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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 In the cultural imagination, expressions of the erotic – sex, desire, relationships – are intrinsically linked to gender. Female gender stereotypes are often based on ideas about sexual behaviour, from the lustful Jezebel who preys on innocent men to the sexually passive ‘angel in the house’ who endures sexuality for the sake of procreation. Similarly, behaviour during sexual encounters is often strictly scripted based on gender, with an alleged set of rules of conduct, including sexual positions and questions of dominance. Representations of the erotic are also plagued by double standards: not only are women encouraged to be sexually available only to be disparaged for being ‘too’ available, but which behaviours are culturally acceptable also differs widely between the genders. This issue of *gender forum* presents works that critically engage with representations of the erotic, both on the page and on the screen.

2 In “Private Selves and Public Conflicts: Mastery and Gender Identity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*”, Laura Linker examines in how far Gaskell's novel from 1855 advances a radical social-moral agenda as it examines Victorian anxieties about public expressions of power and gender identity. The novel presents several competing articulations of the pragmatic industrialist, the intellectual gentleman, and the working class man. The “true man” (164) in Industrial England, a term Gaskell employs to describe the factory owner, Thornton, comes under particular scrutiny, as does the now famous Victorian feminine ideal of the ‘angel in the house’. The pragmatic industrialist identity is challenged by Margaret Hale, the novel's heroine. Margaret appropriates a stereotypically masculine role to advocate for a better life for the factory men working for Thornton, who also serves as her love interest in the novel. At odds with the strong industrialist man “made of iron” (213) represented by Thornton is the ‘man of letters’ represented by the heroine's father, Mr. Hale, whose values and forms of work are regarded as weak, effeminate, and outdated by Thornton. While these gendered divisions of work existed before the mid nineteenth century, they came under pressure during the Industrial Revolution, as working-class men were increasingly ready to go on strike for better conditions and pay. This paper considers these gendered identities and competing forms of work and particularly examines Margaret's inner conflict, for she desires both to improve the condition of the factory workers in Milton-Northern and protect Mr. Thornton from mob violence and financial ruin.

3 Natalie Perfetti-Oates’s article “Chick Flicks and the Straight Female Gaze: Sexual Objectification and Sex Negativity in *New Moon*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Magic Mike*, and *Fool’s Gold*” uses Laura Mulvey’s seminal work “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”

as a starting point. Perfetti-Oates outlines how it reveals the existence and impact of the (heterosexual) male gaze in classic Hollywood cinema. Despite the prevalence of this gaze today, the binary Mulvey posits—man as subject/woman as object—is dated as it fails to account for the emerging presence of the heterosexual female gaze in contemporary Hollywood cinema. Indeed, the practice of male sexual objectification is trending and little research has been done concerning the erotic spectacle of the male body on screen. Her essay examines this trend in chick flicks, which more than any other film genre are created for a heterosexual female audience. As Marcia Pally's "Object of the Game" points out, such spectacle is not necessarily negative; however, an analysis of the genre reveals that sexual objectification is often linked with sex negativity. Chick flicks like *Magic Mike* (2012), *New Moon* (2009), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), and *Fool's Gold* (2008) demonstrate that the sexual objectification of the male body actually weakens the desirability of his character. In *New Moon* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, it is the nice guy who 'gets the girl' and the sex object who does not. In *Magic Mike* and *Fool's Gold*, the sex object does win over the woman in the end, yet the films designate the sexuality of these characters as a flaw they must overcome to achieve this aim. Case studies of these movies thus show that chick flicks increasingly indulge in male spectacle, yet condemn the practice of sexual objectification via sex negativity.

4 Cameron E. Williams focuses on correlating representations of "Sex, Violence, and the Southern Man in Lee Daniels' *The Paperboy*". Though the film has been derided by critics as smut hardly worth watching, this article argues that *The Paperboy* fits squarely into a tradition of Southern fiction in which sex and violence are not only strangely and problematically tangled up, but are furthermore inextricably linked to representations of gender and race. By contextualizing the South's historical preoccupation with associating sex and violence, this essay places *The Paperboy* within this narrative tradition to ultimately illuminate the ways in which the film directly confronts paradigms of Southern masculinity that are deeply entrenched in the region's cultural and racial mythologies.

Private Selves and Public Conflicts: Mastery and Gender Identity in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*

By Laura Alexander, High Point University, North Carolina, USA

Abstract:

Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South" (1855) advances a radical social-moral agenda as it examines Victorian anxieties about public expressions of power and gender identity. The novel presents several competing articulations of the pragmatic industrialist, the intellectual gentleman, and the working class man. The "true man" (164) in Industrial England, a term Gaskell employs to describe the factory owner, Thornton, comes under particular scrutiny, as does the now famous Victorian feminine ideal of the 'angel in the house.' The pragmatic industrialist identity is challenged by Margaret Hale, the novel's heroine. Margaret appropriates a stereotypically masculine role to advocate for a better life for the factory men working for Thornton, who also serves as her love interest in the novel. At odds with the strong industrialist man "made of iron" (213) represented by Thornton is the 'man of letters' represented by the heroine's father, Mr. Hale, whose values and forms of work are regarded as weak, effeminate, and outdated by Thornton. While these gendered divisions of work existed before the mid nineteenth century, they came under pressure during the Industrial Revolution, as working-class men were increasingly ready to go on strike for better conditions and pay. This paper considers these gendered identities and competing forms of work and particularly examines Margaret's inner conflict, for she desires both to improve the condition of the factory workers in Milton-Northern and protect Mr. Thornton from mob violence and financial ruin.

1 Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) advances a radical social-moral agenda as it examines Victorian anxieties about public expressions of power and gender identity. The novel presents several competing articulations of the pragmatic industrialist, the intellectual gentleman, and the working class man. The "true man" (164) in Industrial England, a term Gaskell employs to describe the factory owner, Thornton, comes under particular scrutiny, as does the now famous Victorian feminine ideal of the 'angel in the house.' The pragmatic industrialist identity is challenged by Margaret Hale, the novel's heroine. Margaret appropriates a stereotypically masculine role to advocate for a better life for the factory men working for Thornton, who also serves as her love interest in the novel. At odds with the strong industrialist man "made of iron" (213) represented by Thornton is the 'man of letters' represented by the heroine's father, Mr. Hale, whose values and forms of work are regarded as weak, effeminate, and outdated by Thornton. While these gendered divisions of work existed before the mid-nineteenth century, they came under pressure during the Industrial Revolution, as working-class men were increasingly ready to go on strike for better conditions and pay. This paper considers these gendered identities and competing forms of work and particularly examines Margaret's inner conflict, for she desires both to improve the

condition of the factory workers in Milton-Northern and protect Mr. Thornton from mob violence and financial ruin.

2 Set in an industrialized town in northern England, Milton-Northern, Gaskell's *North and South* teases out the gendered layers of the 'soft' southerner, Margaret, and compares her journey to the harsh, industrialized north with the more refined lifestyle she enjoys on Harley Street in the novel's opening. Margaret leaves behind the south, where women often are depicted as clinging to the domestic ideal, and she both nurtures and fights for Milton's factory workers, repurposing the meaning of 'angel in the house' to incorporate the homes of the suffering poor. Her commitment to changing their living conditions means that she must enter a more public space. Rather than passively accepting the deplorable conditions for the working men around her, she listens to them, visiting their homes and families, some of whom are dying as a result of the poor factory working conditions. Fearless, she braves illness and contagion, stepping outside of her genteel social class to collect their stories to share with Thornton, who firmly maintains the older, patriarchal order and scoffs at her perceived 'southern' weakness for them.

3 Thornton is called "master" (110) by his workers, a class distinction with decidedly feudal resonances that Margaret deplors. Though Margaret disagrees with Thornton, she defends, rescues, and teaches him empathy. Her 'feminine' interference, as Thornton perceives it, nevertheless lessens social class tensions among the men, saving Thornton from near-mutiny even as it threatens his masculine authority and identity as a "true man" (164) among his workers. By the end of the novel, however, Thornton comes to see the necessity of Margaret's intercession on their behalf. He is persuaded by her reasoning and persistence and also by her sexuality. Though frequently frustrated by Margaret, Thornton also finds her alluring and unlike any woman he knows. Her crossing of a hetero-normative gendered space to enact social change both frightens and excites him. It also emasculates him, stripping him of power in front of his men and causing an identity crisis for Thornton, who consistently shows contempt for male characters who are not what he considers masculine enough. The novel, however, validates Thornton's 'feminization' and Margaret's 'masculinity' and suggests that tearing down traditional Victorian gendered roles is a necessary precursor to breaking down the wall between "Masters and Men" (110).

4 Feminist critics of the novel have traditionally understood Margaret's public persona conflicting with the private, domestic cultural ideals appropriate for mid-century Victorian women. Deanna L. Davis examines larger feminist issues at stake in Victorian conceptions of womanhood in the novel and views Margaret as a character that struggles with the idea of

maternity and nurturing others, which drains her. Davis also views Margaret as able to return to an inner self through solitude when on the brink of collapse (520-5). Patsy Stoneman traces feminist criticism in *North and South*, arguing that the class issues Marxist readers have raised often overshadow the gender issues, even for feminist critics. Because Margaret's character does not achieve social reforms through politically contentious means, critics have tended to see her character as not feminist enough, or not feminist at all. The idea of "maternal thinking" that Stoneman identifies (90) allows readers to see Margaret's position as outside a polemic that pits women against men. The idea of the nurturing mother must reject these kinds of hostile relationships (Stoneman 90).

5 Margaret's return to a private self allows her to endure hardship even though "self-care" sometimes conflicts with the nurturing roles Gaskell gives her heroines, often poised between their roles as 'angels in the house' and enactors of social change. This interpersonal conflict remains tied with one in which Margaret must confront masculine and feminine roles for herself, both as a mother-like figure who nurtures and a father-like figure who must care for her family and, in the end, for Thornton, reversing traditional categories and courtship rituals.¹

6 Stoneman argues for the novel's importance in terms of the convergence of gender and class, with Thornton as a character that crosses gendered lines as well (118ff.). Margaret teaches him to feel, a typically feminine role, but she goes on to save him first from a threatening mob, then from financial ruin; she is the dominant figure to enact change in the novel, and this 'mastery' of Thornton fuels their sexual frustrations and longings for each other. The novel ends with expected closure and their union even though Stoneman reminds readers that Margaret continues to feel shame about her public role after the last unifying embrace with Thornton (ibid.).

7 By repudiating a private, 'feminine' role and its ideals, deciding instead to engage a public self that will test her relationship with Thornton, Margaret forces a crisis in Thornton, whose own masculine identity eventually crumbles in the face of financial disaster. Barbara Leah Harmon argues that reforming women by the mid-nineteenth century promoted social reforms like female suffrage and made the private sphere public by collapsing the divisions that traditionally separated them. Nevertheless, Harman argues that the public space remained a promiscuous one for women like Margaret, whose entrance into it has sexual implications Gaskell does not reject; rather, she embraces the possibilities this may offer for Margaret's

¹ The same happens in Charlotte Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847).

own sexuality, which she publicizes rather than conceals in the novel (365ff.). Elizabeth Starr likewise asserts that *Mary Barton* and *North and South* not only reveal Elizabeth Gaskell's ability to mediate between two worlds, the private and the public, but also help her to establish literary authority by the moral reform she desired and ostensibly achieved through her novels. In Starr's assessment, Gaskell works out her own issues as an author and a woman through these novels, as her heroines occupy public roles akin to her own (395-404).

8 Gaskell questions the idea of what 'masculine' means in Victorian England, strongly suggesting that it has become bound to class identity by the 1850's, as Industrial England conflicts not only with the dying ideals represented by the learned Mr. Hale but also with the demands, needs, and desires of the working class poor. Characters re-conceive what it means to be a man from a "true man" to a "gentleman" (164), just as Margaret's character questions what it means to be female. These questions destabilize fixed gender roles by the end, when older notions of masculinity give way to emerging ones that articulate the class struggles at stake in the novel.² Gender identities and class conflicts are mirrored throughout the novel, as Gaskell closely examines the way characters interrogate their own sense of purpose and identity in their private and public lives.

9 Gaskell initially develops gendered tensions between Thornton and Margaret through the sexual tension created by competing suitors. Literary historians have attributed these tensions in part, at least, to the constraints serial publication put on Gaskell, who, as Winifred Geren describes, felt a sense of disappointment at the final product and the limitations this kind of publication imposed on the creative process (142-158).³ While the first suitor, Henry Lennox, who proposes marriage first to Margaret, represents London and the chivalric values of a romantic lover from the south, Thornton embodies Milton-Northern and its industrial values, which conflict with the more gently bred customs represented both by Lennox and the genteel, if poor, Mr. Hale. Lennox and Mr. Hale are both 'men of letters' who define themselves through their intellectual learning, but they cannot engender social or moral change. The novel upholds ethical action over passive learning. This activity becomes the most important value to the new, Industrial England in competition with the 'easy' living of the south.

² Henry N. Rogers III discusses the four major characters in the novel: Margaret, Mr. Thornton, his mother, and Nicolas Higgins as fundamentally all the same—they all have at their core prideful natures that conflict. While Rogers sees this pride as the origin of the tensions in the novel, I would extend his argument by identifying pride as a 'masculine' characteristic each of the characters possesses. This drives the tension because many masculinities compete in the novel for power, sometimes power over the self (61-4).

³ See also Dorothy W. Collins's thorough analysis of Charles Dickens's editorial role in and constraining impulse over the novel (67-93).

10 Gaskell likely based Mr. Hale on her own father, a Unitarian minister whose conscientious objections forced his resignation from the church in Failsworth, a town near Manchester (Pollard 11). After attempting scientific farming, he became, like Mr. Hale, a 'man of letters,' holding posts as editor of *The Scots Magazine* and occasional writer for *The Edinburgh Review*. Eventually moving to London, he ended his life as a Keeper of Treasury Records when an appointment as a private secretary to the Earl of Lauderdale, who was en route to India as Governor-General, failed (Pollard 12). Gaskell reflects these experiences in her novels to argue that a new kind of 'man of letters' was needed to address the kinds of social problems plaguing the fictional town Milton-Northern.⁴

11 The social inadequacies of the kind of 'man of letters' represented by Margaret's father, like Gaskell's, is in part due to its association by the industrialist classes with laziness, even effeminacy—two associations Thornton argues for in the novel. By contrast, the emergent industrialist identity prized hard work and an ascetic lifestyle, and the conflict between the industrialist, 'the man of letters', and the working class identities each contribute to the overarching impasse Gaskell tackles between these social classes and their ideologies of masculinity. In *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity*, James Eli Adams explains the way in which nineteenth-century writers wrestled with competing notions of Victorian masculinities. Adams explains that, by the final decades of the Victorian period, asceticism, an extreme form of self-discipline, was a rebellion against any hint of effeminacy, which became increasingly attached to the 'man of letters,' whose work required intellectual rather than physical labor and self-discipline. Although Adams primarily treats nineteenth-century male authors in his study, from Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens to Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, his book nevertheless offers a provocative analysis of the ways in which masculinities competed against one another over time and the course of changing economies—literally in Industrial England and socially in Victorian gendered ideals culturally constructed. Adams discusses 'feminine' self-discipline that was required for intellectual work, and Gaskell's novel reflects this friction in the Victorian male identity represented by Thornton. Anxious to separate themselves from effeminate slurs, the emerging industrialists like Thornton—efficient and hard-working—attached a stoic ideal to this 'feminine' characteristic, anticipating problems with gendered self-constructions in later nineteenth-century England. Self-discipline, as an emergent feature of the industrialist identity in the 1850s, redefined itself during the Victorian period. By the end of the

⁴ For further information on Elizabeth Gaskell's family, see Arthur Pollard's "Mrs. Gaskell: Novelist and Biographer" (12-31).

nineteenth century, it moved from the 'feminine' to an extreme celebration of 'masculine' achievement typified in the homoerotic ascetic. Both Thomas Carlyle and later Walter Pater wrote extensively on this type. Pater's conception of the perfect male body combines athletic ability with morality and courage (10).

12 Gaskell works with gender complexity in Margaret's character as the concept of education and 'letters' is re-evaluated. She re-conceptualizes the purpose of 'letters' in an industrial world with new industrial values. Because she is a middle-class daughter of a parish priest-turned-tutor, Margaret has access to learning and thus a masculine world that women did not often have, but she rejects classical literature for working-class narratives, which she retells to 'educate' Thornton. Because Margaret perceives that new stories take precedence in Milton-Northern, the re-education of Thornton is equally important for the reader. Bessy and Higgins, the working-class poor, replace the 'dead,' classical authors; their narratives are more 'real' and pressing and become of central importance for understanding why Margaret must adopt a more 'masculine' public identity to change their lives. The novel rejects the idea that the classics can teach moral values in the new, Industrial England. They have no reforming power in an industrialized world and are attached to weakness.⁵

13 Consequently, roles for men and women become more complicated as the novel progresses and the working class Higgins comes into conflict with the industrialist Thornton. Margaret calls all of these masculine identities into question. Her refusal to stay in a domestic sphere, like her cousin Edith, and her refusal to marry Henry Lennox signifies Margaret's transgression of appropriate gender roles, which would deny her access to the public role she assumes in Milton-Northern.⁶

14 The novel opens in the drawing-room of elegant Harley Street, where Margaret's cousin Edith sleeps in an idyllic world in which Margaret, a poor relation, remains an outsider. The setting reinforces the differences between north and south, and Margaret's discomfort with the luxury of this existence becomes important later in the novel. Margaret in fact moves through three localities, the urban south, the rural parish, and the urban north. Harley Street creates a stark contrast between the wealthy and fashionable world of the Shaws in London, the genteel poverty and dying idealism of the Hales in Helstone, and the

⁵ See Barbara Weiss's discussion of this, 274-287.

⁶ These displacements, combined with the death of Margaret's loved ones, contribute to the novel's instability in Terence Wright's evaluation of a strong heroine forced to confront an unstable world. Ultimately, she must find a stable home in herself and in Thornton (97-100).

gritty reality of the Thorntons in Milton-Northern.⁷ Characters reflect these landscapes; their identities change with every scene so that Margaret, though an outsider in Harley Street and even later in Helstone, must navigate all three worlds. The social problems force her to confront the death of her old life in London and Helstone. Mr. and Mrs. Hale, along with Mr. Bell, remain bound to a dying world of privilege and aristocratic values out of place at Milton-Northern. It is not surprising that they die in the novel; unlike Margaret, they cannot adapt to the new, Industrial England. More importantly, however, Gaskell does not intend for them to adapt. Mr. Hale's identity, his apostasy, scholarly ideals, and appreciation for the classical world, cannot conform or even imagine the new narratives of moral and social reforms the novel advocates.⁸

15 Likewise, Margaret's acceptance of Lennox cannot provide an adequate answer because it ignores the seriousness of the social problem that Margaret and Thornton's marriage, at least fictionally, resolves at the end. Lennox represents a world detached from Industrial England or its concerns. Though he, like Margaret, scorns the leisure world in which they live in the opening chapters of the novel, he nevertheless has characteristics of the London gentleman that Thornton scorns several chapters later. Furthermore, he speaks to Margaret as a lover, enticing her into playful language and into an Edenic pastoral landscape they paint together at Helstone. None of these literary traditions work in the novel because they neglect to consider the social world forcing its way into the idyllic language of the pastoral. When Margaret rejects Lennox, his first reaction is to act "lighter, cleverer, more worldly" (31), but even this creates a traditionally upper class identity for him as the rejected lover who admires an idealized woman but finds only disdain from his beloved.

16 As Margaret must come to terms with her father's decision to leave Helstone and a position as her father's "staff[...his] right hand," (169) she conceptualizes Lennox as part of a different world, one she has already left in Harley Street and another she will leave for Milton-Northern. His character and the world it represents envision an ideal of masculinity Gaskell sets up in the beginning only to tear down at the end, defeated finally by the social

⁷ As Coral Lansbury has argued, the religious crisis in the novel has less to do with doctrine than with Mr. Hale's failure to minister to those who suffer. Both in Helstone and in Milton-Northern, it is Margaret who ministers. In Lansbury's assessment, this kind of failure results in the "militant socialism" (103) of Nicolas Higgins, the product of religious failure, which Gaskell envisions as inseparable from the social component tied to religion.

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reforms that have no place in this idealistic world that ignores the social and moral problems of Industrial England.

17 One of the first exchanges between Thornton and Margaret not only reveals the tensions between the north and south in England that drive their relationship, but also Gaskell's strategy for creating the industrialist masculine identity, or one that reflects the landscape. Thornton defends himself to Margaret:

I won't deny that I am proud of belonging to a town—or perhaps I should rather say a district—the necessities of which give birth to such grandeur of conception. I would rather be a man toiling, suffering—nay, failing and successless—here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease. One may be clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly. (81)

His anxiety emerges throughout the novel as he struggles to define what a 'masculine' self constitutes in the new industrial world. He competes with other masculinities, including the “heroic simplicity of the Homeric life” (85) Mr. Hale represents, the “self-indulgent, sensual people [...] with [...] poorness of character” (85) Lennox represents, and the degraded man, represented in the suicide of Boucher and of his father, whose speculation and failure would not allow him to “bear the disgrace” (87).

18 Among the masculine identities Thornton challenges and confronts, the one he finds most problematic is that one between the "true man" (164) and the gentleman. Though he represents the 'master' in Milton-Northern, Thornton feels separation from the gentlemen of the South:

a man is to me a higher and a completer being than a gentleman [...which is] a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as 'a man,' we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself,—to life—to time—to eternity. A cast-away, lonely as Robinson Crusoe—a prisoner immured in a dungeon for life—nay, even a saint in Patmos, has his endurance, his strength, his faith, best described by being spoken of as 'a man.' I am rather weary of this word 'gentlemanly,' which seems to me to be often inappropriately used, and used often, too, with such exaggerated distortion of meaning, while the full simplicity of the noun 'man,' and the adjective 'manly' are unacknowledged... (164)

Thornton cites Robinson Crusoe as an example of a “true man,” and this example not only recalls the hero of the first published novel by Daniel Defoe, but also the first hero for the middle-class man. Gaskell draws parallels between them in several ways. Robinson Crusoe, imbued with self-discipline and an empirical impulse that guides him for more than twenty-five years on his island, struggles not to succumb to despair. He controls his emotions

through unparalleled examples of rational action demonstrated through his physical and psychological efforts to save himself, and his reliance not only on reason but also on a moral world divinely created and purposeful suggests an overwhelming need to see a higher force govern the threatening chaos both in nature and in himself. By citing Robinson Crusoe, Thornton redefines the role of 'man,' choosing instead of the ineffectual 'gentleman,' the pragmatic industrialist identity that has more in common with Robinson Crusoe based on their shared middle-class identity, their role as 'master' over others, and their struggle with emotion as they strive to 'master' themselves and the changing world around them. Each confronts emotion as a dangerous compromise to their practical sense of manhood. Excessive displays of emotion threaten emasculation for Thornton and potential insanity for Robinson Crusoe, the self-proclaimed king of the island and of its inhabitants.

19 What Thornton really rejects, as Adams explains, is the idea of the Carlylean dandy, the aristocrat who acts as a parasite on society. The dandy contrasts with the man of action characteristic of the newly emergent middle-class industrialist man in Gaskell's period (22). This anxiety, of course, had already emerged in two conflicting portraits at the turn of the eighteenth century between such dandies as George Etherege's Dorimant, the rake hero in *The Man of Mode* (1676), and middle-class capitalists like Robinson Crusoe, whom Defoe literally strips of any 'dandifying' materials. Not surprisingly, the two writers support differing political and social ideologies playing out on a national stage.

20 But as Adams notes, the contrast between Carlyle's hero and dandy necessitates a more complex understanding of Victorian masculinities. Carlyle's version requires the inclusion of 'feminine' feeling that conflicts Thornton, and what it means to 'be a man' becomes blurred throughout the novel. Although Thornton stoically proclaims himself a "man of iron" (213) and one who defies his feelings, or 'feminine' qualities that weaken his resolve, he remains insecure about this strength, struggling with the 'feminine' and 'masculine' qualities that emerge both in himself and in Margaret, whose 'masculine' attributes overtake her 'natural' feminine ones.

21 Indeed, Margaret exemplifies these 'masculine' attributes when she saves Thornton more than once, first in a dramatic gesture where she directly calls his masculinity into question as the mob threatens outside and then again at the end, when she saves him from ruin by her inheritance from Mr. Bell. Despite Mr. Thornton's firm resolutions, hard work, stern countenance, and harsh treatment of those who work for him, it is Margaret who must give him courage to face the strikers: "Mr. Thornton [...] go down this instant, if you are not a coward. Go down and face them like a man [...] If you have any courage or noble quality in

you, go out and speak to them, man to man” (177). And again, it is Margaret, not Mr. Thornton, who speaks to the crowd and “threw her arms around him,” turning “her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond” (179). This act, which protects him from physical injury after a striker hurls a stone, nevertheless injures his self-conception as a “true man” (164); even so, it gives him the courage to face the mob, contemptuous of his 'hiding' behind a woman. His mother, as sternly 'masculine' in her demeanor and refusal to show 'feminine' weakness as her son is, taunts him: “Are you become so helpless as to have to be defended by a girl?” (186). The reinforcement of this 'weakness' haunts Thornton for several chapters; certainly it forces him to face his feelings for Margaret, but it also forces the reader to re-conceptualize her 'masculine' role in the novel, for it is Margaret who will effect change in Milton-Northern.

22 Like Gaskell, Margaret assumes a dangerous position as a moral reformer who must consistently reaffirm her femininity to counter the 'masculine' persona she adopts to serve her role in the novel—not the helpless heroine, swept up into a romance narrative, to be rescued and married—but the agent for reform, who mediates between two competing classes, the industrial class and the working class. Margaret takes an active role in saving Thornton, and she consistently reproaches herself for “defend[ing] that man as if he were a helpless child” (190)—an atypical role she resolves as 'woman's work' since it could have “saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed” (191). Nevertheless, she feels

a deep sense of shame that she should thus be the object of universal record—a sense of shame so acute that it seemed as if she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes. (191)

Margaret's subsequent excuse of her actions for Thornton reinforces the discomfort she feels as having assumed a public 'masculine' role.⁹ She represents a feminine version of Carlylean manliness, a definition of the male identity he presents in several works devoted to pinpointing masculine identity. Herbert Sussman explains in *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* that Carlyle's articulation between maleness, an essential definition of unrestrained, dangerous male energy, and manliness, or self-discipline and regulation of male energy in *Sartor Resartus*, frames the debate between 'nature versus nurture' at the center of cultural debates about the Victorian

⁹ As Susan Zlotnick explains, Margaret's sexual innocence at the beginning of the novel gives way to a recognition of her sexuality and preference for Thornton—it must, Zlotnick argues, because it takes recognition to achieve self-control and self-determination (114).

male identity. Carlyle's *Past and Present* presents the driven Abbot Samson, who controls his passions in a celibate lifestyle idealized in work, since his manliness allows him to control extreme passion without giving way to emasculation—the two dangers Sussman argues are present in Carlyle's definition of masculinity (25). Sussman traces this tension within the masculine identity throughout Carlyle's *Past and Present*, *Sartor Resartus*, "The Hero as Man of Letters," and *The French Revolution*, all works that fundamentally reject heterosexuality and the subversive female while celebrating male-male relationships that culminate in the all male community of *Past and Present*. Thornton similarly creates an all male community within his factory, one Sussman identifies, along with the emasculated Mr. Hale, as a Carlylean plot (27).

23 Gaskell actually presents a 'nightmare' version of Carlyle's definition of manliness, one that opposes his obvious anxieties about women. It is not Thornton whose manliness allows him to resolve two competing views of masculinity, one emasculating and the other too passionate; rather, it is Margaret, a 'subversive' woman who wrestles with restrictive social codes for women as she represses desire, who channels social action into Abbot Samson's noble energy. Her celibacy throughout the novel and her worry over expressing too many 'womanly' desires reveal an innate tension between her sexual identity and the moral and social role Gaskell gives her.

24 The way in which Margaret moves through gender roles ultimately stupefies Thornton, who, unlike Margaret, cannot control his feelings for her—he defies his own repeated insistence at his "self-denial" (85) when he sees her assumption of masculine authority blended with traditional femininity:

He only caught glimpses of her; he did not understand her altogether. At one time she was so brave, and at another so timid; now so tender, and then so haughty and regal proud. And then he thought over every time he had ever seen her once again, by way of finally forgetting her. (208)

Thornton's assessment of Margaret's character only leads him to give way to his passions, and Gaskell describes him as "a fool in the morning" who "did not grow much wiser in the afternoon," since he possesses "a more vivid conviction that there never was, never could be, any one like Margaret; that she did not love him and never would; but that she—no! nor the whole world—should never hinder him from loving her" (208). In this way, Margaret commands power over him, as she does over her father and Higgins. Like Thornton, Higgins acknowledges the need for change at an individual level, and these individual changes, another theme Gaskell introduces, allow for the more widespread change in Milton-

Northern.¹⁰ Margaret assumes a dominant position through her ability alternately to find inner 'masculine' strength for her father and to compete with Thornton and win him over. But she also adopts a feminine 'weakness' as the 'angel' that arrives to the Higgens' household to achieve the moral goals that ultimately unite these two classes and resolve the social problem that conflicts them.

25 The pivotal scene in which Margaret saves Thornton reveals this vacillation between the two competing identities that Margaret assumes, and they not only confound Thornton, they 'unman' him, or strip him of that Carlylean manliness that privileges self-control. As he anticipates his forthcoming declaration of love to her, the inner, chaotic feeling Carlyle rejects and Margaret suppresses rises within him, overtaking Thornton for several chapters:

in truth, he was afraid of himself. His heart beat thick at the thought of her coming. He could not forget the touch of her arms around his neck...but now the recollection of her clinging defence of him, seemed to thrill him through and through,--to melt away every resolution, all power of self-control, as if it were wax before a fire...Strong man as he was, he trembled at the anticipation of what he had to say. (193)

Thornton must confront new feelings, and he eventually embraces both Margaret and a less 'severe' gendered identity also. Though he initially perceives such emotion as a stereotypically feminine weakness that he attaches to Mr. Hale and the south of England generally, Thornton begins to feel tension between his position as 'master' and his new feelings for Margaret as her would-be lover. His sexual attraction for her and need to have her prove more potent than his attachment to the "true man" (164) identity of the pragmatic industrialist. Margaret sees this and is able to use it to gain power in their relationship and get what she wants. The novel becomes a power struggle between the two characters, not only in their differing philosophies about the factory workers but also in their fight for dominance in the relationship. Margaret ultimately wins over Thornton to her side, and he accepts her reasoning and financial help. The novel ends idealistically, affirming Gaskell's social goals through Margaret's character.

26 This is not achieved until the very end of the novel. Chapter eleven opens with Thornton's assertion of an industrialist identity and thus a more 'manly' presence than he has in the strike scene. Though "he felt his power and revelled in it" (212), Thornton never reasserts total control over his emotional capacities, and he is ultimately subdued by Margaret.

¹⁰ The idea of the individual, evident in Gaskell's original title for the novel, or "Margaret Hale", articulates her commitment to a reform program that begins within the individual. Shirley Foster notes that this theme connects the characters together, including Frederick Hale, whose individual freedom conflicts with the corrupt misuse of authority by the British Navy. Likewise, Mr. Hale's rejection of church authority and even Aunt Shaw's acceptance of her own actions at the end reinforces the theme of individual responsibility (112).

He cannot perpetuate the “man of iron” (213) identity and also pursue Margaret, a social reformer. This gender ‘softening’ functions as a way for Gaskell to resolve the tensions of the novel, though it complicates the Victorian gendered binaries that Gaskell wants to tear down.¹¹

27 Marriage ultimately creates the compromise between many competing identities.¹² [2] Gaskell revises the standards of her day to allow for women to act as powerful agents for change. They not only engage men but enter and reshape their world.¹³ Margaret’s ability to transcend structured binaries, her transgression of social and gender roles as she assumes a masculine identity, even if it threatens her physically and emotionally, presents a new understanding of masculine and feminine roles.¹⁴ Gaskell’s great achievement, then, remains in creating a female character that not only achieves and wields social and personal mastery over Thornton, but also re-conceptualizes the definition of what ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ mean in Victorian England.¹⁵

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¹¹ For further analysis of Margaret’s ‘softening’ tendencies as a way for Gaskell to explore women’s moral authority to change society, see Jane Spencer’s argument in “Elizabeth Gaskell” (75-95).

¹² Hilary M. Schor takes a different view of marriage and the ‘resolutions’ of the novel, arguing that the marriage plot does not resolve the tensions between classes but only advocates moderation. Instead of building up to resolution, Schor proposes that Gaskell builds the novel on oppositions, tensions, and conflict so readers may recognize them the way Thornton does (150).

¹³ Both Henry N. Rogers III and Dorice Elliott view marriage as an answer to the novel’s social problems rather than as one that fails because it ends conventionally.

¹⁴ Pearl L. Brown argues against this view of marriage in the novel by seeing Margaret’s role as a middle-class woman soon to marry Thornton as more confining than liberating. Mr. Bell, Lennox, and her future husband all manage Margaret’s life in some way, limiting her independence. By contrast, Brown asserts that Mary Barton, Gaskell’s working-class heroine in an earlier novel, actually has more freedom than the middle-class Margaret (350-2)

¹⁵ For Julie Nash, *North and South* presents a complex view of the conflict between ‘masters and men,’ one not as radical as John Stuart Mill’s view but also not as paternalistic as John Ruskin’s desire to return to a medieval agrarian state. Rather, Nash believes that Gaskell walks a line between them, by recognizing that, while a utopia cannot exist between working-class and industrialist—a reality Thornton realizes—Christian compassion of the kind Margaret expresses holds promise for a more progressive relationship (22-28).

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Chick Flicks and the Straight Female Gaze: Sexual Objectification and Sex Negativity in *New Moon*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Magic Mike*, and *Fool's Gold*

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Abstract:

Laura Mulvey's seminal work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" reveals the existence and impact of the (heterosexual) male gaze in classic Hollywood cinema. Despite the prevalence of this gaze today, the binary Mulvey posits—man as subject/woman as object—is dated as it fails to account for the emerging presence of the heterosexual female gaze in contemporary Hollywood cinema. Indeed, the practice of male sexual objectification is trending and little research has been done concerning the erotic spectacle of the male body on screen. My essay examines this trend in chick flicks, which more than any other film genre are created for a heterosexual female audience. As Marcia Pally's "Object of the Game" points out, such spectacle is not necessarily negative; however, an analysis of the genre reveals that sexual objectification is often linked with sex negativity. Chick flicks like *Magic Mike* (2012), *New Moon* (2009), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), and *Fool's Gold* (2008) demonstrate that the sexual objectification of the male body actually weakens the desirability of his character. In *New Moon* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, it is the nice guy who 'gets the girl' and the sex object who does not. In *Magic Mike* and *Fool's Gold*, the sex object does win over the woman in the end, yet the films designate the sexuality of these characters as a flaw they must overcome to achieve this aim. Case studies of these movies thus show that chick flicks increasingly indulge in male spectacle, yet condemn the practice of sexual objectification via sex negativity.

1 In her landmark article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey's analysis of scopophilia in classic Hollywood cinema reveals the existence and impact of the male gaze. The article, published in 1975, characterizes the industry as dominated by the heterosexual male's pleasure in looking. Mulvey examines how this gaze affects the gendered representations of bodies on screen. She writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (2088)

Here Mulvey establishes a binary: woman as spectacle and man as spectator. Her argument, which she makes in regard to classic Hollywood movies, has become fundamental to film studies and applied by scholars to a wide array of films. In so doing, however, many have critiqued the

binary Mulvey posits in “Visual Pleasure” for oversimplifying scopophilia by disregarding the dynamics of the female gaze.

2 In response to such criticism, Mulvey analyzes the role of the female spectator in her essay “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by *Duel in the Sun*.” This piece, published in 1981, describes the female spectator either as unable to identify with the (male) hero on screen or “secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” (70). In the case of the latter, Mulvey remarks that the female spectator will undergo a complex struggle between masculinity and femininity, one that parallels the struggle Freud describes between active and passive experienced by young girls in their early development. Indeed, Mulvey states that “the female spectator’s phantasy of masculinization [is] at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes” (79). In “Afterthoughts,” Mulvey makes room for the female spectator, but does not address the possibility of the female gaze. She does not consider that beyond identifying, or not identifying, with the (male) hero as a subject, the female spectator might turn her gaze upon him as an object (of visual pleasure). However, film studies should consider not only the dynamics of the female as spectator, but also of the male as spectacle. As Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin point out, “Representations of men are just as socially constructed as are those of women, and need to be explored in a similar manner” (245). Benshoff and Griffin highlight a blind spot in film studies, calling for scholarship that balances Mulvey’s binary in “Visual Pleasure.” The erotic spectacle of the male body on screen is particularly important for analysis in light of the emerging trend of male sexual objectification in cinema.

3 Several scholars in film studies have noted the sexual objectification of men on screen in action movies. This genre, with its reputation for featuring guns, explosions, and cleavage, traditionally caters to the heterosexual male gaze. The sensationalization of violence and the sexual objectification of Megan Fox throughout *Transformers* (2007) are characteristic. However, more and more action movies invite the heterosexual female gaze by showcasing men’s bodies as well, such as, for example, Ryan Reynolds’s in *Blade Trinity* (2004). Other popular examples of male spectacle include the bodies of Vin Diesel in *The Fast and the Furious* (2001), Gerard Butler in *300* (2006), and Hugh Jackman in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009). Yvonne Tasker observes that “As with the figure of the showgirl that Laura Mulvey refers to in classic Hollywood films, contemporary American action movies work hard, and often at the

expense of narrative development, to contrive situations for the display of the hero's body" (79). She examines the recent shift in focus from the spectacle of the body in action to the spectacle of the body itself. Similarly, Benshoff and Griffin point out that "in action movies and Westerns [...] it has become something of a cliché that the hero's shirt will be torn open during a particularly rough fight with an opponent" (246). Along with Tasker, Benshoff and Griffin reveal male sexual objectification in the action movie genre as an increasing trend, a phenomenon that holds important implications for the straight female gaze.

4 Few scholars, however, recognize that the erotic spectacle of the male body appears in chick flick films as well. The term 'chick flick' has been used variously in the film industry. Mainly understood as a movie geared toward a female viewership, 'chick flick' is often specifically synonymous with romantic comedies. However, the genre can more generally describe female-targeted films in which romance, characterized by a 'boy gets girl' formula, composes the plot. 'Chick flick' is a relatively recent term, though it has since been applied retroactively to earlier women's movies that feature love stories. Chick flicks have been showing women falling in love with men for decades, yet only recently have they shown men as objects of erotic spectacle. Indeed, the chick flicks mentioned by Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure," such as *To Have and Have Not* (1944) and *The River of No Return* (1954), largely follow the paradigm of woman as spectacle and man as spectator she sets forth. Indeed, viewers of these movies see the bodies of their female leads revealed in low-cut shirts or fitting dresses while the bodies of their male leads are obscured by suits and ties or jackets and long sleeves. The main visual pleasure these men offer their audience members lies in admiration of their faces rather than the rest of their bodies. This pattern continues after the publication of "Visual Pleasure" and "Afterthoughts" for many decades—for example, in the 1980s with *Sixteen Candles* (1984), the 1990s with *Pretty Woman* (1990), and the early 2000s with *A Walk to Remember* (2002). The men in these chick flicks do not undergo any notable sexual objectification. However, beginning in the late 2000s, male sexual objectification occurs more systematically in the genre. This trend can be illustrated in movies like *What Happens in Vegas* (2008), *The Proposal* (2009), and *Dear John* (2010). Each of these features scenes which position the male lead's body as a source of visual pleasure for his spectators. For example, *The Proposal*, a movie that already challenges gender norms by positioning its female lead as the boss and its male lead as her assistant, interestingly inverts the cliché of the shower scene. Here we see Sandra Bullock step out of the

shower and look for a towel; instead of close-ups of her body, however, spectators see close-ups of Ryan Reynolds removing his clothing as he prepares to get in the shower. The presence of male sexual objectification in chick flicks continues to emerge, and, as it does, calls for renewed conversations about the possibilities for and implications of the gaze.

5 Research on the female gaze in film should specifically consider the objectification of the male body in chick flicks, which more than any other genre are created for a heterosexual female audience. However, most of the current conversations regarding male sexual objectification on screen focus on action movies. Moreover, analyses of the female gaze that do focus on chick flicks may not position the erotic male body as an object of the gaze at all. For example, Paula Marantz Cohen's analysis of the female gaze in chick flicks instead centers on the spectacle of the material world—the elaborate clothes, shoes, and hairstyles—offered to female viewers. She only briefly acknowledges the spectacle of the male body, writing in parenthesis that: “(Male nudity is another story, but it serves more as an aesthetic element than an incitement to lust)” (81). Cohen, among other scholars, appears to assume that since chick flicks characteristically feature stories of love, these films do not also cater to lust. Suzanne Moore addresses this silence surrounding the female gaze, observing that “to suggest that women actually look at men's bodies is apparently to stumble into a theoretical minefield which holds sacred the idea that in the dominant media the look is always already structured as male” (45). Nevertheless, the sexual objectification of the male body continues to trend in chick flicks, and, as it increasingly impacts viewers, needs to inform scholarly discussions regarding the gaze. As such, my research examines the erotic spectacle of the male body and the presence of the straight female gaze in chick flick cinema, analyzing the association between sexual objectification and sex negativity that occurs in the genre.

6 My study of contemporary chick flicks demonstrates that these movies characterize sexual objectification with sex negativity. As Marcia Pally's article “Object of the Game” points out, sexual objectification is not necessarily negative. In some cases, the object position can offer advantages, such as having the command of the room and/or the control of a captive audience. Pally explains that objectification can be an empowering and even enjoyable experience, so long as men and women do not remain trapped in subject and object positions. Despite this possibility, however, chick flicks overwhelmingly feature male sexual objectification in terms of

sex negativity. Gayle Rubin describes sex negativity as a significant facet of United States society, observing that

This culture always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent. Virtually all erotic behaviour is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. (150)

My research examines the prevalence of sex negativity as it takes place in contemporary chick flicks *New Moon* (2009), *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008), *Magic Mike* (2012), and *Fool's Gold* (2008). As these films attest, the sexual objectification of the male body for the straight female gaze actually weakens the desirability of his character in the plot. Indeed, in *New Moon* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, it is the nice guy who 'gets the girl' and the sex object who does not. In *Magic Mike* and *Fool's Gold*, the sex object does win over the woman in the end, yet the films designate the sexuality of these characters as a flaw they must overcome to achieve this aim. These case studies of the straight female gaze thus show that chick flicks increasingly indulge in male spectacle, yet condemn male sexual objectification via sex negativity.

Sexual Objectification

7 Contemporary chick flicks increasingly cater to the straight female gaze by sexually objectifying their male leads, frequently more than their female ones. *New Moon*, the second sequence in the *Twilight* saga, evidences this trend in the character of Jacob Black, played by Taylor Lautner. *New Moon* is notorious in pop culture for its near-exclusive appeal to a straight female audience. In analysis of its viewer demographic, Melissa Silverstein labels the movie "guy proof," meaning *New Moon* "won't need guys to see it for it to kick some box office butt." At least part of this chick flick's popular appeal lies in the erotic spectacle it makes of Jacob's body, a spectacle especially evident due to the transformation the character undergoes from *Twilight* to *New Moon*. (Of course, male sexual objectification occurs to varying extents in each of the *Twilight* films, but particularly in *New Moon* as Jacob's character—and his body—play a central role.) Between the first and second movies, Lautner becomes more muscular, cuts his hair, and, perhaps most significantly, removes his shirt. Kristen Stewart's character Bella Swan calls attention to these changes the first time she sees him in *New Moon*, remarking "Hello, biceps. You know, anabolic steroids are really bad for you." The changes that occur to Lautner's body in this sequel coincide with Jacob's transformation to a werewolf. Elizabeth A. Lawrence

highlights the werewolf as a sexual symbol (104), also observing that “a person must remove his clothes in order to become a werewolf” (107). This proves true of Jacob, who spends most of the movie shirtless. Interestingly, *New Moon* does not often invite its viewers to gaze at Jacob’s newly sexualized body in action. Rather, it displays his body in scenes when he simply talks to Bella, such as during a conversation that takes place in her bedroom or another that takes place in the rain. In both he appears shirtless, so that his muscled shoulders and abs are on display to viewers. During a third scene, Jacob removes his shirt in order to help Bella after she has crashed a motorcycle. Note that he does not become shirtless in the process of saving her from the crash, but in order to dab the blood from her head afterward. Moore observes that “What seems to be happening is that now we are seeing the male body coded precisely as erotic spectacle but *without* the [usual] accompanying narrative violence” (53). In this way, *New Moon* takes part in a trending objectification of the male body in contemporary chick flicks which counters Mulvey’s conception of the female as the sole object of the gaze.

8 In another example of erotic male spectacle, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* bares the body of Aldous Snow, played by Russell Brand, for the visual pleasure of its heterosexual female viewers. The sensation Aldous’s body creates bears little similarity to the one made by Jacob’s since Lautner plays a muscular teen werewolf while Brand takes on the role of a libertine adult rock star. The movie relies on this rock star role to sexualize Aldous. His rocker sexuality becomes clear in the first scene Peter Bretter (played by Jason Segel) sees Aldous in person. Juxtaposed to Peter and his dorky Hawaiian shirt, Aldous—shirtless and adorned with tattoos, eyeliner, and jewelry—appears suave and sexy. Brand’s character often provokes a comedic sexual spectacle in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* not merely because of the way his body looks, but also the way his body moves. He first appears in the movie, introduced as a “lead singer and notorious lothario,” in a music video that displays him pelvic thrusting and kissing strangers. Aldous pelvic thrusts again in a scene when he sings an erotic song titled “Inside of You” to Sarah (played by Kristen Bell), and yet again in another scene when he teaches a fellow hotel guest to have sex by using a life-size chess piece to demonstrate bedroom poses. In none of these scenes is Aldous with Sarah, thus offering up his body as the sole object of pleasure for the heterosexual female viewer. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* garners more appeal from a male audience than do most romantic comedies (perhaps because its protagonist is a man), yet still follows the “boy falls for girl, boy and girl have trouble, and boy gets girl” formula of most chick

flicks. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* thus serves to exemplify the emerging pattern of male spectacle in chick flicks and the straight female voyeuristic pleasure it indicates.

9 Arguably more than any other Hollywood chick flick, *Magic Mike* caters to the heterosexual female gaze in the unprecedented spectacle of the male body it presents. This spectacle is made possible because the movie follows the story of a stripper and largely unfolds within a strip club. Unlike other chick flicks in which male nudity is incidental to the events of the film, in *Magic Mike* it is a central part of the plot. As such, over the course of the movie, viewers—like the patrons at the strip club Xquisite—watch a series of stripteases, including multiple group performances as well as several solos featuring Mike (played by Channing Tatum), Adam (played by Alex Pettyfer), and Dallas (played by Matthew McConaughey). Furthermore, the film eroticizes Mike’s body not only on stage at Xquisite, but in his private life as well. Indeed, one of the opening scenes of *Magic Mike* features Mike’s rear end as he gets out of bed in the morning. Though female nudity occurs occasionally during the movie, it is men’s bodies that take center stage—literally. In many ways, *Magic Mike* reverses the argument Mulvey makes about the male gaze in “Visual Pleasure,” since the film clearly signifies the presence of the heterosexual female gaze. This gaze occurs not only amongst the female spectators of the movie in theaters, but within the movie as well amongst the female spectators at the strip club Xquisite. Every scene of the men stripping on stage also shows the women in the audience watching and cheering. McConaughey’s character even explicitly references the gaze while teaching Pettyfer’s how to dance. Coaching him in front of a mirror, Dallas tells Adam: “You are the man on the stage. Thousands of women, eyes on you. You are their vision.” In *Magic Mike*, men are clearly endowed with the “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” Mulvey describes regarding women, challenging the man-as-subject/woman-as-object binary she posits.

10 Matthew McConaughey appears again as Finn in *Fool’s Gold*, a film that (like *Magic Mike*) eroticizes the male body for the straight female gaze. Although Kate Hudson (who plays leading lady Tess) appears scantily clad on the movie cover, it is McConaughey’s body viewers see most on screen. McConaughey stars in *Fool’s Gold* as a treasure hunter/beach bum sporting sun-tanned skin and sun-bleached hair. This character spends most of the movie in trouble, yet manages to do so while looking good. For instance, one scene finds him stranded in the ocean with nothing but a cooler to keep him afloat. Since the boat that will rescue him is visible in the background, the scene does not serve to demonstrate the desperation of Finn’s situation so much

as it serves to emphasize the definition of McConaughey's biceps when clinging to the cooler. Later in the film, Tess confronts Finn about how much money he owes, a conversation that occurs while he wears nothing but a towel; here the viewer watches him talk to Tess while drying water off of his chest and abs. McConaughey's abs appear on screen a great deal in *Fool's Gold* since he spends the majority of the plot in swim trunks. Though his career has recently taken a new direction, McConaughey's earlier work established him a reputation for his frequent role as an object of the gaze in chick flicks. These include *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (2003), *Surfer, Dude* (2008), and *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (2009). Lisa Schwarzbaum affirms that "Years ago, Matthew McConaughey discovered a viable character niche for himself playing a man-tanned hero with a mushy center." Offering up the erotic spectacle of McConaughey's body to the heterosexual female gaze, *Fool's Gold* poses as no exception.

11 The movies *New Moon*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Fool's Gold*, and *Magic Mike* evidence the trending sexual objectification of men in chick flicks. Different as these characters are, Jacob, Aldous, Finn, and Mike all participate in the erotic spectacle of the male body on screen. Their example demonstrates that, like women, "male stars in Hollywood have also been carefully packaged and represented for the voyeuristic pleasure of the viewer" (Benshoff and Griffin 245). Lautner's, Brand's, Tatum's, and McConaughey's roles also demonstrate the contemporary nature of the male spectacle in chick flicks since all their films were produced between 2008 and 2012. Upcoming movies including *Magic Mike's* sequel, *Magic Mike XXL*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* suggest that this pattern will continue. This emerging trend in chick flicks, perhaps more than any other evidence, affirms the existence of the heterosexual female gaze in contemporary Hollywood cinema.

Sex Negativity

12 My analysis of the gaze as it occurs in chick flicks reveals another trend: the contextualization of male sexual objectification in terms of sex negativity. In other words, not only are men increasingly objectified in chick flicks, but their objectification is consistently characterized via sex negativity. In her article "Visual Pleasure," Mulvey characterizes the (heterosexual) male gaze negatively because it denies its female object agency or power. Pally, however, counters Mulvey's assessment of the cinematic gaze as inherently negative; according to her, "As a political condition, being an object is frightful, but as part of *play* it's one of life's

charms.” Pally argues that it is possible for objectification to take place in a positive light and to imbue the objectified individual with power. Furthermore, she states, “we shouldn’t have to choose between subject and object (and God knows we shouldn’t impose such a choice on ourselves); the alternatives are false. We’ll know we’ve ‘made it’....When we can have *both*” (Pally). In chick flicks, however, many men struggle with the same problem women encounter in other genres: becoming trapped as objects of the gaze, so that they cannot, in Pally’s words, “have *both*.” This problem evidences the underlying sex negativity that characterizes surrounding cultural (and hence pop cultural) attitudes about sex, including sexual objectification. This sex negativity appears in *New Moon*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Magic Mike*, and *Fool’s Gold*, either preventing or problematizing each male lead’s role as ‘the one’ so as to trap him in the role of the sex object.

13 In *New Moon*, Jacob does not play the role of ‘the one’ for Bella, despite the intimacy these characters share. The two entertain a close friendship during the movie that gives rise to sexual tension, yet this tension functions less to pose Jacob as a potential romantic interest for Bella and more to problematize the romance between Bella and Edward Cullen (played by Robert Pattinson). Indeed, *New Moon* (as well as the rest of the *Twilight* saga) makes it clear that Edward is Bella’s true love. Near the end of the movie, Bella steps away from Edward only to tell Jacob: “Don’t make me choose. Cuz it’ll be him. It’s always been him.” It is thus no coincidence that Edward, who fulfills the role of ‘the one’ in *New Moon*, is not subject to the same sexual spectacle that Jacob undergoes. Though a brief scene near the end of *New Moon* features Edward shirtless, the majority of his on-screen appeal occurs through close-ups of his brooding face. Screen shots of the face form a popular mode of visual pleasure in contemporary chick flicks—such as Shane West’s in *A Walk to Remember* or Ryan Gosling’s in *The Notebook*—that do not sexually objectify their male leads. Lautner’s character functions in contrast to these male leads: as an object of his beloved’s gaze, yet not as a subject of her desire.

14 Aldous plays a similar role in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* since he, like Jacob, serves as a foil to the character who ‘gets the girl.’ Throughout the movie, Aldous’s rock star persona stands in contrast to Peter’s nice guy character. While Aldous maintains that he can “fuck anyone, anywhere, anytime,” Peter remarks that “for me, it’s much more enjoyable to get to know somebody—if you end up sleeping with them that’s great, but I like to get to know somebody.” Accordingly, the end of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* sees eye-candy Aldous leaving his girlfriend

Sarah in Hawaii with plans to sleep with the next woman, while sweet-rather-than-sexy Peter begins a new relationship with Rachel (played by Mila Kunis). The film does reveal Peter's body to the audience (in fact, it is his penis that appears on screen), yet does so in order to portray Peter as pitiful rather than sexy. Chris Lee quotes an interview with Segel on the subject; when discussing the nude scene, Segel observes that "When a woman does nudity in a movie, men immediately switch into a sexual mode. For women, from what I understand, it's not like that. They see a naked, out-of-shape man crying and it's funny—something weird, disturbing and disgusting we can all laugh at." Segel's nudity here functions to make his character embarrassing and thus relatable, positioning Peter as a 'boy next door' rather than a sex object. This positioning enables Peter to embody the role of 'the one,' while Aldous's 'larger than life' rock star persona remains rooted as an object of the gaze. Sensual, yet neither relatable nor reliable, Aldous is worshipped as a sex symbol rather than desired as a partner. Again, as in *New Moon*, the object of the heterosexual female gaze maintains a distance from the gazer.

15 The sex negativity in *Magic Mike* is largely revealed by the fact that Mike can only become a love interest for the female lead Brooke (played by Cody Horn) after he quits his job as a stripper. Indeed, during the length of Mike's career as a stripper at the club Xquisite, the women around him view him solely as a sex object. The first scene of the film shows Mike climbing naked out of bed after a threesome with his buddy Joanna and another woman he met the night before. Throughout the plot, Mike cannot move beyond this role as an occasional sex partner with Joanna. When he tries to learn more about her and her interests outside the bedroom, Joanna replies: "You ask a lot of questions, don't you? Little Chatty Cathy tonight, huh?" She goes on to tell Mike: "You don't need to talk. Just look pretty." Brooke's character sees Mike as an object rather than a subject as well. The two get to know each other over the course of several scenes, yet when Mike asks Brooke on a date to "get some food," she answers: "I don't know...Plus, I don't exactly sport-fuck my brother's stripper friends." Brooke automatically sexualizes Mike's intentions here because she views Mike in terms of his career as a stripper, and hence sees him solely as a sex object. While she rejects Mike, Brooke does date Paul: a character the movie does not sexually objectify, one who has a 'serious' job processing property damage insurance claims. In the characters of Paul and Mike, *Magic Mike* illustrates the either/or nature of subject and object positions within the heterosexual female gaze of contemporary Hollywood cinema. As such, only after Mike tells Brooke that he quit his job at Xquisite does

she ask him to “get some food and talk about it”—the same offer he had made her earlier. *Magic Mike* stands apart from other chick flicks like *New Moon* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* since its sexual object does become ‘the one,’ yet the movie reaffirms the sex negativity surrounding sexual objectification by illustrating Mike either as a sex object or love interest, but not both.

16 Like *Magic Mike*, *Fool’s Gold* also sees the object of its sexual objectification win over his woman in the end; however, the film problematizes Finn as a good husband precisely due to his sexuality. The link between Finn’s talent as a lover and lack of talent as a husband is established in the beginning of the film when he and Tess get a divorce. Tess complains that Finn is not even competent enough to show up for his divorce, and her lawyer replies: “you married a guy for the sex and then expected him to be smart.” *Fool’s Gold* pits being sexy and being smart as mutually exclusive traits, though Tess herself poses as the exception. This inability to have both brains and brawn seems true of Finn, however, since (as aforementioned) he often appears the most attractive when in the most trouble. Tess articulates Finn’s aptitude for sex (and concomitant inaptitude for most else) at several points in the movie. She explains that “He is a genius at exactly three things: treasure salving, finding money for treasure salving, and one other thing”—meaning sex. Here Tess emphasizes that Finn does not possess the necessary qualities of a worthy partner. He is not, for instance, loving like *New Moon*’s Edward or sensitive like *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s Peter. After Finn and Tess find the treasure at the end of the movie, he tells her “I’ve learned a lot from my mistakes” and asks “Marry me?” She replies, “No, you haven’t. And yes, I will.” Ultimately, it is another object—the treasure they find—that lures Tess into re-marriage. *Fool’s Gold* performs a conventional chick flick ending by following the ‘boy gets girl’ formula, yet nonetheless problematizes Finn’s role as ‘the one’ by linking his flaws as a partner with the sexuality of his character.

17 My study of the straight female gaze in chick flicks reveals contemporary Hollywood cinema’s progress toward gender equality as it enables men and women to reverse subject and object positions. *New Moon*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Magic Mike*, and *Fool’s Gold* evidence this trend as they feature the erotic spectacle of the male body for the visual pleasure of straight female audiences. The emerging sexual objectification of men on screen enriches the film industry as it expands the possibilities for the gaze, and explores new avenues of visual pleasure. As Moore notes, “This new breed of images of masculinity would not have been possible without two decades of gay and feminist politics which advocated the idea that sexuality is

socially constructed rather than god-given and immutable” (45). As seen in *New Moon*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Magic Mike*, and *Fool’s Gold*, this pattern evidences progress beyond traditional gender roles by giving men the opportunity to experience the admiration garnered by sexual objectification and by giving women the opportunity to identify with the cinematic gaze. However, this heterosexual female gaze also proves problematic as it characterizes sexual objectification via sex negativity and thus prevents characters from switching between subject and object positions. Chick flicks which cast their male leads solely as sex objects dehumanize these characters and serve to reverse gender discrimination rather than effect gender equality. Instead, contemporary chick flicks need to offer viewers more nuanced media that rejects gendered binaries—Mulvey’s or otherwise—and allows characters to explore a range of subject and object positions. Indeed, progress toward parity will occur not when men become just as objectified as women, but when men and women can move freely between subject and object positions, both on screen and off.

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Sex, Violence, and the Southern Man in Lee Daniels' *The Paperboy*

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Abstract:

This essay examines the correlation between representations of sex, violence, and gender in Lee Daniels' Southern gothic 'mystery melodrama' *The Paperboy* (2012). Though the film has been derided by critics as smut hardly worth watching, this article argues that *The Paperboy* fits squarely into a tradition of Southern fiction in which sex and violence are not only strangely and problematically tangled up, but are furthermore inextricably linked to representations of gender and race. By contextualizing the South's historical preoccupation with associating sex and violence, this essay places *The Paperboy* within this narrative tradition to ultimately illuminate the ways in which the film directly confronts paradigms of Southern masculinity that are deeply entrenched in the region's cultural and racial mythologies.

1 Reviews of *The Paperboy*, the 2012 erotic thriller directed by Lee Daniels, are overwhelmingly negative. Many critics decry the film as one of the worst in cinematic history, denouncing it as tawdry, vile, campy, and outright weird.¹ Almost inarguably, it is all of these things; the film (based on the novel of the same name by Pete Dexter) is a bizarre and complicated noir mystery set in the late 1960s. The story centers on a young, aimless paperboy named Jack Jansen, whose older, journalist brother, Ward, returns to their small Florida town at the behest of Charlotte Bless, a 'nymphomaniac' who's developed a relationship with a prisoner currently held for the murder of the town's no-good sheriff. Charlotte insists that the man accused of the sheriff's murder, Hillary Van Wetter, is innocent, and Ward—along with his colleague, a black man named Yardley—is hoping to capitalize on the salacious story that may or may not have landed the wrong man in jail. The film is set in the 1960's South, and critics have therefore recognized its conspicuous racial and sexual tensions; however, most dismiss *The Paperboy* as nothing more than "a Southern Gothic sexploitation mystery melodrama so lurid and sticky it would make Tennessee Williams blush" (Schulman). But Daniels' film is more than simple Southern smut. *The Paperboy* fits squarely into a tradition of Southern fiction in which sex and violence are not only strangely and problematically tangled up, but are furthermore inextricably linked to representations of gender and race. *The Paperboy* is predominantly a (white) man's story (as the title suggests, it is the story of the titular paperboy, Jack), and

¹ See, for instance, Nathan Rabin's *A.V. Club* review, Anthony Quinn's review in *The Independent*, Peter Travers' review for *Rolling Stone*, *The Huffington Post*'s review by Christy Lemire, or Will Leitch's *Deadspin* review, titled "Watch Your Favorite Actors Humiliate Themselves in *The Paperboy*, the Worst Movie of the Year."

situating *The Paperboy* within this narrative tradition illuminates the ways in which the film, through its sexualization of acts of violence, directly confronts paradigms of Southern masculinity that are deeply entrenched in the region's cultural and racial mythologies.

2 Joel Williamson explains that most every culture possesses a tendency “to weave together sex and violence”; but in the South, he suggests, “because race came to be so thoroughly mixed with sex, and because slavery and race were themselves deeply and inextricably mixed with violence, sex has had a particular aura of violence” (389). Many scholars have described how the South's peculiar association of sex, race, and violence—born out of antebellum attempts to assuage fears of losing white patriarchal authority (Hodes 147)—carried over into the twentieth century. The sweeping social change ushered in during the 1960s—the time period that provides the setting for Daniels' film—brought about an especially profound (re)emphasis on maintaining the South's hierarchies of racial and gender power. The Civil Rights movement, a renewed interest in women's rights, and the sexual revolution in particular went against the grain of the South's white patriarchal culture, and to quell increasing terrors of “diminishing white supremacy,” white Southerners again “fastened on the taboo of sex between black men and white women with newfound urgency” (147). Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward affirm the ways that racism in the South.

is inextricably linked with sexual anxieties”; during the Civil Rights era, “the specter of any interracial sexual relations provoked anger and fear among many whites, and segregationist organizations like the Klan and the White Citizens' Councils played on this fear to galvanize support for Massive Resistance. (84)

Sex, violence, and race are nearly impossible to separate from the South's structures of white male supremacy, and the social landscape of the 1960s exacerbated existing anxieties attached specifically to masculinity in the South. In *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South Since Reconstruction*, Craig Thompson Friend explains how the social changes of the mid-to-late twentieth century brought about the rise of multiple masculinities in the South, yet each mode of masculine expression almost invariably formed around two ‘primary axes’ that emerged out of antebellum ideals: honor and mastery (x). Honor and mastery—both central facets of men's ‘civic identity’ in the antebellum South—were typically realized through landownership and the successful management of an independent household that included a subservient wife, children, and (when possible) slaves. Regardless of whether or not Southern men adhered to paradigms of honor and mastery, “all shared a sense of the very public nature of their private

characters”: as Friend describes, since before Reconstruction, Southern manhood has “required regular public performance” as a way of maintaining social, gender, and racial hierarchies (Friend x). Often these ‘performances’ in the antebellum South and on into the early part of the twentieth century took the form of institutionalized rituals of violence, such as lynching.² By the 1960s, the time period in which *The Paperboy* is set, Southern men were compelled to find new ways of exhibiting honor and mastery, yet more often than not, the means by which men did so still relied on elements of public performance, demonstrations of violence, and certain ‘mastery’ or dominance over women and blacks.

3 *The Paperboy*—which predominantly takes place in 1969—makes its regional and racial politics clear from the outset. In an establishing shot that occurs barely two minutes into the film, the camera pans over a sign scrawled on the side of a building that reads: “Moat County extends a welcome hand to Yankees and niggers!”³ It also immediately identifies itself as a film that not only mixes sex with representations of violence, but that links those depictions to the region’s racial politics. The Jansen’s black maid, Anita (played by Macy Gray), provides the voiceover for the film and recalls the central narrative through one long, extended flashback. In the opening scene, Anita sits down at a table across from a man who is interviewing her about Jack Jansen’s (Zac Efron) new book, which is based on the events that occur in the film. Jack and Anita share an unusual and close personal relationship, and she is the subject of the interview because Jack has dedicated his book to her. The man begins the interview by asking Anita to talk about the murder of Sheriff Thurmond Call (Danny Hanemann). Anita tells the interviewer that no one liked Call: “It was 1969,” she says,

Sheriff Call was this evil, nasty, disgusting son of a gun. Black people hated Sheriff Call because he killed so many of us during his two terms in service. Some of my family was included. White people feared him, too. So, somebody got fed up with his fat ass and killed him, that’s what happened.

As Anita is describing what she knows about the night, the scene jumps to a black and white shot of Sheriff Call getting out of his patrol car to investigate an isolated vehicle parked in a field. Call shines his flashlight in the car, and the scope of light illuminates the occupants of the

² For an interesting analysis of the lynching ritual and masculine performance, see Kris DuRocher’s “Violent Masculinity: Learning Ritual and Performance in Southern Lynchings.”

³ There is some debate among Southern scholars as to whether or not Florida—especially South Florida—can really be considered “the South.” The sign that reads “Moat County extends a welcome hand to Yankees” in the aforementioned scene is the film’s most obvious indication that this particular area of South Florida identifies itself as Southern.

vehicle and reveals a couple having sex. Presumably, Call orders the couple to go home, and as the car drives away, an unidentified man closes in on Call and stabs him repeatedly in the stomach. One of the ensuing shots is of Call's disemboweled body lying lifeless in the grass, and the camera lingers on this scene while Anita says, "They say he dragged his intestines for a mile before he died." Following Call's murder, Anita remembers, "Crazy white people even built a statue for him." This opening, in which an act of violence occurs right alongside a sexual one, conflates the two, combines that with issues of race, and thus sets the tone for the rest of the film.

4 Sex is everywhere in this film, and it appears in walking form in the character of Charlotte Bless (Nicole Kidman). Anita refers to her as an "oversexed Barbie doll," and indeed, that Charlotte exudes sexuality is evident in her appearance alone: she wears tight skirts and dresses so short they barely cover her nether regions, her face is caked with make-up, and she wears false eyelashes and a hairpiece for added sexual appeal. Charlotte also talks openly (and almost singularly) about her sexuality. When the film introduces Charlotte, she is reading through a recent letter from Van Wetter (John Cusack in easily his creepiest role to date). Hanging on the wall behind her are other letters, and Anita's voiceover explains that Charlotte has a penchant for writing/loving/obsessing over convicted criminals—both black and white. Charlotte's black friend and roommate asks her if the letter is from one of the black inmates that Charlotte has been writing, and Charlotte responds, "This is my white man." The letter from Van Wetter provides additional insight about Charlotte's sexuality: "If ever there was an angel in the world, my angel," Van Wetter writes, "it must be you. But no angel would do the things I dream that you want." Yardley (David Oyelowo) calls Charlotte "one nasty little nut job" after reading some of the 'evidence' she gives to him and Ward (Matthew McConaughey) that will confirm Van Wetter's innocence: it's a journal entry in which Charlotte writes that "[a]ll the killers who have written me want to press their mouths into my vagina, and some even the crack of my behind, except Hillary Van Wetter. He has no such desire. He wants to be sucked off himself. I consider this psychological proof of his innocence." Charlotte is excited by Van Wetter's desire to be pleased and understands him as different than the other imprisoned men she has engaged with; unlike the other prisoners with whom Charlotte communicates, Van Wetter demands an active sexual role from her. Shortly after Yardley reads the excerpt from Charlotte's journal, Charlotte wants to go and look at the prison where Van Wetter is being held. Jack drives her there, and in the parking lot, Charlotte tells Jack, "I'm getting horny being this close to him." She

reclines in the car's front seat, one arm out the window with her feet propped up on the dashboard, flapping her legs open and closed as she talks flirtatiously with Jack. She playfully slaps his hand when he tells her about being a swimmer in college and she tells him of her own experiences swimming. She then leans back, closes her eyes, starts writhing provocatively, and begins moaning, "Oh, baby. I bet he's horny for me all the time." Charlotte is sex personified, and this scene is particularly erotically charged and most exemplifies the way that nearly every aspect of Charlotte's character oozes sensuality.

5 Charlotte is an object of desire for just about every male character in the film. She is in this way the center of the storyline, and the male characters' desires emanate from her like spokes on a wheel. As an object of their desire, Charlotte becomes a fantasy for each of them. The very nature of Charlotte's relationship with Van Wetter is based on fantasy. They begin their relationship while he is in jail, and their only means of communication is through the letters they send one another. Van Wetter places Charlotte, his 'angel,' on a pedestal and imagines doing to her the 'things' that he 'dreams' she wants. Though Charlotte sends Van Wetter pictures of herself, the two do not actually meet face-to-face until Ward, Yardley, Jack, and Charlotte go together to the prison to talk to Van Wetter about the night of Sheriff Call's murder. In this, one of the film's strangest sex scenes, Van Wetter's fantasy is so powerful that he and Charlotte simultaneously achieve orgasm—without ever touching—while Ward, Yardley, Jack, and any number of prison guards stand by watching. After the four arrive at the prison and are seated across from Van Wetter, one of the guards reminds them that any kind of physical contact is prohibited. Van Wetter's focus is only on Charlotte; he barely even looks at the men in the room, and when Ward and Yardley try to engage him in conversation, he cuts them off and hisses, "Shut up, can't you see I'm busy?" Van Wetter then whispers to Charlotte, "Will you do something for me right now? Spread your legs open a little bit." Charlotte complies, hiking her dress up and allowing Van Wetter and the viewer an extreme close-up of her crotch. While breathing heavily, Charlotte runs her hands seductively up and down her thighs. Van Wetter, too, begins breathing heavily, and he instructs her: "Now open up your mouth. Picture what you wrote me in your letters." Again, Charlotte complies, opens her mouth wide, and simulates fellatio, moaning the whole time. In this scene, Charlotte facilitates Van Wetter's fantasy of her as a hyper-feminine, hyper-sexual object that should always be available to providing him sexual pleasure.

6 Charlotte is also the object of desire for Jack. As Anita explains: “Jack was in love with Charlotte Bless. I could tell that horny little boy wanted to jump her on first sight.” While Van Wetter dreams of violating Charlotte, Jack fantasizes about marrying her. He daydreams about picking Charlotte up from her house and whisking her away. In this fantasy, Charlotte wears a tea-length white wedding dress and veil, a symbol of purity and innocence. That Jack envisions Charlotte in a white wedding dress and in so doing bestows on her a kind of virtue is telling, for although he wants to ‘jump her,’ the idea of her being sexual is somehow also repulsive to him. Anita explains that upon witnessing the uncanny sexual encounter between Charlotte and Van Wetter at the prison, “Jack came home and threw up right after that. He couldn’t believe he still loved her after what he saw. But he did.” Jack is similarly put off by Charlotte’s casual talk of sex when the two spend an afternoon together at the beach. Charlotte teases Jack that he needs to get a girlfriend and encourages him to talk to a group of women a few feet down the beach. When Jack tells her that he is not interested, Charlotte says, “You want me to blow you, don’t you? You don’t have to answer, I know it’s true. I’m not gonna blow a friendship over a stupid little blow job.” She then points to one of the young women wearing a blue bikini and assures Jack, “See that one in blue? She’ll blow ya.” Jack, visibly tense and becoming increasingly hostile, asks Charlotte why she is talking to him that way and insists that he is not interested in being fellated by “someone like that.” Charlotte’s flippant response—“Well it’s a good thing you’re not in prison cause you wouldn’t have a choice there”—sends Jack over the edge. He leans down close to her, angrily tells her “Fuck you,” then gets up from their blanket, storms off, and dives into the ocean.

7 Importantly, though Jack is seemingly disgusted by Charlotte’s frank and casual treatment of sexuality in this scene, it is at the same time one in which he exercises a particular fantasy of Charlotte as the two share an especially personal and strangely erotic experience. Once in the water, Jack is violently attacked by a swarm of jellyfish. Dizzy and disoriented from an allergic reaction to the stings, Jack is barely able to drag himself out of the water and onto the beach. The group of women that he and Charlotte had been previously discussing sees Jack struggling and rushes to his aid. One of the women knows that they can alleviate Jack’s pain by urinating on the stings. When Charlotte overhears the women telling Jack that what they are about to do might be embarrassing, she rushes over to Jack’s side and begins yelling, pushing, and swearing at the women to leave Jack alone. In an oddly protective (or possessive) moment,

Charlotte shouts, “If anyone’s gonna piss on him it’s gonna be me! He don’t like strangers peeing on him!” Charlotte straddles Jack, pulls the crotch of her bikini bottom to the side, and urinates on his chest. While this is happening, the camera cuts to a shot of her from a distance. As she urinates on Jack, she leans her head back and lets out a sensual moan. The camera cuts away again to a close up of Charlotte’s crotch, then jumps to a blurred point-of-view shot of her face taken from Jack’s perspective. Her head is tilted back, her eyes are closed, and her mouth is open; her facial expressions and erotic moaning suggest that Charlotte is experiencing a kind of ecstasy. The blurred, dreamlike image of Charlotte’s face seen from Jack’s point of view is very sexual in nature, intimating that this encounter for the two of them is similarly sexual. The odd, heightened eroticism of what is otherwise a non-sexual encounter in this scene mirrors the prison sex scene that earlier occurs between Charlotte and Van Wetter. In this instance, however, Charlotte assumes the active position previously assumed by Van Wetter, while Jack inhabits a passive role.

8 Charlotte is overtly sexual, and as such, draws both the attention and the ire of the men around her. The ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s allowed room for women like Charlotte to express themselves sexually, yet Jack’s fantasies of restoring to Charlotte a sense of purity—along with his unease at seeing or hearing evidence of Charlotte’s sexuality—and Van Wetter’s desire for Charlotte to be an ‘angel’ who is simultaneously and perpetually an available receptacle for his own gratification speak to the continuing presence of ideas regarding appropriate gendered expression for women in the South. For centuries, the South has maintained strict rules about how women are supposed to behave. Beginning before the outbreak of the Civil War, Southern women were invested with all the ideal goodness and purity of the South itself. White and aristocratic, the Southern Lady was required to be a paragon of chastity and virtue and the center of the domestic sphere. This ideal of the lady is “rigid in its prescriptions” (Scura 413); she was a static figure, placed on a pedestal and worshipped as “[t]he center and circumference, diameter and periphery, sine, tangent and secant of all...affections” (Cash 86f.). White Southern women, mythically worshipped as a symbol of the South’s virtue and honor, “represented a fragile, asexual purity” (Roberts 75). Charlotte flagrantly eschews convention and openly defies the rules of Southern womanhood by flaunting her sexuality. And yet because of this, as Anita and Yardley both make apparent, Charlotte’s excessive sexuality and her relationship with Van Wetter mark her as ‘white trash.’ Anita remarks on Charlotte’s

involvement with Van Wetter: “Everybody was confused why she was engaged to Hillary Van Wetter. Nasty white trash swamp.” Ostensibly, it seems as though Anita uses the term ‘nasty white trash’ to refer to Van Wetter, yet her phrasing is peculiarly vague; based on the placement of the insult as a fragmentary afterthought to her observation that no one could understand Charlotte’s attraction to Van Wetter, it is not entirely clear to whom ‘nasty white trash’ actually refers. Though Anita never states it outright, the implication is that Charlotte, by mere association with Van Wetter, is also ‘nasty white trash.’ In the South, where white women were invested with so much purity, they were expected to be “stainless expressions of the South’s ideal” (Gray 189). The term ‘white trash’ is often used to characterize a woman who exhibits a “dangerous and excessive sexuality” (Wray and Newitz 171). Charlotte’s sexual appetite for potentially violent men in jail is not only dangerous for the fact that she seems to derive a certain pleasure from danger, but for the fact that she defies convention in her open and excessive—and thereby threatening—sexuality. Yardley articulates as much when he insults Charlotte by calling her a “forty-year-old woman obsessed with prison cock.” This is a loaded jibe; in one fell swoop, Yardley shames Charlotte for her failure to adhere to societal norms, for her age (and implicitly her unmarried status), and for her ‘obsessive’ and excessive (read: inappropriate) sexual fondness for dangerous or violent men. Though she is criticized for being ‘obsessed with prison cock,’ the men around her are eager for the opportunity to be with her. Charlotte, then, represents a type of sexuality that is at once demonized and fetishized; as ‘white trash,’ Charlotte is removed from the other, more respectable women of her community who have been made “too much the objectification of the combined mother-virgin land.” Because she is openly sexual ‘white trash,’ men like Van Wetter—and even Jack, who has several erotic fantasies of her—feel free to “defile her with impunity” (Roberts 104).

9 Jack’s and Van Wetter’s fantasies about how Charlotte should or should not behave expose the ways in which the antebellum South’s myths of womanhood lingered even in the twentieth century. Moreover, through Jack’s and Van Wetter’s respective expectations for Charlotte, *The Paperboy* also exposes the correlation between sex, violence, and white masculinity in the South. Jack, in many ways, seemingly rejects certain expectations of white Southern manhood, particularly those that require demonstrations of ‘mastery’ over women and blacks. Jack’s ambitions of becoming a professional athlete are dashed when he gets kicked off the University of Florida’s swimming team and out of school because, as he tells Charlotte, he

lost his temper one night when he was drunk and vandalized the university's swimming pool. Following his expulsion, Jack returns to his hometown of Lately, Florida, and works for his father's reputable newspaper business as the paperboy. Here he cultivates a close friendship with Anita, his family's maid. Unlike most of the men in the town of Lately who are unabashedly racist, Jack looks at Anita like a companion. And certainly, their relationship is highly and unusually familiar. The two joke openly about Jack's masturbation habits, for instance. Jack also offers to take care of some of the housework for Anita when she wants to leave the Jansen's house to attend a friend's baby shower. Jack's father, however, has the final say, and with one look insists that Anita can and should take of the work herself.⁴ Anita eventually loses her job at the Jansen's and begins working at a restaurant. Jack visits her there on the day that his father remarries and witnesses Anita being denigrated by her white, male boss, who chastises her about the way she wears her hairnet: "I don't want your black hair in my food," he says to her. To make Anita feel better, Jack jokes, "You can put your black hair in my food."

10 Jack does not subscribe to the ideal of 'mastery' on which his father and other men of his Moat County community rely. Yet, Jack clings to 'honor,' the other defining trait of Southern manhood. One of the ways that men proved themselves as honorable was through the protection of white Southern womanhood, and Jack is most devoted to protecting Charlotte's honor. In the scene where Van Wetter calls Charlotte a bitch, Jack jumps up and furiously commands, "Don't talk to her like that!" Jack feels equally compelled to defend his own honor when it is at stake. After the jellyfish attack, Jack's father publishes a story in the paper titled "Fast Action Saves Lately Man at Beach." Jack's relationship with his father is tense at best. Jack's mother left their family when Jack was young, and Jack, who carries one of her rings as a keepsake, is far more attached to his mother than his father. Jack's father, who has more to do with his new girlfriend than with Jack, is disappointed by his son's athletic failures and general lack of ambition. The story Jack's father publishes about Jack's jellyfish stings deliberately casts Jack in the role of passive victim who is rescued and urinated on by a 'heroic' woman. That his father considers this story fodder for his newspaper—angles the story in such a way as to exploit his son's accident, describing in detail how Charlotte urinated on Jack's "arms, genitals, and face"—

⁴ Jack's father also asks whether Anita has children, the answer to which is common knowledge for both Jack and Ward. Their father, however, knows next to nothing (and cannot be bothered to learn) about the woman who has worked for him for years. Jack and Ward's father is also sure to remark that Yardley is "mighty sure of himself for a colored."

causes Jack, the former champion swimmer, to feel embarrassed and emasculated: “What’s Dad trying to do to me?” Jack asks Ward. Yardley adds further insult to injury when he makes a snide comment about the incident, at which point Jack attacks him, slapping him in the face with a copy of the newspaper and then grabbing Yardley in a chokehold. As Jennifer R. Green writes, “Aggressive physical displays and the refusal to accept, or at least a willingness to defend against, insult marked southern honor” (176). Jack resorts to violence in this instance because he feels he must defend his own honor. What is more, his brawl with Yardley is an attempt to reclaim a sense of manhood that is compromised by the humiliating newspaper article. And it is a racialized form of violence that Jack here reverts to: in order to further demonstrate the power of his white masculinity, Jack goes so far as to hurl a racial insult at Yardley, yelling at him, “Fuck you, nigger!” Try as he might, when his honor is threatened, Jack ultimately falls prey to the violent and racist tendencies of white Southern manhood that have been culturally inscribed in him. Earlier in the film, after hearing the story of how Jack was expelled from school, Charlotte asks Jack if he loses his temper often. Charlotte observes a pattern of violent male behavior in the South: “This place is full of boys just like you who lost their temper one day,” she says, gesturing toward the prison where Van Wetter is incarcerated. Jack’s aggression toward Yardley makes visible one of the ways that violence in the South (and particularly violence against blacks and women) is often evidence of manliness.

11 Van Wetter embodies a markedly different kind of white Southern masculinity than Jack. In her first appearance in the film, Charlotte designates Van Wetter as her ‘white man.’ Anita too identifies Van Wetter’s place in Moat County’s racial and social hierarchy when she refers to him as “nasty white trash.” Sally Robinson writes that ‘white trash’ (or ‘redneck’ or ‘hillbilly’) masculinity defines “a primitive but still white male other” who embodies “a dangerous masculinity outside of the white male norm” (164). Before his imprisonment, Van Wetter, along with his Uncle Tyree (Ned Bellamy) and other members of his family, resides on the fringes of this small Florida town. Van Wetter lives in the swamp—outside the limits of the ‘civilized’ Lately, as Jack is sure to point out when he remarks to Ward that “no one lives out here...no one could live out here”—where he and Tyree barely make a living skinning alligators. This, at least, is their legal trade; on the side, Van Wetter and Tyree sell sod that they steal from golf courses. Whether or not Van Wetter is responsible for Sheriff Call’s murder remains a mystery. The fact remains, however, that Van Wetter is most certainly a criminal who also happens to have a

proclivity for violence; at one point in the film, Ward and Jack go to the Department of Public Information and speak with an officer who informs them that Van Wetter once cut off a deputy's thumb over a traffic ticket. And violence, it should be reiterated, played a central role in both 'creating' and 'exhibiting' Southern masculinity. Charlotte becomes a victim of Van Wetter's violence in more ways than one. On her second visit to him in the prison, Van Wetter berates Charlotte for wearing pants: "Where's your dress?" he asks her. "Every goddamn man in here wears pants. How am I supposed to tell you apart from them?" When Charlotte looks down shamefully, Van Wetter shouts, "Turn around, bitch! You wear a dress in here next time or you don't bother coming." Ward and Yardley's article ultimately raises enough questions about Van Wetter's involvement in Call's murder, and Van Wetter is released from jail. His first act as a 'free' man is to go and find Charlotte, who has apparently ceased contact with him. He arrives at her house and begins making advances toward her. When Charlotte tells him not to touch her, Van Wetter grabs her by the wrists, slams her back against a wall, and then puts one hand around her neck. In what borders on sexual assault, Van Wetter begins kissing Charlotte, and eventually she returns his kisses and the two have sex. Like nearly every other sex scene in *The Paperboy*, the sex that takes place between Charlotte and Van Wetter is violent. Van Wetter handles Charlotte roughly, at several points putting his hand around her neck and choking her during intercourse. The scene is furthermore strangely intercut with a number of quick shots of dead animals, an extra visual cue that alerts viewers to the brutish, animalistic nature of the sexual act and that enhances Van Wetter's display of violent manhood. Van Wetter's violent behavior toward Charlotte eventually escalates to a fatal level when he takes Charlotte to his home in the swamp where he becomes angry when she defies his demand and insists on attending Jack's father's wedding. After this dispute between the two, Van Wetter kills her. Kris DuRocher posits that white Southern men's "ability to control those within their households and below them in the social hierarchy, primarily slaves and women, reflected their race and masculinity" (46). Van Wetter takes this to an extreme by killing Charlotte, an effort to assert control—his masculinity—over her. There is also something worth noting here about the fact that Charlotte, a promiscuous woman 'obsessed with prison cock,' is ultimately killed—in a sense, punished—because of her sexuality. It is quite literally her sexual fascination with dangerous, violent men in prison that leads to her death.

12 Charlotte is not the only victim of Van Wetter's homicidal rage. At the film's conclusion, when Jack, accompanied by Ward, journeys into the swamp in an 'honorable' yet late attempt to rescue Charlotte (or to again protect her white womanhood) from Van Wetter and return her to the safe confines of civilized society, Van Wetter grabs Ward and slits his throat as a horrified Jack stands witness. Through Ward, *The Paperboy* examines another mode of masculinity. One of the central mysteries of this already twisted story has to do with the nature of Ward's sexuality. At several points in the film, people wonder about the origin of the prominent scars around his mouth, but Ward offers no response. After Ward first arrives back in Lately, Anita asks him about his dating life and warns him to "stay away from those rough ones. Remember what happened the last time." The scars on Ward's face and the meaning behind Anita's cryptic advice become apparent when Jack, Charlotte, and Ward go to Ormond Beach together. While drinking at a club, Ward stares intently at a couple of black men; the camera alternates between close-up shots of Ward's face and of the black men's faces as the three make eye contact and exchange knowing nods. Ward walks across the club to talk to the men, then leaves the club. It turns out that he takes these men with him back to his motel room. Charlotte and Jack later go to Ward's room and discover him, handcuffed and hogtied, lying face down on a sheet of plastic, naked, in a pool of blood. He has been nearly beaten to death, and apparently, this is not the first time: Ward has a fetish for kinky, ultraviolent sex with black men. In the South, Friend notes, "homosexuality has always rubbed against the grain of masculinity," and in the early twentieth century the South offered "little public space for homosexuality" (xxi). Even with the rise of the Sunbelt South in the 1970s, "gay men seeking to live and love confronted the conservative sexual standards maintained by southern states" (xxi).⁵ "Gay physicality" was considered 'emasculating' (xxi), and gay men were often "imaged as a threat not only to vulnerable young men but also to the larger community" (Woodland 290). It is for this reason, presumably, that Ward hides this aspect of his identity; in this way, it is worth noting, Daniels' film aligns him with Yardley. As Yardley discloses to Jack, after Yardley got drunk one night and agreed to let Ward fellate him, Ward apparently developed a particular "taste for niggers." Moreover, in the same scene with Jack, Yardley suddenly drops the British accent he affects throughout the film and informs Jack that he has been faking the accent all along because "ain't no negro gettin' a

⁵ See John Howard's "Southern Sodomy; or, What the Coppers Saw" for a more detailed interrogation of the Sunbelt South.

job up in this spot unless he's a motherfuckin' James Bond, ya dig?" Both Ward and Yardley—Yardley simply by virtue of the fact that he is a black man—represent marginalized masculinities, each that stands against white heteronormative manhood in its association with a threatening, violent, even deviant sexuality.

13 That at the end of *The Paperboy* both the “slut” and the “queer” are killed is undeniably problematic, but this ending is not all for naught. Peter Bradshaw aptly reminds us, “A gentleman, they say, is someone who never gives offence unintentionally. A talented film-maker, by the same token, is someone who never outrages your sense of good taste by mistake. And Lee Daniels is a very talented film-maker” (“The Paperboy”). The film is campy, to be sure, and as camp *The Paperboy* offers an exaggerated take on the South’s very own weird and problematic history of linking sex with violence, race, and gender. As a white man’s story, *The Paperboy* interrogates paradigms of Southern masculinity that remain deeply rooted in the South’s racial mythologies. And perhaps that is what we can ultimately take away from Daniels’ film. By mixing representations of sex with violence, *The Paperboy* illuminates how sex and gender continue to be understood in the South, and it forces a consideration of the ways in which many of the South’s cultural anxieties and fantasies about gender and race are indeed still operative. *The Paperboy* may be ‘lurid’ and ‘weird,’ but it is pointedly so, and it is therefore worthy of closer consideration.

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