that his lies must be punished. The association of lying or deception with Brandon's performance reinforces the fear and anxiety surrounding non-normative gender and sexuality. In this regard, Peirce's representation illustrates how homophobia is a central organizing principle of contemporary hegemonic masculinity and dominant patriarchal ideology. John and Tom's homophobic response to Brandon, which leads not only to rape, but also to Brandon's eventual murder, should not be viewed outside of the dominant or normative construction of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, the violence committed by John and Tom needs to be understood as part of a continuum of homophobic intolerance that is entrenched within the dominant socio-cultural order. As Laura S. Brown argues, within dominant culture, there is an ideological precept that maintains that certain people are viewed as "less than human, less than deserving of fair treatment."³⁹ Within our culture, the threat and reality of violence is a constant presence in the lives of LGBT individuals to such a degree that homophobia can be viewed as engrained in the status quo.

The potential to transform and liberate sex and gender from patriarchal constraints is directly tied to our ability to imagine and represent a future where violence is no longer acceptable or promoted as the normal or natural condition of masculinity. Peirce's depiction of Brandon presents a potential resistance to the constraints of patriarchal binary logic by unsettling the opposition between what is dominant and normative in terms of sex and gender with what is perceived as marginal and deviant. Following from Dollimore's theory of sexual dissidence, Brandon's ability to live and dream beyond the

constraints of his society offers a potentially revolutionary space, wherein normative sexual and gender categories are liberated from their “binary prison.”⁴⁰ Even though Peirce’s film depicts Brandon’s horrific death, it is the now legendary courage and heroism of Brandon’s spirit that stands out as the central message of the film. The final scene shows Lana driving out of Falls City, interposed with Brandon’s voice, reciting the letter he had written to her. In the letter, Brandon not only expresses his enduring love, but also his unwavering belief that one day soon they will be reunited. In this way, it is the strength and courage of Brandon’s conviction that a future full of love, happiness and personal fulfillment is attainable that inspires Lana to finally escape her dead-end life in Falls City. By concluding her film with Brandon’s resilient dream of a better life and Lana’s literal escape from her constraints, Peirce encourages a positive reading of the film and of Brandon as an inspirational, rather than a tragic figure.

The lasting impact of Brandon’s story also comes from the heartfelt empathy Peirce creates through the audience’s identification with Brandon. Although not all viewers would experience this insight, the broad audience of Peirce’s film is in a position to empathize and understand Brandon’s dilemma because it involves a common struggle to be loved, accepted, and free to pursue one’s dreams without having to face social prejudices or violent, punitive consequences for being perceived as different. The audience is invited to identify with Brandon as a person, a human, rather than seeing him as John and Tom see him—as sick or perverted, a freak. In Brandon’s transgender identity, there is a potential to disrupt and challenge patriarchal norms. In this regard, Brandon’s identity reveals how John’s and Tom’s own masculinities are vulnerable,

pathological, and destructive. Beneath the pathos that we feel for Brandon and Lana—and to a lesser extent, John and Tom—as victims of a system that perpetuates a cycle of violence and violation, there is also a challenge to stop this cycle by changing or dismantling the binaries of gender and sexuality. In this regard, Brandon’s queer identity is presented as a form of personhood that needs to be not only tolerated but celebrated. As Peirce states, “I like to think that Brandon embodies something that we’re moving toward and that we will continue learning to understand, enjoy, and represent our genders and our desires, individually and collectively, in our art and in our lives.”⁴¹ The evolution of genders and desires that Peirce alludes to depends on our ability as a culture to accept and strive for diversity and nonconformity as a goal, rather than something that is ridiculed or excluded. In this effort toward progress and cultural evolution, artistic expressions of all types and internet campaigns like the “It Gets Better Project,” “The Trevor Project,” and *Bully* are leading the charge. Yet positive transformation in this direction can occur only when the boundaries of binary logic are crossed—when the divisions between self and Other are no longer barriers, but connections.

Notes

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- ¹ *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce (20th Century Fox, 1999).
- ² Dan Savage, "It Gets Better Project" (Nov 1 2010) itgetbetter.org (accessed Feb 11 2011).
- ³ "The Trevor Project." (2010), thetrevorproject.org (accessed Feb 26 2011).
- ⁴ James Montgomery, "Dan Savage Explains Why He Started 'It Gets Better' Project." mtv.com. September 30 2010 (accessed April 17 2012).
- ⁵ James Montgomery, "Dan Savage Explains."
- ⁶ Sady Doyle. "Does 'It Gets Better' Make Life Better for Gay Teens?" *The Atlantic*. October 7 2010 (accessed April 17 2012).
- ⁷ "The Bully project" (2012), thebullyproject.com (accessed April 17 2012).
- ⁸ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 33.
- ⁹ GLSEN: Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network. Sept 10 2010 (accessed Feb 11 2010) <www.glsen.org>.
- ¹⁰ "Gay Bullying," National Youth Association. Nov 7 2010. Accessed on Feb 12 2011.
- ¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.
- ¹² Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 33.
- ¹³ Roland Barthes qtd. in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition, eds. Julie Rivkin, Michael Ryan. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 933.
- ¹⁴ Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity." *Feminism & Masculinities*, ed. Peter F. Murphy. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 186.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 189.
- ¹⁶ Jeanna Bryner, "Homophobes Gay? Study Ties Anti-Fay Outlook to Homosexuality, Authoritarian Parenting." *Huffington Post*. April 9 2012 (Accessed April 17 2012). According to recent studies published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, those individuals "who are most hostile towards gays and hold strong anti-gay views may themselves have same-sex desires, albeit undercover ones."
- ¹⁷ Julianne Pidduck, "Risk and Queer Spectatorship." *Screen* 42.2 (2001): 97.
- ¹⁸ Gary Morris, "Hell in the Heartland: *Boys Don't Cry*." *Bright Lights Film Journal* 27 (2000): 2.
- ¹⁹ Lisa Henderson, "The Class Character of *Boys Don't Cry*." *Screen* 42.3 (2001): 301.
- ²⁰ Gary Morris, "Hell in the Heartland," 2.

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- ²¹ Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and Realities*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 31.
- ²² Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity*, 31.
- ²³ *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce (20th Century Fox, 1999).
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Michelle Aaron. "Pass/fail," *Screen* 42.3 (2001): 96.
- ²⁶ Ibid, 96
- ²⁷ Katherine Monk. "Review: *Boy's Don't Cry*." CBC Infoculture, Yahoo! Movies, October 27, 1999 http://www.infoculture.cbc.ca/archives/filmtv/filmtv_10261999_boysdontcryreview.html>.
- ²⁸ *The Brandon Teena Story*, directed by Susan Muska and Greta Ollafsdottir. (Zeitgeist Films: 1998).
- ²⁹ Melissa Anderson. "Review: *The Brandon Teena Story* and *Boys Don't Cry*." *Cineaste* 25.2 (2000): 55.
- ³⁰ Judith Halberstam. "The Transgender Gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*." *Screen* 42.3 (2001): 295.
- ³¹ *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce (20th Century Fox, 1999).
- ³² Rachel Swan. "Review: *Boys Don't Cry*." *Film Quarterly* 54.3 (2001): 50.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Melissa Rigney. "Brandon Goes to Hollywood: *Boys Don't Cry* and the Transgender Body in Film." *Film Criticism* 28.2 (2003-2004): 8.
- ³⁶ Ibid, 9.
- ³⁷ Ibid. 9.
- ³⁸ Stacey D'Erasmus, "Boy Interrupted." *Out Magazine* (Oct. 1999): 66.
- ³⁹ Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma." *American Imago* 48 (1991): 124.
- ⁴⁰ Roland Barthes qtd. in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Epistemology of the Closet." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, Second Edition. (New York: Blackwell, 2004), 933.
- ⁴¹ Kimberly Peirce "Brandon Goes to Hollywood." *The Advocate* 22.2 (2000): 46.

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A Womb of One's Own: A Wandering Rhetoric

By Lydia McDermott

The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into the extremest anguish and provokes all manner of diseases besides. ...Such is the nature of women and all that is female.

--Plato Timaeus qtd. in Thompson 33-4

But let the embellishment of our style (for I will repeat what I said) be manly, noble, and chaste; let it not affect effeminate delicacy, or a complexion counterfeited by paint, but let it glow with genuine health and vigour.

--Quintilian qtd. in Brody 27

I.

In her 1993 book, *Manly Writing*, Miriam Brody traces the connection of manliness in writing with virtue and truth in rhetoric texts from Quintilian through the twentieth century. Always lurking as the specter in the shadow of a true rhetoric is the figure of the eunuch, adorned in various amounts of deceit/finery depending on the current definition of good writing/rhetoric.¹ Brody writes: "In an intriguing collapse of stylistic and gendered issues, Quintilian claimed that the eunuch deceived, because his body was a

¹ Brody proceeds quite fluidly from advice on oral rhetoric to advice on written rhetoric without noting the differentiation, as Robert Connors has pointed out (*Composition-Rhetoric*). Despite this lapse, the metaphors do persist; their progeny swim forward.

lie. This logic allowed Quintilian to claim that over-ornamented language, like the eunuch, is always the enemy of truth, pretending to be what it is not” (16). The opposite of manly, true rhetoric from Quintilian forward is an effeminate, deceitful rhetoric. Man with phallus/pen intact versus emasculated, de/un-penned man dressed up like a pretty woman. But there is no woman here. The womb has wandered out of rhetoric's reach.

The womb also cannot enter. Robert Con Davis has argued convincingly that Aristotle's conception of form in writing, *logos* in rhetoric, was directly influenced by Ancient Greek figurations of the body. Con Davis's argument is complex, but I will try to summarize the main points here that are related to my developing thesis. In Aristotle's *The Generation of Animals*, Aristotle advances the prevailing argument (as we see in the quote from Plato above) that a woman's body is inferior to a man's. Not only does her womb wander indiscriminately, but also she lacks heat because of a lack of pure blood. More importantly, she has no form, because she lacks sperm. The superior, warm, sperm-producing male body defines form for Aristotle. It is “that which is able to concoct, to cause to take shape or to discharge it” (qtd. in Con Davis 44). Con Davis writes: “The connection here is form (*eidos*) as a natural and intrinsic expression of maleness” (45). A woman could not express form because it is not within the capability of her inferior body. As Con Davis asserts, “The female is alienated from form by her nature as a woman” (49). Additionally, “Aristotle argues quite clearly...that the same form (*eidos*) that is the essence of being male is the form that structures the logical relations of the *hupokeimenon* and scientific inquiry” (49). Good form in science, determined by good *logos* in rhetoric, is unavailable to women because they are women. If we trace the

language Aristotle uses to describe the male's body/form forward, we may find echoes in writing advice through the twentieth century, as Brody points out. What follows are quotes within Brody's argument. I set them here in juxtaposition/parataxis/association. Aristotle values a pattern of "contradiction," binaries with which to assert the superiority of one over the other, naturally (Con Davis 39). Here, I imagine these men in a room nodding heads and talking past one another, agreeing without listening, catching onto the key terms and feeling some solidarity together as men, writing with power/force/sperm.

Adam Smith on Lord Shaftesbury (his eunuch in the shadow): "His weakly state of body ...did not incline him greatly to be of any particular temper ...as he was of no great depth in reasoning, he would be glad to set off by ornament of language what was deficient in matter [read form]. This with the refinement of his temper, directed [him] to make choice of a pompous grand, and ornate style" (qtd. in Brody 50).

Hugh Blair writes: "They who have never studied eloquence...nor have been trained to attend to the genuine and manly beauties of good writing, are always ready to be caught by the mere glare of language" (qtd. in Brody 78).

John Genung's conception of force as “a general vigor and virility of expression wherein every word seems to have its mark and to take deep hold of the author's inner life” (qtd. in Brody 140 my emphasis).

Also Peter Elbow: “Conversely, try to feel that when you write in a mushy, foggy, wordy way, you must be trying to cover something up: message-emasculatation or self-emasculatation. You must be afraid of your strength. Taking away words lets a loud voice stick out. Does it scare you?” (qtd. in Brody 183 my emphasis).

Brody traces Quintilian's conception of “enargeia,” powerful language clearly associated with masculinity, through the centuries under new names: “nativism” for Adam Smith, “vivacity” for George Campbell, “force” for John Genung, and “authentic voice” for Peter Elbow. But enargeia traces back to the sperm in Aristotle's conception of eidos/form, and it is wriggling its way through all the above excerpts in language like “virility,” “strength,” “manliness,” and perhaps even “sticking out” with its phallic potential. The opposite of this ideal form from Quintilian forward, according to Brody, however, is not the female body, but the body of the eunuch: “weakly,” “mushy,” “foggy,” “glaring,” and “ornate.” The eunuch has sacrificed his sperm. He has chosen to imitate the mushy non-form of the woman's body. Is this worse than never having sperm? Or is the female

body/voice/writing/rhetoric just not part of the equation? She is too threatening, with her little animal-womb chomping at the bit.

The womb on the outskirts of this discussion of form/good writing is the silence of the differend of man/eunuch, good manly writing/rhetoric vs. deceitful effeminate writing/rhetoric. Here, I draw on Victor Vitanza's discussion of Lyotard's conception of a *differend*:

As we will eventually see, in a litigation, which is determined by cognitive rules and regimens, often a differend is created, and silence is created; but the creation of this differend and its state, silence, “does not impose the silence of forgetting”; on the contrary, the differend “indicate[s] that something [variously referred to as a 'feeling' and a 'sign'] which should be able to be put into phrases cannot be phrased in the accepted idioms” (1988a, 56). And, therefore, it is necessary to bear witness to this silence and consequent sign/feeling, and to discover idioms for them. (Vitanza 39)

The differend is a stand-off in the presence of a silence on the tip of the tongue. Something begs to be said, but cannot find the words. If writing is figured as solely manly, be it a good man or an ornate effeminate man, a differend is created in the silence of the woman that is not entering the discourse. The wandering womb is floating around the room. I want to bear witness to the womb. I want to discover the idioms to

illuminate/reverberate this silence. I want to embrace a logos and form that wanders like a womb. And I want the womb to have a voice.

II. A Collage: Foremothers: A Womb of One's Own

I must contend with Cixous. Is *écriture féminine* the idiom I am looking for? Perhaps, but I am concerned with the physical, embodied presence of the womb, as well as her metaphorical implications for writing and somehow I find Cixous lacking. Afterall, Aristotle was concerned with the womb's physical presence, its wandering, and the female body's lack of form/sperm as analogically related to her inability to discourse. Quintilian conceived of the eunuch's body as discourse: a lie embodied. Here the womb inter/dis/e-rupts.

Cixous agrees with Con Davis (in a retrograde motion in time²): “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition. It is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogocentrism” (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 879). Sperm begets sperm begets more sperm, and then we have form and reason. My prick salutes your prick; I'm prickly all over.

² Perhaps, it makes more sense to say that Con Davis agrees with Cixous, in chronological time. Of course, I'm imagining a conversation between texts that has not taken place until now, so I suppose I can also imagine people agreeing across space, time, and languages. Laughing with each other.

Cixous outlines two levels of realizing a “new insurgent writing” in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” The first is a writing of and through the body/self: “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her ...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (880).

I must now contend with Virginia: “she [a young professional writer self of Woolf's] had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say ...She could write no more” (245). Woolf's body silenced her. Did her silence suffocate her? She laments, near the end of her life, that her body always had been silent: “The first--killing the Angel in the House--I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved” (245). So Woolf's second objective becomes Cixous's first level of *écriture féminine*. Has woman's writing progressed? Does the Angel still lurk in any dark dusty corners? Woolf describes this angel: “She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life” and when Virginia dared to write a review of a male author, this Angel tried to advise her, “Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex” (243). Use the eunuch's rhetoric to deceive, she whispers. Pretend to be the woman he pretends to be. Let no real women speak.

Woolf says she killed this Angel, but if she could not access her body in writing, then the differend remains. The woman's body, the womb, remains on the tip of her drowned tongue. “A woman with this trouble might miss up to two menstrual periods because her

uterus had lodged between the lungs, and in this condition the text says flatly, 'she cannot survive' because the accumulated menstrual fluid will fill the lungs and drown her" (Con Davis 46).³ Adrienne Rich writes of Woolf three decades later:

I was astonished at the sense of effort, of pains taken, of dogged tentativeness, in the tone of that essay [A Room of One's Own]. And I recognized that tone. I had heard it often enough, in myself and in other women. It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men...(Rich 271)

The Angel appears to have survived, and continued to charm, not only in Woolf's texts, but also in the tone that Rich recognizes as all too familiar. Not only has the Angel survived, the Eunuch and the manly man are still engaged in fisticuffs and ignoring her. If the Angel still works at the "wiles of her sex" which are really the wiles of the eunuch, then the woman behind the Angel, the body behind the writing, the womb behind the rhetoric, the anger behind the charm is still silent.

Cixous's second level:

An act that will also be marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression. To write

³ "Woolf struggled with her own mind all her life. In 1941, when the mental illness she had fought for years returned, she drowned herself in the Ouse River near her cottage in Rondell, England" (Ritchie and Ronald 241).

and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become at will the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process. (880 emphasis in original)

This deserves unpacking, even as I wince at the term and its academic cache. Unraveling? Exploring? Wandering through? I am immediately struck by the rhetoricity of this passage. Finding the occasion to speak is a classical rhetorical impulse, but it has never been available to women.⁴ According to Cixous, history has been “based on her [woman's] suppression.” I would add rhetoric itself and the very logoi that Cixous wishes to destroy. According to Con Davis, this conception of form and logoi could not have existed without women's suppression. So Cixous is in accord. We recognize the differend that has been created by this discourse and its silent observer's name is woman/womb. Cixous calls women to “become at will the taker and initiator [read “grand concocter, sperm-spewer, form-giver”].” We must will ourselves to become; not the willing that Rich recognizes, which stifles emotion and evicts the womb. We will become takers. What will we take? Form? Sperm? We will become initiators? And what will we initiate? Not a sperm economy, for we have forged an “antilogos weapon,” a spermicide. We will take and initiate with our forged weapon, this writing Cixous describes, within all symbols and all politics. The womb will be there, in the room, in every room.

Is *écriture féminine* the idiom I am looking for? Perhaps, but I am concerned with the physical, embodied presence of the womb, as well as her metaphorical implications for writing. In “Sorties” Cixous writes: “First I sense femininity in writing by: a privilege of

⁴ See Robert Connors on how decidedly women were shut out (up?) of rhetoric.

voice: writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries" (285). This I agree with utterly, viscerally, but why? In a footnote to her chapter "Interpreting the Silent 'Aryan Model' of Histories of Classical Rhetoric," Kathleen Welch writes: "The hierarchy that print has enjoyed over sound (one kind of literacy over one kind of orality) has led to the marginalization of, in the United States, African-American aspects of our cultures and Native American aspects of our cultures" (48). And women. I understand and believe Bob Connors when he writes of the denial of oral rhetoric to women and the ensuing rise of "composition-rhetoric" as largely spurred by the introduction of women into the academy. Rhetoric must be confined to writing if we are going to let women learn it. Heaven forbid they use them fightin' words. But her orality, (and yes, African American, and American Indian, Hispanic, etc. ...) her voice was subsumed; was never valued. The womb's voice is on the tip of our collective tongue, and has been repeatedly swallowed. So voice in text is not just a vestige of oral rhetoric's superior position over composition-rhetoric (see Bowden). It can be the voice that never was: "There is not that scission, that division made by the common man between the logic of oral speech and the logic of text, bound as he is by his antiquated relation--servile, calculating--to mastery" ("Laugh" 881). Yes, Hélène.

But the womb, itself, I have not heard here. For Cixous the avenue of body-writing is erotic, mirrors the female experience of sex: "Because she arrives, vibrant, over and again" ("Laugh" 882). As she comes back again in sex, so she comes back again in

writing. The form/logos is recursive like a female orgasm. The metaphorical possibilities here are lovely, but I am troubled because I think the womb is still wandering in the ether and not on the page. Cixous writes: "When I say 'woman,' I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history" ("Laugh" 875-6). But this, I cannot swallow.

Alice Walker invokes Virginia Woolf in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," but she adds some physical specificity, a material specificity I find lacking in Cixous. Walker quotes Woolf [and inserts her own parentheticals in square brackets] {and I insert some of my own in curly brackets}:

[A]ny woman born with a great gift {a womb} in the sixteenth century [insert "eighteenth century," insert "black woman," insert "born or made a slave"] would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage {in the river down the road from the cottage?} outside the village, half witch, half wizard [insert "Saint"], feared and mocked at {ignored for her charm}. For it needs little skill and psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry {rhetoric} would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary instincts {the eunuch and the penis in a boxing match} [add "chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one's own body by someone else,

submission to an alien religion”], that she must have lost her health and sanity {womb wandered into the brain?} to a certainty. (qtd. in Walker 317)

Not all wombs are created equal. Woman is not universal, even under patriarchy. We are women, various and wandering, and all our constraints and histories/hysterics are not the same. Yet we can listen to each other. Alice Walker speaks to Phyllis Wheatley: “It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song” (318). Yes, this notion of song is important. Yes, this voice, this song. But no, Alice, the what is also important, as you point out so well in your rewriting of Woolf.

I want a womb to wander in, a room to wonder in. I want to hear/write the womb-stories we are missing. Speak, Fido, Speak!

III. Collage Two: Grandmothers / Wondering Wombs:

My grandmother on my mother’s side, Mimi, was diagnosed with “infantile uterus”⁵and was unable to conceive. My mother was adopted. My other grandmother, Big Red, called herself the ugly one in relation to her sister, Dot, who was mentally retarded and diagnosed as schizophrenic. She was the pretty one. I wonder at the power of the naming here.

⁵ This must have been in the 1930s, so she would have been diagnosed through a pelvic exam. Apparently such a diagnosis has fallen by the wayside for its lack of accurate descriptive possibility. Additionally, what was normally diagnosed as “infantile” usually could conceive, so my grandmother probably had a mullerian abnormality that prevented conception (see <http://mulleriananomalies.blogspot.com/2007/12/what-are-different-types-of-mullerian.html>>)

...how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name--and therefore live—afresh. (Rich 270)

What did it mean to Amelia to have a doctor call her uterus “infantile”? Not just small, but baby-like? Whiny and immature. Mimi had a dependent personality, an infantile womb. My grandfather had to take care of her, drive for her, baby her. When my mother came along, she was jealous that another baby got the attention.

I have had three children now. Each a cesarean section. At my first son's birth, the OB, Cricket/Dr. Cricket, who was called in after 23 hours of labor with a midwife, told me my cervix was funny-shaped. No babies coming out that way.

The Catholic Church played a significant role in Mimi's conception of the utility of her womb/of her existence. My grandfather had gone to seminary. He dropped out when he fell in love with Amelia while ministering the sacrament to her in a TB hospital. The Catholic Church played a significant role in Big Red's womb as well. When Big Red got drunk she lamented “that coat hanger” Robert had used. Oh that coat hanger.

My mother tells me this story now in close juxtaposition to her talk of working in a Catholic crisis pregnancy center, and offering me “natural” family planning advice, since another c-section could be risky for my health. *Mimi told my mother when she was a little girl that she was a punishment from God. Amelia could not bear children; how dare she relish her sexuality, with her little baby-like womb? My mother was her punishment, she said. What did that do to my mother's conception of her own sexuality/body/womb?*

I got an IUD for the first time recently, after my third child. The doctor wanted to insert it while having an ultrasound to make sure she did not wound my battered womb. The experience felt a bit like a sci-fi film. The speculum glowed a light blue light in the dim room. My uterus was projected on a big screen TV in front of me so I could watch the little metal T find its place in me. Truly cyborgian. The doctor actually said, "Ready to deploy" before she inserted the IUD. Looking at the T in the little room of my womb, I felt empty. The only times I've had ultrasounds, there were babies to see in there. I'd never looked at my womb in its non-pregnant form before. The ultrasound was disappointing. I was displaced. What was I looking at? Not a fetus, but the space inside me projected outside me by a miracle of man-made sound and technology; a space of conception that had not conceived; a space that would reject sperm/form; a space of formless potential. This womb is a part of me that represents neither the erotic sexuality of Cixous, nor the maternity expected by Aristotle. This was the hysterical body that Woolf could not write. This is an opening.

IV. "Because she arrives, vibrant, over and again"

What am I looking for? What am I arguing for? A womb-rhetoric/womb-writing. I want to discover the idioms to illuminate/reverberate this silence. I want to embrace a logos and form that wanders like a womb. And I want the womb to have a voice. I want to bear witness to the womb. Aristotle values a pattern of "contradiction," binaries with which to assert the superiority of one over the other, naturally (Con Davis 39). I am looking for parataxis/juxtaposition, an associative, recursive logos: "To write and thus to forge for herself the antilogos weapon" (Cixous "Laugh" 880). Not anti-logos, exactly, but

spermicide, yes. I want to write and forge a different logos, a womb-infused logos. The form/logos is recursive like a female orgasm. The metaphorical possibilities here are lovely, but I am troubled because I think the womb is still wandering in the ether and not on the page.

The womb cannot enter. It is by nature deceitful and unhealthy. We must will ourselves to become: "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time" (Cixous "Laugh" 880). The Angel whispers in our ears, "Use the eunuch's rhetoric to deceive. Pretend to be the woman he pretends to be. Let no real women speak." Danger, dear writer, danger, dear reader! If the Angel still works at the "wiles of her sex" which are really the wiles of the eunuch, then the woman behind the Angel, the body behind the writing, the womb behind the rhetoric, the anger behind the charm is still silent.

And I want the womb to have a voice: "It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is willing herself to be calm, detached, and even charming in a roomful of men" (Rich 271). Not this tone--an unleashing of the animal, of the womb-anger. Our wombs are angry. They have been dissected, appropriated, blamed, and thrown away. We must will ourselves to become. If writing is figured as solely manly, be it a good man or an ornate effeminate man, a differend is created in the silence of the woman that is not entering the discourse. The wandering womb is floating around the room. I want to bear witness to the womb.

Have I begun to will my womb to become here on paper? I am not looking for a universal Woman's discourse/rhetoric. I'm searching for writing/rhetoric that enacts the body as it speaks the body. Even more specifically, I want to bear witness to the womb. I want to find the idioms to express her. She is chomping, chomping at the bit---still.

Calling all wombs! I want to pursue this writing/rhetoric and research, and I want others to do so too. This is an opening. I want the womb to have a voice. I want to bear witness to the womb. I want to encounter other witnesses, wombs.

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Deconstructing the Erotic: A Feminist Exploration of Bodies & Voice in Lucille Clifton and Audre Lorde's Poetry

by Roxanne Rashedi

Bridging and Connecting:

Examining the Feminine Erotic

In their poetry, Clifton and Lorde employ an eros that is traditionally deemed as feminine by having their speakers expose their insecurities and educate their readership on the various injustices that men in positions of power impose upon Black women. By doing so, Lorde and Clifton cultivate a community where readers of diverse backgrounds can come together in a safe space and discuss how their differing subject positions inform if not determines how they conceptualize erotic power. As readers discuss Clifton and Lorde's poetry, they see what constitutes and reinforces the differences that divide women and men along racial, sexual orientation, and class lines. They discover how the feminine erotic is a power that bridges gaps of difference, thereby allowing one to understand another person's thoughts, values, and overall subject position, and, additionally, comprehend how a subject position that differs from one's own is neither superior or inferior to one's own.

Lorde explores how to access the feminine erotic via poetry in her essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." She argues that poetry, as a revelatory distillation of experience, provides the illumination by which people examine their lives and give substance to their unrecognized feelings. Lorde asserts that each woman embodies a divine, creative spirit. Yet, this spirit is often left unexamined, unrecorded, and ultimately, silenced. For

Lorde, poetry is the way to *un*-silence this spirit. She writes, “The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep” (37).

Published at around the same time as Lorde’s “Poetry is Not Luxury,” is Hélène Cixous’s essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976). Similar to Lorde, Cixous also explores a feminine practice and coins the term *écriture féminine*, asserting how feminine writing is impossible since “it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system.” In “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power,” Lorde describes these “phallogocentric systems” as structures of self-abnegation that attempt to suppress the feminine voice (39). Both Lorde and Cixous elucidate the power that fiction and poetry can bring to reclaiming and asserting the female voice. As women write, they not only liberate themselves from that Lordean silence, but they also deconstruct the very social constructions like race, sexual orientation, and class, which limit their erotic potential.

Lorde taps into Cixous’s *écriture féminine* with her poem, “Coal.” The tone of “Coal” embodies the erotic as the speaker claims her right to express and voice her own ideas and feelings: “I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside/now take my word for jewel in the open light.” The speaker recognizes the power of her “word” as a “jewel”; that is, she realizes how her thoughts and beliefs can provide her with financial security. But more importantly, the speaker comes to appreciate her “words” because she sees them to be as transparent as a crystal clear “jewel”; that is, the “jewel” symbolizes the speaker’s essential truth, her erotic spirit.

This particular line suggests the power of the “word,” or more specifically, how language shapes one’s reality. The poem, “Coal,” conceptualizes this very reality through the various forms that the *sign* signifies. As the linguist Marcel Danesi asserts, a sign is “something that stands for something, to someone in some capacity.”¹ In order to read a sign, an *interpretant sign* is needed. An interpretant sign decodes the meaning of one sign by referring to another sign. In the poem, the speaker explores the different sentiments one sign evokes as she alters the interpretant signs she uses to decode the primary sign: “coal.” The speaker uses thought-provoking images in phrases such as, “singing out within the passing crash of sun,” an “ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge,” or “seeking like gypsies over my tongue/ to explode through my lips/ like young sparrows bursting from shell.” Yet, she analyzes words that are simultaneously intermediary and fixed. By doing so, she shows how language can never fully capture or decode sign into a sentiment, feeling, and/or emotion since the interpretant sign (i.e. the signs used to decode that one sign) can change at any given moment.

For example, in the line, “Some words live in my throat/ breeding like adders . . . / Somewords/ bedevil me,” the speaker structures the interpretant signs like “bedevil,” “breeding,” and “adders” in a way which suggests how the speaker’s ability to speak ironically confines her freedom to truthfully express her feminine erotic: to embody an uncensored voice. Earlier in this stanza, she claims how the “sound comes into a word, coloured/by who pays what for speaking,” implying how one pays to hear what they want to see and hear (Lines 6-7, 616). The act of expression (i.e. communication via language) is a commodity since voice is censored through those Lordian systems of “self-abnegation”: hegemonic forces like patriarchy (57, “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as

Power.”) The initial image of “the total black, being spoken/From the earth's inside” seems to celebrate black heritage and beauty, but it is also “open” to connotations of sexual violation (Line 3, 616). “Earth” symbolizes the female womb which has been penetrated from the “inside”; her womb becomes “total...black.” As a pigment, black is absent of color and absorption from any source of light, thereby insinuating how the speaker’s womb, the place where life and voice can come into being, is silenced. The speaker emphasizes this silence as she withholds those “words” of penetration that “breed” like “adders” in her “throat” (Lines 16-7, 616). By doing so, she reveals her struggle to fully express the “words” that “bedevil” her or rather, the stories behind those words that are too painful to voice.

This repression is not necessarily a negative quality. In the concluding stanza, Lorde writes:

Love is word, another kind of open.

As the diamond comes into a knot of flame

I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside

Now take my word for jewel in the open light. (Lines 23-6, 616).

The tone of the poem is no longer repressed, but mystifyingly “open.” As readers, we read Lorde’s words of “love” and expose them like “jewel[s] in[to] the open light.” By doing so, we violate the “inside” of the speaker, her repressed “jewels” of expression. This violation is necessary because it helps to create a community of female readers that will discover the speaker’s as well as their own voice.

For Lorde, the political is not separate from the personal; the two are intertwined. Political issues like race, class, and sexual orientation become personal as the language of power, law, enacts if not determines how these social constructs shape the nature of a woman's life. The repressed tone of the poem shows how the speaker is awake to the world; she bridges the gaps between the political and personal by employing the extended metaphor of "coal" which not only expresses her anger towards racist attitudes and sexual harassment, but also elucidates how the use of anger can be a source of erotic power for women. Anger helps invoke and inspire expression instead of repression. With the support of a readerly community, readers of "Coal" learn how to manage the anger that they hold both towards themselves and others. They begin to transform their self-destructive thoughts into the written word of self-affirmation: the use of the erotic. This use is not, in the words of Lorde, "a luxury." Women must actively seek to uncover, unlock, and voice this erotic power.

Similar to "Coal," the speaker in "A Woman Speaks" shows how the erotic is accessible through language; she claims her right to "speak" and develop a system of signs and signifiers that do not result in "self-abnegation" but, rather, creative potential. That is, the speaker's words intrinsically relate to her visceral sensations: her erotic truth. Lorde describes how poetry helped to strengthen her voice, particularly during her fourteen-year long battle with breast cancer. Towards the end of her life, she expresses how her voice had weakened. Nevertheless, she kept speaking, writing, and embodying the very words that made up her poems.² As we will see later, much of Lorde's work draws upon West African traditions which, in effect, transforms Lorde the poet into Lorde what Paul Oliver terms as the griot or, one who extemporizes events and uses their vocal

expertise for gossip, satire, or political commentary.³ Like the diverse patterns of interpretant signs and imagery in “Coal,” the speaker in “A Woman Speaks” becomes the griot figure and provokes readers to discuss the identity politics surrounding race, gender, sexual identity, and class.

According to Eurocentric thought, the speaker of “A Woman Speaks” would be at the bottom of the society since she is black, lesbian, and female. Yet, throughout the entire poem, the speaker asserts her right to have a voice. She does so most explicitly in the concluding lines, “I am /woman/ and not white.” These lines specify how the speaker identifies as a woman of color and, additionally, how a woman of color becomes the status quo or norm instead of the always already differed, “othered” group. By doing so, the poem emphasizes how there are different types of discourse which are largely based upon race and gender. In “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Lorde states: “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us — the poet — whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (38). This whispering “Black mother” is the erotic force which is willing to be and feel vulnerable. Essentially, it is the voice outside of Eurocentric rationalism.

The speaker in “A Woman Speaks” moves beyond Eurocentric ideals and white and black patriarchy by interweaving West African religious tradition with her own experiences. She taps into the spiritual power of the West African religion and describes herself as “Moon marked and touched by sun” (Line 1, 4). “Moon” and “sun” are commonly attributed to MawuLísa, the Dahomean sky goddess-god. Mawu creates the world and is the mother of all the other *orisha*, or deities. She represents the female

sex, bounded by Lisa, the male sex as well as Mawu's son. Hence, the MawuLisa figure counters traditional gender roles where men are perceived as the rational, logical beings and woman are seen as the irrational and emotional ones. The poem turns the "isms," or social constructions such as *racism*, *sexism*, and *classism*, on their heads; MawuLisa, for instance, depicts a subordinate entity since she is black and female. Yet, MawuLisa embodies "[unwritten] magic" or a quality that has not been captured through language (Line 2, 4). Contrary to being defined by socially limiting labels like "black," "female," and "lesbian," the speaker narrates her life's journey and acts as the definer. As a definer, the speaker reconsiders these marginal categories and becomes Lorde's "Black Mother" poet, whispering her "magic" into readers' ears via poetry.

Aside from MawuLisa, the speaker draws upon other erotically empowering figures from West African religion. The line "no favor/untouched by blood" perhaps refers to the "blood" shed by the Dahomean Amazon warriors. The tone of the poem is proud since the speaker asks for "no favor" and is full of "pride." Yet, the tone also indicates the speaker's vulnerability towards making any mistakes, similar to the goddesses and gods of the Dahomean and Yoruba traditions to which Lorde refers to (Lines 5 and 9, 4). The speaker associates herself with the birth of Aphrodite from the "entrails" of Uranus and admits that this passionate connection causes great chaos (Line 14, 4). This chaos is represented by those "pound[ing]...restless oceans" from which Aphrodite originally surfaced (Line 15, 4). Situated in the present, Lorde interweaves West African religious tradition and Greek mythology to recreate the Eurocentric vision of erotic womanhood. This vision is not solely for "white...women" but for women of all colors (Lines 31-3, 4). The speaker reclaims black women's agency and shows how forms of self-expression

like poetry help cultivate erotic power. First wave feminists ignored issues of race and class but through writing, a black woman can recognize and expose the hegemony of these constructions which, in effect, allow her and her readership to access their erotic powers and gradually discover their own identities.

The speaker reflects upon her self-discovery when she asserts: "I do not dwell / within my birth nor my divinities," thereby suggesting that she chooses not to be limited solely to her physical, raw self and/or her deeper sense of a spiritual self (Lines 16-7, 4). As an "ageless and half-grown" entity, the speaker simultaneously fuses spirit and body as one (Line 18, 4). She only becomes fully "grown" once she "seeks" to find her "sisters / witches in Dahomey" (Lines 18-20, 4). However, the speaker is "*still* seeking" to find her "sisters"; "still" signifies a shifting of temporality (emphasis added). The speaker is in the present, past, and most importantly, positioned in an ancient or more rooted sense of the past, a past which always permeates the present. Lorde scholar, Margaret Morris, describes this temporal transition as "*Apo koinou*...where a single word or phrase is shared between two distinct, independent syntactic units" (emphasis original, Morris, 179). She writes:

Apo koinou in Lorde's poetry is a way of subordinating the sentence structure to the association of ideas as they are explored further and more deeply through the sequence of the poem...apo koinou suspends the temporality or causality normally implied in discrete sentences and their orderly sequence, it allows Lorde's voice to reveal feelings that are

chaotic...sometimes contradictory, without undoing those very features by subordinating the feelings to the ordinary rules of syntax. (Morris, 179)

To build upon Morris's theory of "apo koinou," I would add that Lorde inserts signifiers like "still" to cause a temporal shift in time and space and, additionally, to depict the speaker's erotic emotions. In other words, the speaker elucidates how confusion and chaos stem from "Eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of *Chaos*, and personifying creative power and harmony" (emphasis added, Lorde, 55). The "I" appears to be "still seeking her sisters, the witches of Dahomey"; however, this same line also suggests that "her sisters" are "still seeking" to find the speaker. The speaker and the witches attempt to trace and retrace their spirits from past to present and vice-versa in order to discover their true identities. In the concluding stanza, the speaker returns to the past and refers to herself as "treacherous with old magic" (Line 27, 4). This "old magic" is the erotic power: the unacknowledged force that lies deep in all women.

As Lorde discusses in "Poetry is not a Luxury," sexist and racist groups like those "white male forefathers" have repressed, negated, and silenced black women's knowledge. Yet, as the speaker claims, women continue to hold onto their erotic power at a "magic[al] unwritten" level. This "old magic" seeps into the present and transforms into "the noon's new fury" (Lines 27-8, 4). This transformation implies that black women will no longer remain silent since they will learn to utilize the "old magic" of their "sisters" and fight contemporary hegemonic forces with great "fury." In an interview with Karla Hammond, Lorde comments on the lines "I am treacherous with old magic/and the

noon's new fury"; she discusses how these words relate to "power, strength, what is old and what is new being very much the same" (Morris, 180). Morris argues that readers do not know the addressee to these specific lines because "...the woman is speaking to those who acknowledge for the first time that women have a future of their own but who have not let go of the assumption that she who speaks as a woman must of necessity be white and male-identified" (180). In other words, readers should not assume that she is white and male, given the fact that she openly expresses her thoughts. Morris concludes that the speaker is a "magic, erotic woman" since she chooses to speak at her volition and "embodies authorization not despite but because of being a woman" (181).

To add to Morris's reading, I would argue that the speaker deconstructs traditional gender binaries of the rational male versus the emotional female and accesses her erotic powers. She becomes a culmination of both genders; that is, the speaker embodies the ancient MawuLisa figure. She recognizes the history of her ancient sisters: a history that includes voicing not only the narrative of African-American enslavement but also the exploitation of black women as "breeders." The speaker becomes more erotically charged as she explores the ancient history that informs and influences the nature of her subject position today. "A Woman Speaks," then, creates Lorde's ideal female readership: an intergenerational, bi-racial community of female readers. The poem invites readers from diverse demographics to join together and uncover their erotic powers. As a unified group, these readers can fight against patriarchal forces as well as acknowledge the impact of those ancient histories which have shaped the nature of black female subjectivity today.

Both Lorde's poems, "Coal" and "A Woman Speaks," exemplify Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality in relation to black female empowerment. These poems specifically show readers how social constructions like gender, race, and class intersect on multiple and often simultaneous levels, thereby contributing to the silence imposed upon black women and women of color at large.⁴ But more importantly, both poems demonstrate how to counter these hegemonic forces by writing and voicing the poetic word: the repressed, unrecognized erotic knowledge.

Similar to Lorde and Cixous, Lucille Clifton also explores an *écriture féminine* through poetry. In the early 1980's, an interviewer asked Clifton "Why do you write?" She responded with, "I write to celebrate life" (Johnson, 70). Like Lorde, Clifton's speakers tap into their erotic powers as they un-silence the brutal histories which many (i.e. white males in particular as Lorde notes in "Poetry is Not a Luxury") do not like to remember and record, the history African-American enslavement, particularly the role of the "breeder" that was imposed upon black women. Clifton's poems positively reshape and redefine black people. In succinct, subtle, and insightful verses, she elucidates their vitality and beauty. Stephen Henderson attributes Clifton's short, concise poetry to "mascon" images that pervade much of her work. Mascon is an Afro-Americana phrase that signifies a "massive concentration of black experimental energy" (Johnson, 70). Often, they represent "verbal expressions which evoke a powerful response in the [reader] because of their direct relationship to concepts and events in the collective experience" (Johnson, 70).

While she does not directly hearken to the “mascon” image, Clifton’s autobiographical poem, “i was born with twelve fingers,” definitely invokes a collective experience (*Two Headed Woman*, 1980). Like her mother and daughter, Clifton was born with twelve fingers: six on one hand and six on the other. Mary Jane Lupton argues that the “speaker associates this congenital difference with European witchcraft and with Egyptian royalty” (10), though the speaker never implicitly nor explicitly refers to European witchcraft or Egyptian traditions. Rather, the poem describes this “congenital difference” through vivid bodily images in order to render the black female body as an allegory. By doing so, the speaker highlights the tension between what constitutes a disfigured/disabled body versus a figured/able-bodied individual. More importantly, the speaker celebrates a societal stigma: polydactyl. As she celebrates a seemingly disabling feature, the speaker challenges the Anglo-European model of what Rosemarie Garland-Thompson notes as “the canonical body”: that which adheres to the social paradigm of being white and able-bodied (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 105). Thompson discusses how various twentieth century black women writers like Toni Morrison, Ann Petry, and Audre Lorde depict and celebrate disabled and disfigured bodies as a means to transcend social and cultural limitations. For Thompson, these authors create African-American female characters who are “grounded” in a singular body which bears the etchings of history; their sense of self-validation, power, and identity derive from their physical differences as well as their resistance towards cultural norms (105). These “grounded” characters “...enable a particularized self who both embodies and transcends cultural subjugation, claiming physical difference as exceptional rather than inferior” (105). In other words, Clifton offers this depiction of an African-American female

self “grounded” in an “identity” that resists “cultural norms”; her speaker celebrates her congenital difference of polydactyl and redefines it as a source of power rather than something to be concealed from both the public and her own eyes.

The speaker does not merely celebrate Thompson’s widely quoted expression of the “extraordinary” or disfiguring body. Rather, Clifton shows how the speaker’s difference invisibly connects her to other female members in her family as she reflects:

And we connect

My dead mother my live daughter and me

Through our terrible shadowy hands. (Line 14-8, 166).

This passage includes two medial gaps: one between “my dead mother” and “my live daughter” and another between “my live daughter” and “and me.” The medial gaps symbolize the hiatuses in the past (e.g. death) and present (e.g. live) time. Despite these lapses in time, the disfigured and socially marginalized image of the black female body, those “terrible shadowy hands,” are actually what “connect” the past to present. As the speaker reconnects to her dead mother and daughter, she also taps into “me” or that intrinsic power which lies inside of her body, thereby experiencing Lorde’s erotic power. That is, the disfigured “shadowy hands” symbolically connect mother to daughter and daughter to mother; in doing so, they affirm the speaker’s sense of self (Line 15, 166).

In “i was born with twelve fingers,” Clifton portrays how fragments of the black female body can represent the voices of women not only in her own family, but also to her

readership. As the speaker vividly describes each of her twelve fingers, she becomes vulnerable to her readers. She uses poetry as a medium to fragment her body apart on the page which in turn helps her to facilitate an erotic connection towards her readers. By severing her eleventh and twelfth finger, Clifton ironically intensifies the erotic power of the women in the poem since the fingers that were cut off “take what we want” and “connect” the generations of the women to each other through their invisible, ghostly, “terrible” appearances. In other words, the speaker rejects the poetic formula of, to use Lorde’s words, white male forefathers, by rejecting the sonnet form which concludes on a happily ever after, concluding sestet. Similar to Lorde, Clifton conveys how the erotic power livens when a woman embraces the weaknesses that stem from inside and outside her spiritual and physical self. But more importantly, these are insecurities that she must seek to connect and reconnect to from the generations before her (e.g. ancestors), during her time (e.g. her female readership), and the generations to come (e.g. future offspring). The “ghostly image” of Clifton’s fingers, then, disconcert readers while also inviting them to explore a relationship of fragmentation—the very essence of erotic power.

Clifton’s “homage to my hips” also celebrates the self-affirmation of black women through an isolation of bodily features: the hips. Tracing back to its root in 1595, “homage” referred to a lineage of successors and ancestors. Clifton pays “homage” to her large hips which represent what she once was ashamed to claim ownership over. It is subtle but still apparent how the speaker pays tribute to her forgotten ancestors, enslaved African-American women. But most importantly, the word “homage” represents the reverence one is granted when one sacrifices the self; that is, the

speaker delves into the *écriture féminine* that various systems of self-abnegation attempt to repress. “Homage” is given by the speaker to what embraces the “my” of her “hips” which greatly differs from being claimed through self-definition (i.e. the defined versus the definer). Clifton explores how hips influence the roles of African-American women. She moves from the size of her hips, which is related to confinement, to the freedom of her hips, and concludes by describing the “might” and “magic” of her hips (Lines 1-5, 5-10, 11-5, 168). The speaker rejoices that “these hips are big hips” which implies how tiny hips are neither desirable nor more beautiful (Line 1, 168).

“Homage to my hips” shows how society has imposed a paradigm of slenderness upon women through a) the mass media and, b) the limitations in public and private spheres. The speaker expresses how the “space” of her hips “don’t fit into” small “places,” which suggests that her hips are larger and, therefore, do not represent the model that society endorses (Lines 2, 4- 5, 168). The alliterating p-sound in “little/ petty places” emphasizes how the speaker literally refuses to be tiny, in terms of her physicality, and also figuratively in terms of her mental capacity (Lines 4-5, 168). Robert French reads the speaker’s refusal as knowing “...how to laugh, even when laughter is not the expected response; and what it [i.e. the poem] celebrates, it celebrates against the sorrows of being black and a woman, in this time, this place” (187). French fails to consider, though, how the speaker does not wallow in the “sorrows of being black and a woman”; alternatively, she embraces these supposed “sorrows” and vehemently negates pettiness. Similar to Lorde, Clifton’s speaker refuses to be defined as grotesquely abject and “othered.” The speaker becomes an active subject for she redefines her large hips, the social marker of stigma and ugliness, as a source of

“magic” empowerment. The speaker uses the alliterating m-sound in “mighty” and “magic” to emphasize the empowering qualities of her large hips. These adjectives provide a stark point of contrast for connotations of the adjective “petty” (Lines 11-12, 168). By using uses adjectives like “mighty” and “magic,” the speaker attributes a sense of mysticism to her body.

This same magical quality is also present in Clifton’s “homage to my hair” where the speaker envisions her body parts as separate, alive entities. This particular poem echoes Clifton’s earlier poem, “the way it was,” where she describes how she straightens her hair in order to become more “white” (Johnson, 74). Joyce Johnson, a Lorde scholar and philologist, argues how Clifton pays “homage” to what she was once deeply ashamed of: her body. To further develop Johnson’s reading, I would add that Clifton also claims ownership over her body and asserts her right to define it through celebratory verses. As I discussed earlier, this is a poem where Clifton provides a mascon image: “nappy hair” (Lines 1 and 3, 167). Throughout history, this image has caused shame and humiliation for many black women, causing them to feel socially estranged and “othered.” Stemming from biblical stories such as “Adam and Eve,” the word “hair,” particularly female hair and especially hair of a black woman, holds numerous connotations. “Good” and “bad” adjectives are attributed to female hair in terms of its texture, length, and color. But more importantly, these adjectives supposedly gauge the beauty and self-worth of a woman. While “nappy” is traditionally deemed as a pejorative term, Clifton reinterprets it through succinct, festive verses. She uses verbs like “jump” and “dance” to elucidate the very celebration and aliveness of her “nappy” hair. Coupled with “music,” these words turn reinterpret the signifier, the “bad”

image of nappy hair, as something that is utterly worthy of celebration — a festivity of black womanhood (Line 2, 167). The speaker asserts “the grayer she [i.e. the speaker, presumably Clifton] do get, good God, the blacker she do be!” (Lines 10-11, 167). In these concluding lines, Clifton shifts her diction from mainstream English to black dialect. By doing so, she hearkens back to mascon imagery; she reinforces her pride in being a black woman.

The Masculine Erotic: Examining the Disconnected Sisterly Erotic

In the “homage” poems, Clifton’s speakers’ appear to be empowering figures. The speaker of “homage to hips” refuses to hold her hips “back” and keep them “enslaved,” thereby celebrating black women’s bodies. The tone of “homage to my hips” embodies Lorde’s erotic up until the “man” enters the scene: “I have known them/to put a spell on a man and/spin him like a top!” (Lines 13-5, 168). For Lorde, men are excluded from the erotic community since they have traditionally been the ones to restrict the female voice (e.g. ideologies like patriarchy.) Yet, in this poem, Clifton allows for a man to be present in order for the female to cultivate agency. The speaker’s hips possess magical powers which control and spin a man’s mind like a “top.” The word “top” implies that the man is like a toy which the speaker can “spin” and play with at her disposal. The speaker, then, embodies a semblance of Lorde’s erotic; she utilizes her “free” body as a tool to manipulate a man. The “!” indicates that Clifton, and perhaps even her female readership, gain pleasure through this type of manipulation. Nonetheless, Lorde would argue that this pleasure stems from an “abuse of feeling” since Lordian erotic

communities are based on egalitarianism and connection, not exploitation. Clifton's speaker only sees her hips as a means to exercise her sexual authority over a man; she does not recognize the creative potential that lies in her body and, more importantly, how that creativity can both empower herself and inspire her readers. Learning from Clifton's speaker, readers succumb to the traditional, "pornographic" erotic. They gain the semblance of erotic power as they see the speaker perform a masculine gender performance: using the female body to manipulate the "other" (e.g. man.) Clifton, then, transgresses Lorde's theory of eros which argues for an egalitarian erotic community.

Published at the same time as "homage to my hips," "homage to my hair" elucidates Clifton's masculinized erotic performance. Similar to "homage to my hips," the speaker envisions her body parts as living independent of her volition and encounters her hair as another being. As discussed earlier, critics like Johnson argue that her hair becomes a source of pure celebration, exultation, and most importantly, that which reinforces the speaker's "...recognition of and pride in her blackness" (74). Nevertheless, the speaker still sees her hair as outside of herself. Her identity is displaced as she realizes the power of hair: "i hear the music! my God" (Line 2, 167). Through the music of her hairs' "jump[ing]" and "danc[ing]," the speaker meets the other: her "nappy hair" (Lines 1 and 3, 167). Tiffany Kriner, an eschatologist and literary scholar, argues that the speaker actually empowers herself as she fragments and divides her body parts.⁵ Yet, Kriner does not discuss how the speaker explores racial tension by inserting the socially pejorative and debilitating image of "nappy hair" or hair that is sexually deviant and commonly attributed with kinkiness. "Nappy hair," then, fragments the speaker's sense of self since "she" is removed from the "I" of the speaker (Lines 4 and 3, 167). The speaker only feels

powerful when she sees her body parts separate from herself, thereby suggesting a fragmentation of the speaker's racial identity — a fragmentation that the poem never allows to become whole. The self remains *dis*-unified. The speaker reinforces the stereotypes associated to “nappy hair,” using it to seduce a man like “tasty...good greens.” By doing so, she counters the Lordian erotic because she provides the man with kinky pleasure and, additionally, gains the semblance of what Kriner discusses as black women's empowerment. In lines one through four, the speaker introduces her nappy hair and opens up the possibility for redefining and countering the stereotype. However, lines four through eleven reinforce the traditional role of nappy hair as fulfilling the desires of the “black man” and, more importantly, controlling the man through the sensuality of nappy hair: its “electric fingers” (Line 9, 167). By embodying a tone of control and manipulation, “homage to my hair” also counters the Lordian erotic of intimate, egalitarian relationships.

Both “homage” poems appear to celebrate self-possession and self-ownership. As I analyzed earlier, the word “homage” implies that the speaker pays tribute to her body. Nevertheless, the speaker in “homage to my hips” takes charge of her sexuality only to entertain and control a man; she does, after all, “spin him like a top.” Similarly, the speaker in “homage to my hair” celebrates the musicality and liveliness of her “nappy hair” only to feed it like “tasty...good greens” to a *man* (Line 6, 167). Both poems situate the black female as the seductress who tantalizes the subordinate figure, the man; these speakers cultivate a sense of agency but only by having a man present in the scene and, more importantly, gaining self-satisfaction when they see the men enjoy their physical selves. The homage poems are not an authentic representation of Lorde's

erotic or of Kriner's "self-sacrifice" (196). They do not foster a space for exposing and sharing the speaker's as well as the readers' (i.e. the female readership) vulnerabilities since they rely on manipulating men in order to both access and exercise their erotic powers.

Clifton's "homage" poems depict an eros that transgresses Lorde's; yet Lorde herself contradicts her erotic theory in "Love Poem." The speaker in "Love Poem" celebrates lesbian intimacy and likens vast archetypal landscapes, like mountains, valleys, and forests, to particular parts of the female body. "Earth" denotes a piece of land that one conquers or, in this case, penetrates. The speaker assigns the gender of female to "Earth" when she asserts, "And I [the speaker] knew when I entered her [Earth]" (Line 7, 617). This line indicates that the speaker "enters" the "earth," her female lover, thereby showing how she initiates the sexual act. As the initiator, the speaker represents the "butch" while her lover represents the *femme*.⁶ The speaker/butch describes, "howling into her entrances through lungs of pain," emphasizing her butch role since she "howl[s]" or enters into the femme's "entrances" (Lines 14- 5, 618). By doing so, the femme expresses "lungs of pain" which suggests how the speaker/butch has widened her clitoris. "Love Poem," explores the speaker's physical sensations and pleasures but never expresses the reactions of the receiver: the "Earth" or femme. The "earth" signifies the female body; it is the "mountain," the "valley" that the speaker consumes (Lines 3-4, 617). In this poem, Lorde does not cultivate a space for erotic power because feelings and sensations are not recognized by both the initiator and receiver. The "joy" that transpires between the two is not shared ("Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power, 57, Lorde).

Readers of “Love Poem” only catch a glimpse of the speaker/butch’s erotic experience. At the same time though, the speaker can also represent a “soft butch” because she initiates sexual acts without embodying the masculine stereotypes that are associated with being butch. Judith Halberstam, a feminist and queer studies scholar, describes the soft butch as a lesbian “... with butch tendencies who has not completely masculinized [her] identity” (123). Unlike the classical butch, the soft butch does not represent the tomboy figure. She does not adhere to gender norms; rather, she shifts and alters her gender identities. If the speaker is a soft butch, then she would embody Lorde’s erotic more so than the traditional butch because her acts would not derive from aggression, lust, greed— qualities that define the stereotypical butch. In the beginning of “Love Poem,” the speaker is a soft butch. She describes her “entr[ance]” or the act of penetration like a sweet, “honey[-filled]” experience (Lines 6 and 9, 617). As the speaker “enter[s] her,” she compares parts of the woman’s body to “earth” and asks this “earth” to “speak” and bless the speaker with “what is richest...honey”; this “honey” symbolizes the exchange of bodily fluids. Lorde describes the woman’s “carved,” curvaceous figure through natural images like “mountains” and “valley[s]” (Lines 3-5, 617). These natural images emanate the romantic tone of a soft butch (i.e. the speaker) whose actions are sweet like “honey” and who flows from the “tongues...and...breath” (Lines 10, 12-3, 617).

The tone of “Love Poem” seems to convey the Lordian erotic. It depicts a pleasurable encounter between two lovers who picnic on earth’s glorious “mountains” and “valleys” (Lines 3-4, 617). However, the tone of the poem is not erotic since the speaker is not a soft butch but a classical butch. When read carefully, the reader sees how each line

expresses an action that the speaker initiates. The speaker describes, “And I knew when I entered *her* I was/high wind in *her* forests hollow...on the tips of *her* breasts on *her* navel” (emphasis added, Lines 6-7, and 12, 617). “Her,” or the other woman, is repeated several times in the second stanza. This repetition emphasizes how she is an object that the speaker “howls” through, thereby satisfying her own sexual desires but not necessarily the other woman’s (Lines 6 and 14, 617). Since the reader never hears the voice of “her,” the reader does not know whether or not she enjoys the speaker’s “howling...entrance” (Line 14, 617). The lines “howling into her entrances/lungs of pain” suggest that the “her,” the other woman, experiences an orgasm. Nevertheless, these lines indicate that the speaker forcefully “howls” or thrusts into the other woman, which, in effect, causes “her” discomfort.

In “Love Poem,” the speaker, Audre Lorde, objectifies the “her,” the other woman; as a result, the tone of the poem does not embody the Lordian erotic since the speaker fails to bridge her feelings to the other woman’s. For Lorde, “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (56). In “Love Poem,” the “joy” is not shared since we only hear the speaker’s voice. Hence, the speaker is disconnected from the other woman. Like “her,” readers too are disconnected from the speaker because we never receive an opportunity to engage in the experience of the “Love Poem.” The speaker is always there to “howl” away her own experience and in doing so, dismisses the chance for her partner and readerly community to “howl” back.

Feminine and Masculine Eros: Is there a Correct Utilization and Expression of the Erotic?

Readers share, experience, and interpret the erotic differently in both Lorde and Clifton's poetry. As my analysis shows, the poets shift their stances on the erotic, altering how it is expressed in each of their poems. For instance, the speakers in the "homage" poems tap into the erotic by exercising their sexual agency over men. Contrarily, the speaker in "i was born with twelve fingers" uses the erotic as a means to connect herself to other female members in her family. As we just saw, Lorde herself contradicts her interpretation of the erotic in "Love Poem" where the speaker expresses only her own physical and sexual pleasures. By doing so, this speaker suppresses the other voice that "bridges" the gaps of Lorde's "difference"; the joy is not shared ("Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," 57). If the reader reviews the poems discussed in this article, comparing and juxtaposing one to another, he or she sees how the erotic is conveyed contradictorily. This discrepancy suggests that the erotic is more intricate than Lorde's initial definition in the "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."

Through their poetic speakers, Lorde and Clifton manifest how the erotic consists of many layers. The expression of these layers drastically shifts depending on the individual's emotional and physical states as well as their overall objective; that is, what they plan to achieve with their erotic power. While "Love Poem" might not embody an egalitarian, erotic tone, it is still an erotically empowering text since it breaks free from heterosexual gender norms by allowing the speaker, Audre Lorde, to embody a more

masculine persona. That is, Lorde objectifies the other woman as she howls into her entrances. Therefore, the poem cannot simply be deemed to be transgressive through a reversal of gender roles. By allowing her speaker to be the dominator, Lorde challenges established notions of love, sexuality, and ultimately, the poetic conventions of the Eurocentric tradition. She makes the “black mother” the powerful dominator instead of the “white man,” breaking free from Cixous’s marked language of patriarchy and asserting her right to voice the *écriture féminine* (“Poetry is Not a Luxury,” 23). Poets like Lorde and Clifton use poetry as a platform to express a transgressive, provocative, and empowering form of eros. Their poems invite female readers to discover their own “black mother” voice—that voice which whispers thoughts and ideas which misogynistic and traditionally deemed feminist circles have tried to censor and suppress.

Endnotes

¹See Marcel Danesi and Paul Perron’s *Analyzing Cultures* for an excellent, comprehensive overview to the field of cultural semiotics.

²See the documentary *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* for an excellent overview of Lorde’s life and work.

³ For an extensive discussion on blues, West African traditions, and other forms of African-American music, see Paul Oliver’s *Savannah Syncopators: African retentions in the blues*.

⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to coin the feminist sociological theory of intersectionality. See Crenshaw’s *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color* for an overview on the history of intersectionality in relation to the labor market and feminist theory. For further discussion on how to study intersectionality

as a methodology, see Leslie McCall's "The Complexity of Intersectionality."

⁵ Eschatology is a branch of theological science that often explores concepts like death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Clifton's work is sometimes, but not always, studied by eschatologists since her poems explore the psyche, self, and body in such a way that fragments the self and, as shown in this article, delve into a form of destruction that actually represents creation and life.

⁶ Butch and *femme* are used to represent the gender roles in a homosexual relationship; the word *femme* is the French word for woman. Butch is the woman who performs a masculine gender performance. The butch's behaviorisms, actions, and overall demeanor are characterized as masculine (i.e. the tomboy figure). For further reading, see Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, where she explains the different degrees of being butch (i.e. "stone butch" verses "soft butch," etc).

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Harassment, Exploitation, and Rape: Sexual Offences in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*

By Jeff Carr

The works of William Shakespeare are filled with examples of extreme sexual misconduct, and there exists a significant amount of scholarly attention regarding these misdeeds. However, previous generations of readers and critics may not have discussed these frequent, disturbing occurrences in great detail. In order to fully comprehend Shakespeare's work and the context in which he wrote, it is necessary to read his plays and sonnets from a feminist perspective. Although some conservative literary critics will surely disagree, approaching these works as a feminist is a crucial exercise, as scholars and readers are then able to examine the male/female power structure of Renaissance England. This knowledge, of course, allows us to better understand Shakespeare and the times in which he wrote. Sexual misbehavior occurs in many of Shakespeare's plays, but *Measure for Measure* is an especially intriguing case. In this work, Shakespeare weaves a web of entangling sexual offences with Isabella, Mariana, and Angelo emerging as the foremost victims and participants. Indeed, several offences, including sexual harassment, exploitation, and even rape, appear throughout *Measure for Measure*.

Let us first examine sexual harassment in the play. Although some traditionalists may argue that sexual harassment is a twentieth century term and thus not applicable to Shakespeare's England, they are naïve to suggest that such did not occur or that the author was not aware of it. Isabella serves as evidence. Noted feminist Nicholas Radel

describes her as “the victim of criminal sexual harassment” (123). Indeed, her encounter with Angelo is the most vivid example in the text of what the modern reader would recognize as sexual harassment. A possible influence on Shakespeare in his development of Isabella as victim comes from the *Book of Susanna* in the *Apocrypha of the Old Testament*. Susanna is described as “a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord” and had been trained “according to the laws of Moses” (Sus. v. 2). In Act I, Scene IV of *Measure for Measure*, Isabella commences the process of becoming a nun, desiring a “more strict restraint / Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare” (1.4.4-5). Both women are revealed as ardent followers of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition and appear to be virtuous. Their connection develops further, of course, as Susanna and Isabella both become victims of sexual harassment.

In the case of Susanna, she is stalked by two elders, respected patriarchal figures in her community. As she bathes in the garden at her home, the two men attempt to abuse their power when they say, “We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you” (Sus. v.20-21). The preceding passage is a clear example of sexual harassment, as the two men attempt to blackmail Susanna into an adulterous affair. Susanna illustrates her understanding of her powerlessness when she replies, “I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord” (v. 22-23). As a victim of sexual harassment, Susanna is forced to decide whether or not to submit to the carnal desires of the elders. If she is to lie with them, she will compromise her integrity and her sexual autonomy; if she refuses, death is imminent, as the elders will

accuse her of the crime they are asking her to commit with them. Susanna decides to risk losing her life rather than to compromise her sexuality.

Like her possible model Susanna, Isabella also endures sexual harassment from a man of great power. With her brother Claudio set to be executed for fornication, Isabella attempts to persuade Angelo to pardon him. Initially, Angelo refuses, but on the following day, he presents an unethical proposition to the woman who is about to become a nun:

Which had you rather, that the most just law

Now took your brother's life, or, to redeem him,

Give up your body to such sweet uncleanness

As she that he hath stained? (MM 2.4.51-54)

In this selection, Angelo employs tactics similar to those used by the elders in *Susanna*, abusing his power in an attempt to satisfy his lustful cravings. Isabella, however, follows Susanna's example when she says, "Sir believe this, / I had rather give my body than my soul" (MM 2.4.55-56). In other words, Isabella would rather be executed than to surrender her sexual autonomy. Isabella's courage is tremendous in this difficult circumstance. It is fair to speculate that countless women in both Biblical times and during the Renaissance faced such undesirable choices. Isabella is heroic in that she maintains her sexual autonomy, despite the efforts of a very powerful patriarchal oppressor.

The harassment of Isabella is furthered, as Angelo attempts to gain advantage in his desire to fornicate with her, as he tells her he can

Admit no other way to save his life –
As I subscribe not that, nor any other,
But in the loss of question – that you, his sister,
Finding yourself desired of such a person
Whose credit with the judge, or own great place,
Could fetch your brother from the manacles
Of the all-abiding law; and that there were
No earthly means to save him, but that either
You must lay down the treasures of your body
To this supposed, or else to let him suffer.

What would you do? (MM 2.4.88-98)

In response to the question of whether her virginity is more valuable than her brother's life, Isabella answers that surrendering her purity is a greater sin than allowing Claudio to die when she says, "Better it were a brother died at once / Than that a sister, by redeeming him, / Should die forever" (MM 2.4.107-09). Isabella's language is comparable to that of Susanna, when the latter states that fornicating with the elders "will mean death" for her (v. 22). Of course, neither Isabella nor Susanna speaks of a literal death; rather, they refer to a loss of honor, respect, and sexual autonomy, which to them is worse than the demise of the body.

Unlike Susanna, however, Isabella does not face death if she refuses her offender's advances. The fact that her brother's life is instead at stake may make her appear less sympathetic than Susanna, but she is still the victim of what modern readers would identify as criminal sexual harassment. Therefore, it is absurd for critics to label her unsympathetic. Yet, many literary critics have traditionally viewed Isabella unfavorably (Kamps and Raber 194). In *William Shakespeare: The Problem Plays*, Richard Hillman makes such an assessment when he writes, "Isabella's withdrawal from the world, together with her moral rigidity and intolerance, manifests a lack of emotional sympathy, which renders hollow her preaching of the doctrine of mercy" (120). Hillman and other critics who share his perspective do not seem to fully grasp the complexity of Isabella's dilemma. Although many readers and critics may prefer that she comes to her brother's rescue, they overlook the fact that she is also a victim here. When critics suggest that Isabella surrender her sexual autonomy to a corrupt man in power, they offer a disturbing – and in many ways sexist – solution to the obstruction of justice.

Isabella, who was, after all, about to become a nun, has true religious convictions, which she cannot compromise. Contrary to the opinions of less sympathetic critics, R.W. Chambers, in an early criticism of *Measure for Measure*, reveals that Isabella remains consistent to the fundamental Christian thinking of her day when she quickly denies Angelo's unwelcome sexual advance. Chambers writes,

Now whatever we think of that instant decision, it is certainly not un-Christian. Christianity could never have lived through its first three hundred years of persecution, if its ranks had not been stiffened by men and women who never

hesitated in the choice between righteousness and the ties to their kinsfolk. We may call this fanaticism; but it was well understood in Shakespeare's day. (107)

Isabella's faith in a benevolent God and her fear of sinning against him not only explain her unwillingness to fornicate with Angelo to save her brother's life, but they are also consistent with the actions of Susanna. Chambers's comments can be supported by looking at a "A Prayer Against the Flesh" from Richard Day's *A Book of Christian Prayers*, which states that sex will "carry us into destruction, turning us away from God, to her own earthiness and rottenness" (221). Considering the religious climate of her time, it is reasonable to assume that Isabella would have been influenced by selections such as this one. Understanding context enables readers to understand Isabella's thinking.

If Isabella's piety is still in question, consider her conversation with Claudio in Act II, Scene I. While not capable of sacrificing her sexual autonomy for her brother's life, she claims that she would gladly surrender her existence instead when she states, "O, were it but my life, / I'd throw it down for your deliverance / As frankly as a pin" (MM 3.1.105-08). There is little reason to doubt the sincerity of Isabella's declaration. Readers should notice a sense of powerlessness in Isabella that is often felt by victims of sexual harassment. Chambers describes Isabella as a "human body in the extremity of torment" to whom "the honour of her family and her religion are more to her than mere life, her own or Claudio's" (111). Clearly, Isabella is revealed as a virtuous woman placed in a compromising situation rather than the cold, selfish sibling some critics have portrayed her as being.

In both *Measure for Measure* and *Susanna*, the resolutions to the problems created by sexual harassment can only be resolved by men. Just as Susanna is about to face execution, “God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, ‘I want no part in the shedding of this woman’s blood’” (v. 45-46). Daniel then acts as Susanna’s attorney and tricks the two elders into admitting their guilt, ultimately saving Susanna’s life and honor. Duke Vicentio, disguised as a friar, compares to Daniel only in regards to gender and that he resolves the problems created by Angelo. He introduces the idea of the bed-trick, telling Isabella to,

Only refer to yourself to this advantage: first, that your stay with him may not be long, that the time may have all shadow and silence in it, and the place answer to convenience. This being granted in course – and now follows all – we shall advise this wronged maid to stand up your appointment, go in your place. (MM 3.1.226-31)

The Duke persuades Isabella to take part in his scheme by assuring her that it will “do a poor wronged lady a merited benefit, redeem [Isabella’s] brother from the angry law, do no stain to [Isabella’s] own gracious person, and much please the absent Duke” (MM 3.1.192-95). This last consideration is of particular interest to Vicentio, a crafty, manipulative politician who seems influenced by the writings of Machiavelli (Kamps and Raber 132-34). The fact that both Susanna and Isabella can only have their dilemmas resolved by men shows the Biblical and Shakespearean woman’s reality: not only does she face sexual harassment from men, but she must also rely on them exclusively to undo their chaos. Radel states, “In its general treatment of female characters, then,

Measure for Measure assumes that their sexuality is not their own to manipulate and explore” (112). Indeed, male characters, especially the Duke, ultimately determine the fate of Isabella and Mariana.

Harassment is the not the only sexual offence that occurs in *Measure for Measure*, of course. Duke Vicentio, continuing to act as a Machiavellian, convinces Marianna to participate in the bed-trick, telling her that she is committing a righteous act by deceiving Angelo when he states,

He is your husband on precontract;
To bring you thus together, 'tis no sin,
Sith that the just of your title to him
Doth flourish the deceit. Come let us go.

Our corn's to reap, for yet our tithe's to sow. (MM 4.1.68-72)

Besides providing a convenient loophole for Isabella, Mariana, the jilted fiancé of Angelo, emerges as a victim of sexual exploitation. Although she is an eager participant in the Duke's conspiracy, Mariana is in fact being manipulated by Vicentio in order to achieve his desired goal: acquiring Isabella. Vicentio takes advantage of the fact that Mariana, left without a dowry and possessing a damaged reputation thanks to Angelo, is likely to have no other prospects for a husband (Kamps and Raber 203). In this context, Mariana appears vulnerable, and the Duke uses her as a pawn in his game of sexual chess.

Isabella's role in the exploitation of Mariana is a topic worthy of further scholarly attention. The prominent view among critics is that her involvement proves that she is self-serving and manipulative like Vicentio. Proponents of this perspective claim that she loses her credibility as a pious woman and victim, which, for this study's purposes, establishes her as a participant in *Measure for Measure's* complex web of sexual offences. According to Hillman, Isabella agrees to the bed-trick because she understands that "she can gain the upper hand without doing the 'dirty work' herself" (127). The problem with this viewpoint is that it fails to consider the possibility that the Duke is also manipulating Isabella into taking part in his sexual conspiracy. Readers should recall that Isabella is to become a nun, and Vicentio is dressed as a friar. Her respect for him as a representative of God must lead her to believe him when he says, "To the love I have in doing good a remedy presents itself" (MM 3.1.191-92). The Duke (or friar, as Isabella perceives him) continues, assuring her that "the doubleness of the benefit defends the deceit from reproof" (MM 3.1.235-36). Although Isabella ultimately participates in the sexual exploitation of Mariana, perhaps she is less deserving of scrutiny than Vicentio.

The Isabella/Mariana bed-trick, while perhaps laughable to modern readers, actually results in the most serious sexual offence in the play: the rape of Angelo. Expecting to engage in intercourse with Isabella, Angelo is deceived into unwanted sex with Mariana, as she reveals in Act V, Scene I when she states, "Why just, my lord, and that is Angelo / Who thinks he knows that he ne'er knew my body, / But knows he thinks that he knows Isabel's" (5.1.206-08). While this occurrence provides a resolution to the play and, quite possibly, humor for the reader, it should, in fact, be correctly identified as rape.

Although Angelo is largely unsympathetic to most readers, one cannot readily dismiss the seriousness of the sexual offence committed against him. Here, Angelo shifts from offender to victim. The violated Angelo is then forced to marry Mariana and, in the process, loses his own sexual autonomy to a degree.

With Angelo's offences sufficiently punished, the ultimate resolution to *Measure for Measure*, as with many of Shakespeare's comedies, is marriage, which as Radel points out, has been institutionalized to maintain social order and control (124). In the final act of the play, Vicentio also orders Lucio to marry Kate Keepdown, the prostitute with whom he fornicated. He also proposes to Isabella and pardons Claudio when he states, "If he be like your brother, for his sake / Is he pardoned, and for your lovely sake, / Give me your hand and say you will be mine" (MM 5.1.489-91). The Duke's solution to alleviate the victimization of Isabella and Mariana is marriage to the two men who are guilty of the sexual offences against them. Isabella is again placed in a compromising position. If she agrees to marry Vicentio, she must surrender her sexual autonomy. According to Radel, the Duke attempts to "control sexual license and women's sexual freedom by harnessing them to legal marriage" (123). If, however, Isabella refuses the Duke's offer, she could possibly face some degree of sanction. With Vicentio's record of sexual exploitation and Machiavellian manipulation, it is reasonable to assume that he might consider committing another sexual offence against Isabella.

The sexual offences occurring in *Measure for Measure* are also prevalent in *All's Well That Ends Well*. The latter play shares many similarities with the former, but it contrasts sharply by featuring a male character who faces sexual harassment. The victim in this

play is Bertram, an arrogant young nobleman who wishes to avoid a relationship with Helena, a beautiful, intelligent woman with common lineage. Bertram is victimized by the King of France, who abuses his authority by ordering Bertram to surrender his sexual autonomy by marrying Helena. The King states, "Why, then, young Bertram, take her; she's thy wife" (AWW 2.3.112). Of course, Bertram objects to marrying Helena, but he is ultimately forced to be with her. In this context, the King is guilty of an extreme form of sexual harassment. Being a cad, Bertram may be less sympathetic to the reader than Isabella and Mariana in *Measure for Measure*. However, the sexual offences committed against him are no less severe.

Sexual harassment is not the only sexual offence committed against Bertram, though. After he leaves Helena, preferring war to her companionship, he is deceived into intercourse with her. Shakespeare again employs the bed-trick plot device in *All's Well That Ends Well*. In Bertram's case, he believes he is meeting the beautiful Diana for an evening of carnal delight but is surprised later in the play to learn that he was actually with Helena, his jilted wife, who announces,

And look you, here's your letter; this it says:

'When from my finger you can get this ring

And are by me with child, &c. This is done:

Will you be mine, now you are doubly won? (AWW 5.3.312-15)

In this passage, Helena reveals the success of the sexual conspiracy: she has his ring and is pregnant with his child. Like Angelo, Bertram is the victim of rape committed by a woman. Both men are often perceived as scoundrels who may be reformed by the

institution of marriage. Under pressure from the king, Bertram is resigned to his fate when he says, "If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (AWW 5.3.316-17).

All's Well That Ends Well was written just before *Measure for Measure*, so it holds the distinction of being the original Shakespearean play to feature the bed-switching gimmick. Comparing the two uses of this unlikely plot device, some might perceive Bertram as equally deserving of this victimization as Angelo. Further examination, however, reveals that while similar to each in other in some regards, their circumstances are not the same. The key difference is that Angelo wanted to be engaged to Mariana until she lost her dowry. Bertram never wanted to be with Helena, a fact made evident when he states, "I cannot love her, nor will I strive to do't" (AWW 2.3.152). Thus, Angelo is a miscreant who loses his sexually autonomy as punishment for his unethical behavior, but Bertram loses control of his sexuality for being arrogant. Through this comparison, it seems as though Shakespeare recognized the lack of justice with Bertram's punishment and later tried to make Angelo a much less sympathetic character. Regardless, the loss of sexual autonomy as punishment in both plays speaks volumes about the times in which Shakespeare wrote and lived. In addition, Shakespeare is again revealed as a visionary for approaching topics that would not emerge as material for scholarly discourse for another 400 years.

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The Construction of Women from a Gendered Perspective: Pre-Cinematic Victorian Representations and the Male Scopophilic Gaze

By Emily Ennis

Laura Mulvey suggests that women-as-artwork is traditionally a feature of male perspective, that “[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearances coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (841). The Fallen Woman was the subject of visual and literary representations throughout late nineteenth-century art and literature, and the act of framing, of capturing a moment to represent through the scopophilic male gaze, constructed the Fallen Woman. In attempting to represent the Fallen Woman, to capture her “fallenness” as in literary or artistic contexts to “capture,” to “represent,” male artists in fact “take [her] prisoner”. In framing the Fallen Woman men present a static image that cannot be altered; a fetishistic representation of all fallen women, and all aspects of the Fallen Woman. While she is represented in art, captured by the male gaze, the Fallen Woman cannot re-define herself from a non-male perspective. I argue that representation of the Fallen Woman is an act of male mastery: scopophilic, implicating sexuality in the desire to look at and define the Fallen Woman. I present, also, a case for the importance of the mirror in the self-construction and re-presentation of the Fallen Woman: if the person within the frame is female, then the frame is female and thus the spectator’s gaze is female. Yet this vision of the Fallen Woman cannot be captured or maintained, with the very earliest forms of moving pictures (such as zoetropes) not existing until the 1860s. While the mirror reflects the diversity of the Fallen Woman’s identity, it cannot

be maintained permanently, and thus the male gaze – the framed picture – becomes the only option for viable and visual construction of the Fallen Woman.

In William Holman Hunt's painting, *The Awakening Conscience*, the male painter has attempted to capture, or frame, the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the Fallen Woman. The picture's frame itself was designed by Hunt (Riggs, 'The Awakening Conscience), and inherently becomes integral to the artistic representation, demonstrating male framing power over woman's passivity in being rendered as art *object*. Not only does the frame capture her and imprison her, but it renders her static: unable to either rise from the man's lap, or sit back down upon it. She is captured—as photography captures a transitory moment—as either sitting upon his lap, and becoming "Fallen," or, as the title suggests, in "a paralysing consciousness of her entrapment has turned her own body into a wedge of fear" (Dijkstra 3) rising from the seat of sexuality. Hunt frames her as either falling or acknowledging she has fallen. With the man's arms round around her hips—and loins—like a cage she is enclosed, statically framed by male sexuality and "fallen" unable to rise up and transcend her representation.

Hunt's capturing of the Fallen Woman in a transitory state is expressive of larger concepts of liminality. The woman in her static in-between position displays her left hand, upon which, despite being covered with rings, the wedding ring finger is exposed un-ringed: she inhabits the liminal space of not-virgin but not-married as needing to have her conscience awoken to her wrongs against cultural norms. The act of framing the Fallen Woman then is an attempt at framing something (and I mean *thing*, because as art she becomes a physical, immutable, object) which falls outside prescriptive female gender norms. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sees the woman's use of a married name as making a "graphic" statement (2443), that is, that it is

the ultimate signifier of her relation to, and perhaps subjugation by, man: as a “Miss” one has one’s father’s name, as a “Mrs” one takes one’s husband’s name. Male desire frames the Fallen Woman, therefore, in an attempt to regain ownership of the indefinable woman that is un-married and un-chaste. Art becomes another form of “graphic” statement so that they might be able to categorise her sexually. The importance put on the delineation of which cultural roles women can assume is seen most clearly in George Elgar Hicks’s triptych, *Woman’s Mission*,¹ which defines woman as “Guide to Childhood,” “Companion to Manhood,” and “Comfort to Old Age,” thus dutiful mother, wife and daughter. In Hunt’s painting Ruskin saw “nothing there that has the old thoughts of home upon it, or that is ever to become a part of home,” (qtd in Nead, ‘The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting’ 36) and consequently the woman is irrevocably unable to become mother, wife or remain dutiful daughter – she exists in an in-between world of all three. As the woman cannot be defined through the tradition of domestic art, or signification of marital status, men wish to capture and control the Fallen Woman through the power of the frame. Then, constructing the Fallen Woman is a means to regain, or to retain, male power over women and sexual status.

While Hunt’s painting is a clear marker of Mulvey’s traditional role of male patronage, the use of mirrors suggests a hope for the reinvention of the Fallen Woman: she tries to escape the capture of the male artist, the male gaze, and the male’s hands which physically encircle her hips. At first glance, the bird on the floor is captured by the cat in much the same way that the woman is held in place by the man. But in fact the mirror on the far wall reveals an open window and hope of escape for the bird, avoid-

¹ George Elgar Hicks, *Woman’s Mission* (1863). I have been using the paintings as reproduced in black and white in Lynda Nead’s *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell [1988] 1990), centrefold.

ing capture and danger by leaving the scene. Similarly, the Fallen Woman can choose to leave the man, as suggested in her “awakening conscience;” the conscience was there all along, like the escape, but now she sees it. She might be able to leave the confines of the man’s arms; there is a means of escape through the mirror out to “[t]he clean, golden light of virtue, which plays through the fresh and tender leaves of a springtime tree beyond the open window of her lavishly gilded cage, [which] reaches out to her with the promise of wholesome regeneration, of cleansing immersion in the unpolluted world of God’s garden.” (Dijkstra 3) With the position of the mirror as it is it should in fact reflect the spectator (much like it does in Ford Madox Brown’s *Take Your Son, Sir*, which puts the woman in the male gaze, the male spectator reflected in the ironic halo-mirror above her head), but in fact it reflects a world of pre-lapsarian regenerative qualities. It offers hope for the representation of the Fallen Woman as something other than the construction of the male gaze. Like the bird, it offers the Fallen Woman something more fluid than her “lavishly gilded cage” that maintains her “*to-be-looked-at-ness*”. This role of the mirror as offering means of reconstruction for the (Fallen) woman, and the role of mirrors themselves as an essentially female object, will be important for later discussion.

The act of framing-as-art-object, therefore, is an act of construction of the Fallen Woman by men. Men are the traditional patrons and viewers of art, and in “capturing” a quality, or moment, renders the woman static, and unable to alter or redefine the gaze, or the construction of her identity. Women’s “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” is an act of male agency that finds other cultural outlets in the pornographic image or the page-three pin-up. Men construct the Fallen Women through their mastery and demand scrutiny of the Fallen Woman as *fallen*, as inhabiting a liminal space that framing can and will eventually control. It is important now, however, to discuss how the

regenerative-redefining power of the mirror can be used simultaneously with the power of the portrait.

A reader of sensation fiction may be said “to “spectate,” rather than to identify with female suffering” (Pykett 80) and “one of the important criteria for Victorian reviewers in judging fiction was the writer’s ability to create faithful “portraits.” The medium of language should compose a “visual” image of the character....” (Onslow 450) The invitation was for Victorian writers to write/paint a literary portrait, consequently something which should be viewed-observed—rather than read. Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* is in itself an invitation to spectate: the title offers a frame in which to place the literary portrait of Lady Audley: her secret. The construction of the Fallen Woman preoccupies itself with the “picturesqueness and attractiveness of women’s wrongs.” (Pykett 61) Yet as a female artist – and not the director of the male gaze – Braddon in fact begins to question the accuracy of representation through portraiture/painting. In questioning the “treatment of the female model in the eye of the male viewer, [she] expose[s] and implicitly question[s] the male creation of women’s role.” (Onslow 461-2) In deconstructing the characterisation of the Fallen Woman, Braddon suggests new modes of re-presentation, as well as signifying the difficulty of overhauling the power of the static, and male, frame.

Robert Audley invokes the “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” of Lady Audley—the Fallen Woman of the novel—by confessing that, “I want to see this fair-haired paragon, my new aunt” (Braddon 50-51) and it is Robert’s scopophilia that leads to the scrutiny and discovery of Lady Audley’s true identity. Framing the Fallen Woman as a thing to be looked at demands scrutiny and analysis of the construction of the Fallen Woman and what it means to be “fallen,” Lady Audley is the object of the male gaze, the sub-

ject of the literary portrait, and the subject of a portrait within the text. Lady Audley is “doomed to be endlessly observed and investigated.” (Auger 9) The genre of the novel, and the literary preoccupation with male detection, invokes Lady Audley as an enigmatic object that must be unravelled and deconstructed.

The genre of detective fiction demands acts of scrutiny or looking into, of going beyond the surface. The male gaze of Robert and George is seen to be so powerful and penetrative that they employ covert means of entering Lady Audley’s chamber in order to view her unfinished portrait. This can be read as particularly sexual when one considers a similarly penetrative act in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

My Lord, as I was sewing in my chamber

Lord Hamlet with his doublet all unbrac’d,

No hat upon his head, his stockings foul’d,

Ungarter’d, and down-gyved to his ankle

[...]he comes before me. (II.i., 88-95)

In the case of Ophelia, Hamlet comes before her in a state of undress prepared, it is assumed, for sex. Ophelia as a thing at which to be looked by the Victorian male gaze is a trope consistent with Victorian art, Ophelia having been depicted by many painters of the Fallen Woman.² The desire to see Lady Audley is matched to the desire to see Ophelia, and the men’s penetration of the room matched to Hamlet’s ea-

² I make especial reference here to John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851-2), who as a painter and founder of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood would have been affiliated with William Holman Hunt, and been preoccupied with similar framings and renderings of (Fallen) women. Millais’s painting can be found here: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/ophelial>> [Accessed May 2011].

gerness for sex: her picture is covered intimately as though it were a naked body. They remove the baize that covers her unfinished painting, disrobing the body of Lady Audley, and George stares at it “with the candlestick grasped in his strong right hand, and his left arm hanging loosely at his side” (Braddon 71) in an almost masturbatory gesture. The male gaze is important in constructing the Fallen Woman, and because paintings require spectators, means that a scopophilic sexual pleasure can be accessed, meaning the Fallen Woman is constructed as sexual/art object of the male gaze.

It is at this point that George Talboys realises that Lucy Audley is in fact his presumed-dead wife, Helen Talboys. Yet for Robert he sees something “odd,” something which Alicia qualifies as “another expression [...] not to be perceived by common eyes” (Braddon 71) and when Auger notes how John Ruskin defined the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic as conveying truth over beauty (Auger 7) (and considering Braddon’s qualification of the portrait as Pre-Raphaelite) the reader/spectator comes to expect the uncovering of a truth. Robert as an amateur detective is on the same quest for truth and cannot understand the disparity—it is “odd” —between Lady Audley, person and painting. If the portrait is “truth,” as merely an abstract noun, then the male perspective of women as the static art/sex object should convey a universal and unequivocal truth. However, as will be later discussed, woman, and the Fallen Woman in particular, has a more multifarious personality than merely the caption or framing of a painting; this is the oddness Robert Audley sees.

To continue from *Awakening Conscience*, where William Holman Hunt is implicated in the act of simultaneously representing and framing, the potential of mirrors in feminine re-presentation is suggested in the novel. At the sight of Lady Audley in her

boudoir the narrator suggests that had Hunt “peeped into the pretty boudoir, I think the picture would have been photographed upon his brain to be reproduced by-and-by upon a bishop’s half-length for the glorification of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood.” (Braddon 295) The idea of photography invokes the male act of “capturing” a moment—photography literally captures light through its lens to create instantaneous representation - while Braddon writes how the many looking-glasses of the room “multiplied my lady’s image” (Braddon 295) Suggesting an endless chance for framing and re-framing. The frame of photography of a man’s mind seizes only the one myopic image of the woman, whereas Lady Audley produces many different images or perspectives of woman. Lady Audley’s many identities and proliferation of names read as a way of constructing the Fallen Woman from multifarious perspectives: there is not just one frame, and the subject is the viewer, the non-male gaze. Lady Audley’s reincarnations as Helen Maldon, Helen Talboys, Lucy Graham and Lucy Audley subvert the permanent capturing and framing implicit in Sedgwick’s argument: that the use of a title, or the taking of one’s husband’s name, is a fixed and representative sexual identity. They subvert the notion of male ownership, or male construction, of the Fallen Woman.

The “great looking-glasses that stretch from ceiling to the floor” (Braddon 27) of Lady Audley’s room provide the female, rather than the male, gaze to construct and redefine the Fallen Woman. It is an entire reflective landscape through which she can fashion herself. In Lacanian theory the mirror serves the self in its creation of identity:

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to that term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to

this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*. (442)

The process of identification with the figure in the mirror, at least in psychoanalytic thought is a means of constructing identity. For Lady Audley as the Fallen Woman, her identity is constructed as and by the person she sees in the mirror. Bram Dijkstra supports this in her exposition of the mirror as signifying feminine qualities. For her the mirror is an extension of female identity:

She existed in and for what she mirrored, and unless she mirrored the world of man, she mirrored brute nature, the world of woman, herself. Thus, paradoxically, as long as woman lived among women, she lived alone, completely self-contained. She mirrored other women and other women mirrored her. Her purity was her self-containment, her inviolate sex the mirror of her existence, barren though that existence might be. Yet as long as woman existed apart from man, she existed as Woman... (132)

This ties in with Lacan's view of the mirror as an extension of the self, as a means of identification with parts of the self. Lady Audley with her many identities has mirrors that multiply her images innumerable in the face of being captured by the male gaze. (Braddon 295) She generates a female homosocial community where she mirrors Woman (that is, her various representations in the mirrors), and where she evades the scopophilic male gaze. Self-containment and thus self-representation and self-fashioning is ensured by the ability to look into the mirror: her many selves can be contained, and presented simultaneously, unlike in her portrait rendered by the male gaze, which due to its three-quarter or full-length character exhibits the woman's one

body to any viewer. This inability to present these many selves as anything other than static fragments exposes Victorian fetishism. (Felber 471-3)

Fetishism “is clearly associated with a person without being one” and fragments the nature of the self; moreover, the “fetishist behaves as though it actually were these other objects...” (Rycroft 57). In portraying a Fallen Woman in a painting you capture her, you render her statically (even in movement, in *Awakening Conscience*), resulting in a fragmented perception. In representing her as framed, as an object transcendent of time, you detach it from the body, become fixated on the synecdoche, and it becomes a fetishized representation of woman standing in for women. The male gaze is linked to the fetishization of the (Fallen) female body. In a painting it is only possible to see that snapshot, that moment of stasis, while a mirror, reflecting the ever-changing ever-moving spectator, frames a fluid and self-contained, self-sustaining and self-fashioning multifarious, self. Felber notes that “the mirror resembles the portrait, but it presents a potentially fluctuating image and the possibility of growth or change. In the mirror, Lucy could be a subject with some measure of control over her representation.” (Felber 481-2) This measure of control is over her body and its representations in the homosocial world of Woman. The agency of spectating and of framing is returned to Woman who is both figure in the frame and figure that is framing. In gazing into the frame the viewer can identify with a different identity like Lady Audley fetishized which is part of herself: the mirror shows the composite personalities that construct her as a Fallen Woman. Unlike fetishism, however, the choice of the one identity does not, and should not, stand in for the whole, which is a person in flux.

Moreover, the mirror, Bram Dijkstra argues, is already inherently feminine as “the moon had come to stand for the essence of everything that was truly feminine in the world” because it exists as a “reflected identity” (Dijkstra 122). The female body has always been associated with the moon, not least in the goddesses of ancient mythologies but also in the identification of the moon as governess of the months, and consequently tied to menstruation and metaphors of menstruation. The moon which reflects light cannot be independent and cannot illuminate itself; it cannot present itself by itself. For that reason, although the mirror depicts the true nature of the Fallen Woman as not merely a fetishized trope or captured moment that synecdochically stands in for the whole identity – because of its nature as a transitory representation that cannot be fixed, and because it depends on the reciprocity of what it must reflect, the mirror cannot stand as a mode of representation for woman without the attachment to an ever-moving woman. At the close of Braddon’s novel, Lady Audley is removed to a *maison de santé* and upon her first take of her new room believed the “glimmering something which adorned the rooms” to be “costly mirrors,” but were in fact “wretched mockeries of burnished tin” (Braddon 389). In removing her mirrors, Robert Audley removes Lady Audley’s ability to view and re-view herself; he shatters Lady Audley’s self and self-perception: there is no self-sustaining mode of representation. Lady Audley has no means to represent or re-present herself, meaning man must. Robert has re-constructed her as the Fallen Woman, as another identity and male-given title, as “Madame Taylor.” (Braddon 390) Lady Audley had chosen her previous identities but now Robert constructs one for her, one that is tied to marital status, as well as perhaps even linked to a sexual depravity (by re-naming her a Madame it perhaps signifies a male conquest—representing instead the “madame” of a brothel who disrupts a female homosocial continuum to feed the male gaze and

sexual acquisition). The chapter is entitled “Buried Alive,” depicting how although Lady Audley is corporeally alive, her autonomy and diverse self is buried; there is decay without the regenerative power and hope of change the mirror offered. This coffin of semi-reflective surfaces brings us back to the “natural mirror” that is water; like Venus who rises from the foam Woman must always return to the water, dying an Ophelia-death. (Dijkstra 132) Lady Audley’s identity and self-presentation born out of the mirror must equally be submerged, by live burial, in the tarnished mirror.

And so, while the mirror offers regeneration and self-representation for the Fallen Woman, the inability to “capture” the ever-moving images of the reflective surface (before the true cinematic age, and before a time of female directors) means that the only way in which Woman, and importantly so, the Fallen Woman, can be represented is through paintings constructed by and for the male scopophilic gaze. The act of framing is an agency which can be harnessed for representation and “[t]he feminist, futuristic potential of women’s self-construction is nevertheless implied” (Felber 485) in mirrors, but the ultimately Victorian technological inability to capture or represent moving images means the production of only static and fetishised representations of the Fallen Woman. Men hold the agency of the frame as the traditional patrons of art, while women have inherent “*to-be-looked-at-ness*.” In looking at themselves they can recreate themselves to themselves, but to represent themselves to public eyes requires the agency of the frame of the male gaze.

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