

## Lehigh University Lehigh Preserve

---

### Theses and Dissertations

---

1993

# A dark girl alone : identity and self image in Brown girl, brownstones, Maud Martha and The bluest eye. Can this woman be trusted? : cross-dressing, autonomy and sexuality in The roaring girl and The fair maid of the west

Jennifer B. Goldfarb  
*Lehigh University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd>

---

### Recommended Citation

Goldfarb, Jennifer B., "A dark girl alone : identity and self image in Brown girl, brownstones, Maud Martha and The bluest eye. Can this woman be trusted? : cross-dressing, autonomy and sexuality in The roaring girl and The fair maid of the west" (1993). *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 195.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact [preserve@lehigh.edu](mailto:preserve@lehigh.edu).

**AUTHOR:**

**Goldfarb, Jennifer B.**

**TITLE:**

**"A Dark Girl Alone":**

**Identity and Self Image**

**in Brown Girl, Brown-**

**stones, Maud Martha and**

**the Bluest Eye**

**DATE: May 30, 1993**

"A dark girl alone": Identity and Self Image in *Brown Girl,*  
*Brownstones, Maud Martha* and *The Bluest Eye*

"Can this woman be trusted?": Cross-Dressing, Autonomy and  
Sexuality in *The Roaring Girl* and *The Fair Maid of the West*

by

Jennifer B. Goldfarb

Thesis Papers

Presented to the Graduate Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

in

English

These thesis papers are accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts.

5/20/93  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor, Paper I

\_\_\_\_\_  
Advisor, Paper II

\_\_\_\_\_  
Department Chair

Table of Contents

Certification . . . . . ii

Table of Contents . . . . . iii

Abstract . . . . . 1

"A Dark Girl Alone": Identity and Self Image  
in *Brown Girl, Brownstones, Maud Martha, and  
The Bluest Eye* . . . . . 2

Abstract . . . . . 22

"Can This Woman Be Trusted": Cross-Dressing,  
Autonomy and Sexuality in *The Roaring Girl*  
and *The Fair Maid of the West* . . . . . 23

List of Works Consulted . . . . . 44

Vita . . . . . 49

## Abstract

"A Dark Girl Alone": Identity and Self Image in  
*Brown Girl, Brownstones, Maud Martha* and *The Bluest Eye*

In this paper I will discuss the "tyranny of ideal beauty" and how different reactions to this tyranny influences the self image and identity of three characters from different novels.

Jane Somerville in "Idealized Beauty and the Denial of Love in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," discusses the relationship "between the tyranny of ideal beauty. . . and the anguish of three women. . ." (18). Although Somerville writes specifically on *The Bluest Eye* the "tyranny of ideal beauty" can be seen at work in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Ideal beauty takes the form of a hierarchy in which the pale skinned, blond, and blue-eyed rank the highest and dark skinned, kinky haired, and black-eyed fall to the bottom. The anguish in the lives of these black women is caused by the conjunction of perceived physical attractiveness with value and self worth. Those at the top of the scale are perceived as the most beautiful, most valuable, most deserving of love and attention while those at the bottom are perceived as ugly, insignificant, without worth. This "tyranny," promoted by the media through advertisements, movies, etc., espouses a standard of beauty that Pecola Breedlove, Maud Martha Brown and Selina Boyce (along with most of the population) can never even approach. As a result they are made to feel inferior, ugly, and unworthy of respect and regard.

In all three novels the American cultural media, the communities, families, and various individuals condemn Pecola, Maud Martha, and Selina for what they are not: Pecola is not pretty and rich; Maud Martha does not have good hair and graceful ways; Selina is not quite and obedient. But above

all, these three women are condemned for not being light, the next best thing to being white. If these women are to form strong, coherent identities, a place must be found in which to locate a positive identity, a positive sense of self worth. Pecola Breedlove never finds this place and is lost forever. Maud Martha forges a strong identity for herself using her spirit and imagination, but she can not move beyond the cultural conditioning which teaches a preference for lighter, whiter skin. Selina Boyce, the most successful of the three women, forges a strong, forceful personality from her own spirit and the solid cultural bedrock of her protective Bajan community.

The dominant culture, in an attempt to keep Pecola, Maud Martha, and Selina from positive self knowledge, makes them invisible. If society does not distinguish these women from the faceless masses of the poor and the black then society does not have to recognize them as individuals, women with desires, dreams, and talents. All three women experience invisibility as a result of their interaction with the dominant (white) culture. Mr. Yacobowski, the candy store owner, does not see Pecola; the white patrons of the Studebaker Theater avoid seeing Maud Martha; the cold, rich streets of Manhattan do not acknowledge Selina's existence. However, within their own families and communities there lies a deeper level of "not-being-seen."

Claudia and Frieda Macteer, Pecola's friends, are the



only ones who see and acknowledge her on a regular basis, but even they do not notice the steady erosion of her sanity. When Mrs. Macteer discovers that three quarts of milk have been drunk, she angrily begins to talk about "folks," "anybody." She talks around and around Pecola's identity, describing Pecola, but never naming her. These indirect monologues are Mrs. Macteer's common method of expressing anger and frustration, but her refusal to name Pecola helps to create an aura of invisibility around her. Pecola is just "someone," a being who is not quite there, a presence with no actual substance. No one, outside of Claudia and Frieda, ever calls or refers to her by name. Even her parents only acknowledge Pecola when an extra-ordinary act imposes her existence upon their insular worlds: when she spills the blueberry pie in the white family's kitchen, and when her foot, scratching her leg, sparks Cholly's memory. In both instances, the only response to Pecola's existence is violence, punishment for her intrusion into their worlds. Just as her parents do not see her, the community's response to Pecola renders her invisible as well. The women of the community, in an attempt to categorize Pecola and, therefore, make her not-visible, place some of the blame for the rape on her. If she is merely a bad girl, then they do not have to think about her and about what has been done to her. They do not have to see her and their own pain and suffering reflected in her eyes.

Maud Martha also ranks among the invisible. People in her own community and in the larger, white world, do not see her; they see only her color. To them, she is just an "old black gal" (Brooks 34). She feels that the woman everybody sees is not the real her, merely a mask made of color and expectation. The real woman, the one who saves mice, loves her daughter, reads Maugham, the woman who "in her daily existence. . . seasons her life with artistry, sees she is a valuable and unique individual" (Russell 66), is invisible to the naked eye. Maud Martha finds outlets for her frustrations in her imagination and in small acts, like sparing the mouse. But these are precisely that, small acts, private acts; they do not propel her out into the ranks of the "seen."

Like Maud Martha, Selina Boyce feels that she is one of the invisible. White people do not see her: she is "non-existent--a dark intruder in their glittering inaccessible world" (Marshall 213). When she wanders through Manhattan, the people on the streets, much like Mrs. Benton, do not see her; they see only her color. Mrs. Benton's insistence on classifying Selina, in questioning her on her family origins and where she now lives, is an effort to place Selina safely into a known category and thereby render her invisible. Once Selina is categorized, she is not seen as an individual, just as a type (Southern, West Indian, poor) and therefore, invisible. Once Selina has been made invisible, the mother

does not have to see her, no longer feels threatened by her presence. Mrs. Benton's need to classify Selina parallels the community's need to place blame on Pecola. Once both women have been categorized, there is no longer any need to think about them, no need to see them.

But Selina refuses to be categorized. She is struck by the powerful knowledge that "their idea of her was only an illusion" (Marshall 291), and the realization that she must act, must do something to become visible, to stop their illusion "from destroying her inside and find a way for her real face to emerge" (Marshall 291). It would seem, then, that action is a counter to invisibility. Selina's first act is to dance, to move out onto the stage where she is the only figure. This literal visibility is paralleled by both her refusal of the Association scholarship and her departure for Barbados. These acts place her outside of her safe, homogeneous community. Cut off from them she is visible as an individual, alone on the stage of the world.

Maddone Miner, in "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues: Rape, Madness, and Silence in *The Bluest Eye*," discusses visibility as part of Cholly's motivation for his horrifying actions:

As Morrison explains, several factors motivate Cholly, but the two thoughts floating through his besotted brain immediately prior to his penetration of Pecola point, once more, to his desire for confirmation of his presence. (179)

This confirmation of presence, like Selina's need to act, need to "establish the validity of her own existence" (Leseur 121),

is part of the drive to remain visible, to be seen and acknowledged as an individual. But this visibility carries a high price -- isolation and exposure. An individual alone in the world has no community to fall back on, no safety net. Cholly and Selina, in their desire for visibility, cut themselves off from the protection of a community.

Like Cholly and Selina, Maud Martha also experiences visibility through physical action. Although her action, the birth of her daughter, is not a conscious, controlled drive towards visibility, it results in a similar end. During the birth the women of the "kitchenette" building recognize Maud Martha's presence among them:

People. Weren't they sweet. She had never said more than "Hello, Mrs. Barksdale" and "Hello, Mrs. Cray" to these women before. But as soon as something happened to her, in they trooped. (Brooks 99)

The sense the reader gets, from Maud Martha herself, is that recognition is a result of something that was done to her, not an act she had consciously enacted. Because hers was not a drive to confirm her individuality and visibility, Maud Martha does not experience the same separation and exposure that Cholly and Selina share. Instead, she is accepted and acknowledged as part of a community, the community of mothers, the community of "kitchenette folks."

Pecola as well, experiences this "confirmation of presence" through action, but she substitutes emotional action, anger, for physical action: "There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth"

(Morrison 43). But Pecola does not have a strong enough base on which to hang this "sense of being" and all too soon anger is replaced by shame, shame at her own ugliness, her own blackness!

Traditionally, black has been positioned in opposition to white. As children, we are taught to fear the dark where evil things lurk in the shadows and are invisible in the darkness. Consequently we are taught to love the light where all goodness is revealed and evil can no longer hide. This dichotomy of black and white is present in *The Bluest Eye*, *Maud Martha*, and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. However, the traditional, white, western connotations of black and white are inverted in all three, consequently emphasizing the search for a black identity in the white world. Within the novels, the light/white no longer conveys the customary positive or good image. Instead, strength and presence are located in the darkness, in the blackness. The yearning to be white, to feel proud and superior because of the lightness of skin, is not presented as positive. Maureen Peale, the "high-yellow dream child," is a mean spirited, callous child, whose "beauty" masks her personal as well as physical (dog tooth, extra fingers) short-comings. Helen Brown, Maud Martha's sister, is emotionally unfulfilled, marrying an older man she does not love, opting for security over romance, lovelessness over passion. The Association in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, attempts to emulate the white middle class and ends up producing

narrow, spiritless, silent, colorless children.

By contrast, strength, passion, and voice are found in the darker characters: Claudia Macteer, Maud Martha, and Selina. Claudia, who speaks for Pecola, is fierce in her hatred of Shirley Temple and equally fierce in her love of Pecola's unborn, black baby. Maud Martha, unlike her sister, marries for love, but through the course of her sometimes unhappy marriage, she comes to find the strength of her own spirit: "'Why,' she thought, as her height doubled, 'Why. I'm good! I am good'" (Brooks 71). Selina possess the courage to fly in the face of communal and familial pressure, to speak her mind and seek her own truth and place in the world.

The images of light and darkness run in different forms throughout the novels. For Pecola, the darkness represents safety. She is secure with her darker friends, Claudia and Frieda, who protect her from the school-yard bullies. Pecola believes she is safe as she wills herself into invisibility under her blanket. In her world darkness represents absence, an absence of terror, derision and pain, and an absence of being. In contrast, the light represents danger. The lighter-skinned Junior physically terrorizes her, and Maureen Peale is cruel under her facade of kindness. Soaphead Church represents a danger to her as well, for in giving her what she wants, blue eyes, he sends her the rest of the way to madness. Pecola yearns for the light, for the white, for the blue eyes. Her own dark eyes are the one part of her being that she can

not make disappear.

Maud Martha also finds comfort in the dark. When she and Paul venture to the white cinema, the World Playhouse, it is only in the darkened theater that they feel safe. There they are not exposed, not revealed to the crowd as "two shy Negroes wanting desperately not to seem shy" (Brooks 76). In the darkened theater, they are just part of the crowd. However, they feel exposed when the show ends, and as:

the lights revealed them for what they were, the Negroes stood up among the furs and good cloth and faint perfume, looked about them eagerly. They hoped they would meet no cruel eyes. They hoped no one would feel intruded upon. (Brooks 78)

The light makes Maud Martha and Paul acutely aware of their presence in unfamiliar territory.

In *Maud Martha*, however, the light/dark dichotomy is chiefly illustrated by the contrast of the two Brown sisters, Maud Martha and Helen. According to Harry Shaw, "Helen is the embodiment of all the light-skinned or white girls with whom Maud Martha seemed to sense a perpetual rivalry" (164). Maud Martha feels that her darker color and unruly hair mark her as ugly. She is constantly comparing herself unfavorably to Helen in matters of personality as well as looks. When a department store Santa snubs her child, Maud recalls Helen, and how "Helen would not have twitched, back there. Would not have yearned to jerk trimming scissors from purse and jab jab jab that evading eye" (Brooks 175).

In contrast to the other novels, the white/light images

in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are not only represented through comparisons to other people. The whiteness instead is threaded throughout the text. It is embodied in Silla's kitchen, in the colorlessness of Ina's life, in the white columns of Deighton's dream house, and in the robes of the followers of Father Peace. So, too, is darkness woven through the text. It is in the shadows at the top of the stairs, in Selina's black mourning clothes, and in the stillness of a room, which ". . . like a dark, fragrant mother tried to sooth her" (Marshall 7).

The most dramatic representation of the light/dark dichotomy is embodied in Silla, "the mother." Rosalie Troester notes that: "Silla stands in her kitchen, half in sunlight, half in shadow, embodying the age-old human conflict between good and evil" (15). Through Silla, Marshall deftly subverts the traditional symbolism: light is no longer good, black no longer bad, and Silla is caught between the two. The light/white represents the desperate materialism that drives Silla to fraud and forgery. She formulates her plan to get Deighton's land in her kitchen, with its "stark light. . . the antiseptic white furniture and enameled white walls," and she stands "easily amid the whiteness" (Marshall 22). Yet, as she declares her intentions in the white kitchen, shadows slip across her face. The shadow/black represents the strengths of culture and community. She is in this white kitchen with other Bajans, part of the community, cooking traditional



Barbadian food.

When we first see Silla, she brings winter to the sun-drenched spring park. Her strength and determination to bring her family out of poverty through a series of demeaning and degrading jobs is embodied in her physical presence:

Silla Boyce brought the theme of winter into the park with her dark dress amid the summer green and the bright-figured house-dresses of the women lounging on the benches there. Not only that, every line of her strong-made body seemed to reprimand the women for their idleness and the park for its senseless summer display. . . And the park, the women, the sun even gave way to her dark force; the flushed summer colors ran together and faded as she passed. (Marshall 16)

But even in her powerful darkness, Silla represents winter, the season of ice and white snow. In every aspect, she is trapped between the dark and the light. Trapped between the remembered joy of her young days is the Barbadian sun and the need to be hard and cold to survive in white America.

Marshall portrays Selina in opposition to Silla. Selina wants no part of the mother's world, of the white kitchen, of winter demeanor. Selina rejects the white in favor of her own blackness. As Selina moves out of invisibility, she moves out of the shadows, out of the darkness and into the light: "the light cascaded down and formed a protective ring around her" (Marshall 280). But this is a light of her own choosing -- a light in which she is a sole, dark figure, a light which has her blackness as its source, its sun. Here, Selina's connection to Silla is made very clear. Like her mother standing in the kitchen, half in shadow, half in light, Selina

embodies the dark/light dichotomy. But rather than splitting her soul between the two, Selina projects her darkness into the light, imposing her blackness on the white. She does not compromise her own soul for a place in this light, but forces it to take her as she is, in all her dark splendor.

The traditional preference for light over dark exerts a powerful influence over the development of the characters' self image. Pecola's self image is tied to her search for love: "Pecola believes she is unloved because she is ugly" (Pettis 28), and she believes that she is ugly because she is black. Everything around her tells her that this is true: "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs--all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison 20), what every black girl child should aspire to be. Jane Sommerville states Pecola's cast most clearly:

The Breedloves are all ugly, 'relentlessly and aggressively ugly.' Cholly's ugliness is the result of despair, but that of Pauline and the children is a thing that they wear. It does not 'belong to them.' It comes 'from conviction,' . . . a 'cloak of ugliness' . . . they accept this burden confirmed by 'every billboard, every movie, every glance.' (20)

Pauline has bought this "cloak of ugliness." In her desire to look like Jean Harlow, she purchases the cloak at the movie theater, and bequeaths it to her daughter in the form of "the certain knowledge that she was ugly" (Pettis 28).

Like Pauline, Pecola has internalized this knowledge. It is embedded so deeply in her psyche that she cannot even

recognize its source. Claudia, on the other hand, intuitively knows that "beauty" is something inherent in the Maureen Peales, the Shirley Temples, the white baby dolls; it is something that she does not -- cannot -- possess. Pecola does not even know what this thing is. She only knows that she is lacking something whose absence "made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison 39).

The apparently mysterious and transfiguring nature of beauty leads Pecola to one conclusion: if she possesses Mary Jane's eyes, she will become Mary Jane, Maureen Peale, Shirley Temple and consequently will be worthy of love. Consumed by her unconscious acceptance of white "beauty," Pecola can not see the danger in which it places her. The older Claudia, looking back on her youth, can dispassionately examine her own gradual acceptance of the "white standard." She recounts her own transformation into a disciple of Shirley Temple. But Pecola cannot do the same, she lost herself too early to the cult of Shirley. She willingly gave herself before she knew what there was to lose, and because she was possessed by "the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (Morrison 40), eyes which reflected their own disaffection and despair back on the child.

Pecola's feelings of ugliness and worthlessness relate to her identification with dandelions, the lowly, common weeds

that sprout up through the sidewalk. But Pecola does not see them as a nuisance, something to be pulled, sprayed, whacked, eliminated. In her first identification with the dandelions, Pecola finds a connection with the stream of life that exists beyond the bounds of color, racism and economic oppression.

She owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world part of her. (Morrison 41)

As she blows away the seeds, she takes part in and is connected to the regenerative power of nature and the cycle of life. But, however good the dandelions make her feel, the people with whom she tries to interact, like Mr. Yacobowski, quickly put her back in her "place." In their eyes, she is an ugly, little black girl, not even worth the effort to look at her. Her participation in the cycle of life is not seen, and if it were seen, the adults would consider it a waste; all she does is create more weeds.

Pecola's second identification with the dandelions is a projection of her own feelings of ugliness and inadequacy. After the incident in Mr. Yacobowski's store, Pecola feels some anger, but mostly shame, shame at being ugly and therefore unworthy of acknowledgement and love. She projects these feelings onto the flowers she found pretty and comforting a few moments before:

Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, "They are ugly. They are weeds. (Morrison 41-43)

The unappreciated, unloved dandelions also represent the life her father plants inside of her. Most of the people in the community want the baby to die. Alive, it is a shameful reminder of their own inability to overcome oppression, to escape despair. Like dandelions on a green lawn, the existence of Pecola's baby threatens the nice, orderly view of the world that the community has carefully created. Only Claudia and Frieda do not want the baby to die. They feel a driving need for life. They need reassurance in the face of "the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (Morrison 148). They need to know that "a thing of ordinary allurements was as easy to love as a thing of heart catching beauty" (Brooks 2).

Like Pecola, Maud Martha identifies with the dandelions. To her, they are not intruders on the perfect green of a suburban lawn, but "yellow jewels for everyday." Maud Martha finds them beautiful because of their familiarity:

She would have liked a lotus, or China asters or the Japanese Iris . . . But dandelions were what she chiefly saw. Yellow jewels for everyday, studding the patched green dress of her back yard. She liked their demure prettiness second to their everydayness; for in that latter quality she thought she saw a picture of herself, and it was comforting to find that what was common could also be a flower. (Brooks 2)

Maud Martha pulls her identification with the flower inward, searching for her own beauty in the image of the flower.

Maud Martha's search for her own beauty and worth is a long, and not entirely successful, journey. Like Pecola, she

is continually faced with the knowledge that, in society's eyes, her dark skin marks her as less beautiful, less valuable, less worthy of love. Sandi Russell describes the novel, *Maud Martha*, as an "[examination of] the racism that is experienced in 'small droplets' rather than in drastic encounters" (65). This insidious racism is most manifest in the color discrimination that Maud Martha experiences from her own family and community:

For the basic situation had never changed. Helen was still the one they wanted in the wagon, still the "pretty one," "the dainty one." The lovely one . . . But the kernel of the matter was that, in spite of these things [intelligence, compassion], she was poor, and Helen was still the ranking queen, not only with the Emmanuels of the world, but even with their father--their mother--their brother. (Brooks 34-35)

Maud Martha is shunned and pushed aside because she does not possess the "pale and pompadoured" (Brooks 179) beauty, the imitation of white, that Helen possesses.

Much of Maud Martha's indignation can be put down to sibling rivalry, but in a world where light is almost white, almost right, the preference for a lighter child over a darker one can not be so quickly dismissed. Shaw suggests that Maud Martha is a

sensitive young woman grappling with the difficult problem of reconciling her human need to be cherished with society's aesthetic preferences and insensitivity which appear virtually to exclude her from the ranks of the cherishable. (175)

Maud Martha believes she sees herself with an honest and unprejudiced eye:

. . . I am certainly not what he would call pretty. Even with all this hair (which I have just assured him, in response to his question, is not "natural," is not good grade or anything like good grade) even with whatever I have that puts a dimple in his heart, even with these nice ears, I am still, definitely, not what he can call pretty if he remains true to what his idea of pretty has always been. Pretty would be a little cream-colored thing with curly hair. Or at the very lowest pretty would be a little curly haired thing the color of cocoa with a lot of milk in it. Whereas, I am the color of cocoa straight, if you can be even that "kind" to me. (Brooks 52-53)

However, she has bowed to the "aesthetic preferences" that have been thrown in her face again and again, and in doing so she has no choice but to see herself as less beautiful, less worthy of being loved.

Even though Maud Martha has accepted the white aesthetic, she does not pursue it as Pecola Breedlove does. Perhaps because her life is safer and her parents are more supportive, Maud Martha possesses more self-knowledge than Pecola. She understands the value of a good mind and a strong imagination; she recognizes that there is more to life than being pretty. Yet, she, like her husband Paul, cannot get past the color barrier: "My color . . . is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it" (Brooks 87-88). Maud Martha cannot jump high enough to see herself, she cannot see her own beauty. She learns to find the beauty in nature and in her own actions (when she saves the mouse), but she never comes to accept her own physical appearance as anything but a "type," a type that is "not a Foxy Cat favorite" (Brooks 81),

a type that is not beautiful.

Selina Boyce, in contrast to both Pecola and Maud Martha, sees herself as neither ugly nor unworthy of love because of her skin color. Her more positive self image is due, in part, to her community which fosters and protects its children and which judges educational and material success, rather than beauty and paleness, as measures of worth. It is this aspect of the "white standard," this ethic of material success, that the Barbadian community has embraced, against which Selina struggles. She eventually rejects the way of life that the community has chosen in order to seek out her own place in the world.

Selina is portrayed in opposition to Silla, the mother, whom she closely resembles in both determination and personality. Silla is the force against which Selina pits her newly emerging identity, the foil for all of Selina's actions and thoughts. Silla is represented as wintry in her somber clothes and icy within her white kitchen. In contrast, Selina is warm, glowing with life and vitality. She is the sun to Silla's motif of winter cold. She shines in the sunlight like the "fresh painted black iron fences" (Marshall 53) around the West Indian homes. When Selina enters "Prospect Park, with her hand in Beryl's and the sun shining before her eyes, she [is] drunk with freedom" (Marshall 56).

For Selina, the power of the sun is not only external but internal as well. When she tastes her first sip of rum she



feels that "she, like Suggie, carried the sun inside her" (Marshall 52). This sun is the warmth of the alcohol, but it is also the energy of her emerging identity and independence. In the park, Beryl tells Selina: "Well come on let's get outta this sun. My mother says I'm getting black running around with you in the sun" (Marshall 58). These words carry two levels of meaning. The superficial level is ironic, for although she is lighter than Selina, Beryl is still black. Staying indoors, out of the sun, will not make her less so. On a deeper level, these words take on considerable weight when viewed in terms of the later events of the novel. Beryl joins the Barbadian Homeowners Association's youth group, she goes to school to study what her father wishes and essentially tries to emulate, as her elders do, the white, middle-class lifestyle. But Selina chooses to follow the path of her soul, her internal sun, toward self fulfillment and enlightenment and rejects the direction that her community has chosen. She does not want to become more like the white society. Instead, by going to Barbados, she chooses to become blacker, tanning her soul in the rays of her internal sun.

As long as Selina carries her sun inside her, as long as her blackness, her strength and her heritage is her sun, she cannot help but have a positive self image; she can do nothing but shout to the world how beautiful she is. This final revelation however, does not take place until the end of the novel. Even as she rejects her community's chosen path,

Selina realizes that it is her connection to her community, to the strength and endurance of her people that fuels her sun.

Pecola Breedlove, Maud Martha Brown, and Selina Boyce all confront the "tyranny of ideal beauty." Pecola, because she has neither a strong enough sense of self nor a supportive community succumbs to this tyranny and loses her own quiet beauty in the pursuit of white perfection. Maud Martha, through the strength of her spirit, and her determination to enjoy life, comes to a realization of her own self worth. Yet, while she wants desperately to believe it, she can not quite convince herself of her own beauty. Selina Boyce, at the end of the novel and the beginning of her journey, rejects the culture of ideal beauty as she rejects the culture of materialism and acquisition. She recognizes what the others do not; perceived beauty has no bearing on their value as human beings. Instead, they are women who's very presence in the world makes them valuable, makes them beautiful.

## Abstract

"Can this woman be trusted?":

Cross-Dressing, Autonomy, and Sexuality in  
*The Roaring Girl* and *The Fair Maid of the West*

In this paper I will discuss how cross-dressing, and physical, financial and sexual autonomy enable Moll Cutpurse and Bess Bridges to reexamine and redefine the "femininity."

As cross-dressed women, Moll Cutpurse from *The Roaring Girl* and Bess Bridges from *The Fair Maid of the West* help to redefine traditional 16th- and early 17th-century notions of women, sex, and gender roles. These women, in their masculine garb, are physically strong, financially secure, and sexually independent. I will examine some of the factors that motivate their cross-dressing and how cross-dressing is linked to their autonomy. I will also examine how these characters help to reinterpret concepts of sex, socially defined gender roles, and relationships.

The plays of the Renaissance are written from a predominantly male-centered point of view. The women characters are usually social and sexual accessories, who are decorative, and perhaps potentially fertile, but otherwise not very useful. Those female characters who are essential to the movement of the plot are reactors, responding to acts and words initiated by the male characters. While Moll and Bess do fall within the broad bounds of this paradigm, they possess characteristics which set them apart from other female characters. Key among these characteristics is the male clothing they choose to wear. Cross-dressing is a sign of their financial independence, atypical sexuality, and unconventional social relationships with men.

Moll chooses to wear male clothing, not as a disguise, as

many of Shakespeare's transvested heroines, but as a sign of her independence. Her choice of clothing reflects her choice of lifestyle. Moll resides on the fringes of social respectability, maintaining social relationships with cutpurses, pickpockets and canters as well as shopkeepers, musicians and nobility. Her social independence permits her to move freely between the underworld and the "respectable" world; her sartorial independence, furthermore, allows her to move freely between the masculine and the feminine spheres. Moll never resolves her ambiguity and never settles for being entirely feminine or masculine. Instead, she straddles the two, blurring the connection between biologically determined sex and socially constructed gender.

Bess Bridges differs from Moll in several important ways. Bess's autonomy is dependent on male entitlement and whim. Her cross-dressing is more a matter of expediency than a lifestyle choice; she only wears male clothing for a short period of time, and most of this time is spent offstage. However, her cross-dressing characterizes her unconventionality in owning property, distributing wealth, and avenging her beloved's death, and her consequent re-dressing illustrates her leanings towards more traditional gender roles: her marriage to Spencer and her attitude towards the Duke of Florence. Bess, unlike Moll, eventually chooses femininity over ambiguity, but she still retains some of the characteristics of the masculine social construct.

Both Moll Cutpurse and Bess Bridges wear male clothing on their various forays in the wilds of gender ambiguity. Neither the characters nor their authors may consider these women role models, but through their clothing, and their consequent physical, financial and sexual independence, they take the first steps toward redefining gender roles and relationships.

Stephen Greenblatt in "Fiction and Friction..." suggests that:

Separation from the female, the crux of male individualism, is inverted in the rites of cross-dressing; such characters as Rosalind and Viola pass through the state of being men in order to become women. Shakespearean women are in this sense the representations of Shakespearean men, the projected mirror images of masculine self-differentiation. (Greenblatt 51)

Here, Greenblatt refers specifically to Shakespearean women, who doubtless were the most frequent examples of trans-vested characters. However, Greenblatt's paradigm does not hold true when one leaves the "Rosalind" mold to explore other types of cross-dressed characters. Moll Cutpurse and Bess Bridges are two such characters. Neither woman passes "through the state of being men." At no time do they become, or try to pass themselves off as, men. Rather, they appropriate male clothes and some "masculine"<sup>1</sup> social characteristics. Nor are Moll

---

<sup>1</sup>By "masculine" and "feminine" I mean the physical and social characteristics that are associated with the specific genders. These divisions are based on my own observations of Renaissance texts. The masculine characteristics encompass cruelty, the ability to do or provoke violence, strength of body and spirit, intelligence, knowledge, command over one's own life and body, and

and Bess on a quest to "become women," or, as Greenblatt implies, to become better women. At the end of *The Fair Maid of the West, Part I* Bess does fulfill the socially delineated role of a woman; she marries. However, when she goes off to sea, and when she cross-dresses, she does so to avenge her beloved's death, not to marry him. Nor is Moll attempting to find a husband, or to test one she already has or will shortly have (i.e. Portia, Rosalind). At the end of *The Roaring Girl*, Moll does not miraculously transform herself into a "proper" woman; she continues to live her life as she pleases. Moll's habitual cross-dressing indicates that for her, unlike the Shakespearean trans-vested heroines or even Bess Bridges, the wearing of male apparel is not a passing fancy, a shock tactic or a strategy designed to accomplish a specific goal, such as testing a husband. Moll does not wear male clothing to become or pass herself off as a man, but as an expression of her real, androgynous persona. Moll does not generally disguise herself, but it is relevant to note that when she does use disguise, once it is as a man and once as a woman.

Moll does not become a man, but rather, she exhibits, along with particular items of male dress, those male characteristics which are most practical in a patriarchal society: martial prowess, financial acumen, physical and

---

the ability to advance into and move within male-dominated social spheres such as business, law and politics. The feminine characteristics encompass tenderness, sensitivity, weakness of body and spirit, cleverness, cunning, wit and compassion.

social mobility, fearlessness. Cross-dressing, which can not be separated from her assumption of masculine characteristics, makes her an "Other" figure, not necessarily bound by the precepts of the fairly rigid, Jacobean social structure. As an Other figure, with no fixed place in society, Moll lacks the social bedrock of belonging to a group and the network of social constructs which supports an individual. However, in return for this lack of social support, Moll can move easily between the social classes. She is equally at home in the low taverns, the middle class shops, and the aristocratic drawing rooms.

Moll's insistence on maintaining her unusual mode of dress in the face of social, religious and legal proscriptions, further indicates that cross-dressing is not a capricious choice. Moll would have probably found her life much easier if she had lived either as a woman or as man. But, as a cross-dressed Other, Moll can retain, in addition to social ambiguity, her sexual/gender ambiguity as well. I use both terms here because the Renaissance was a time of fluctuating notions concerning biology, reproduction, sex and identity. A person was defined as much by her placement, through acts and temperament, into a socially defined gender, as by her actual genitalia. Moll could have probably enjoyed greater freedom and autonomy disguised as a male, but she chooses to retain some feminine characteristics. In doing so she creates herself as an androgynous person, embodying



cultural, rather than physical, hermaphrodism.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike Moll, for whom cross-dressing is an expression of her androgynous persona, Bess does not live as a cross-dressed woman. She wears male attire on only two occasions. Instead, cross-dressing allows Bess to express certain aspects of her predominantly "feminine" persona. By putting on masculine clothing, Bess creates alternate personae. When fighting Roughman she becomes her own brother, ostensibly defending her "sister's" honor. When she takes to the seas and dresses as a man, she becomes her dead lover Spencer, taking on the male privilege of revenge and defending English honor against the marauding Spaniards. In both cases "Bess puts on male clothing to right social wrongs" (Howard, "An English Lady..." 4), to punish Roughman for his swaggering cowardice and to defend her country's interests.

Bess disguises her self as her own brother in order to teach Roughman a lesson. He would not have fought with her if he had known she was a woman. Dressing up as a man allows her the opportunity to make her point about Roughman's character, to safely speak her mind. In this instance, cross-dressing gives Bess a "voice;" the masculine guise invests her with authority and presence.

Why Bess cross-dresses at sea is not such an easy

---

<sup>2</sup>I refer here to Robert Kimbrough's definition of androgyny as: "a mythic concept which represents an inner, psychic state of experience, whereas hermaphrodism is an objective, physical state of being" (Kimbrough 20n).

question to answer. The only practical reason for Bess to wear male clothing is to join with her men in fighting the enemy, who, like Roughman, may not have been eager to cross swords with a woman. Bess does not exclusively dress as a man and consequently is not seeking to hide or disguise her true sex/gender from her men. Cross-dressing at sea is not a matter of authority either. Both the captain, Goodlack, and the first mate, Roughman, know that Bess is a woman, yet they have no problem taking direction from her. The only people who do not know Bess's true sex/gender are the pirates and Spaniards *The Negro* encounters. Cross-dressing would not necessarily have been a precautionary measure. Bess had no problem maintaining her chastity in the rough, masculine world of the tavern, where she was renowned as the only virgin barmaid. She would not need masculine attire to signal her sexual unavailability. In fact, wearing male clothing makes Bess more desirable and would cloud the issue of her chastity. As we will later see with regards to Moll, cross-dressing was associated with sexual license and promiscuity. A cross-dressed woman was a loose and ready woman.

Although her cross-dressing does have one practical purpose, Bess's sea-going cross-dressing episode is another signal or marker of her unconventional nature. Bess does not follow the typical, feminine social construct for her time and social class. She is a working woman, a barmaid, but a chaste one.

1 Captain: I think she's honest.

Carroll: Honest, and live there?

What, in a public tavern, where's such  
confluence

Of lusty and brave gallants? Honest, said you?"  
(*The Fair Maid of the West* (FMW) I.i.24-26)

Mr. Carroll's disbelief of her chastity indicates the uncommon nature of Bess's behavior. When she takes on Spencer's business and property, she reveals a sharp business acumen, another oddity in an era when women did not, as a rule, manage money or even own property. When Bess gives away all her wealth, we again see an indication of her unconventional behavior. Money was to be kept, spent and handed down to one's children. Although the terms of Spencer's bequest prevented Bess from retaining her wealth if she were to marry and have children, the disbursement of all her money and property to strangers, servants, and apprentices indicates a very generous and singular concern for the economic well-being of the poorer classes. Lastly, women did not charter ships to avenge a beloved's death, raid pirate ships, and fight the enemies of the crown. They mourned or remarried and stayed home where they were (supposedly) safe and protected. Cross-dressing itself does not make Bess an Other figure. Rather, it is a manifestation of her markedly atypical nature.

For Bess and Moll cross-dressing is either an influence on or a symbol of their physical, financial and sexual autonomy. In terms of physical autonomy, cross-dressing presents these women with opportunities to display physical ability and strength. Male attire worn while engaging in

contests with dishonorable men, Roughman and Laxton, signals their ability and willingness to protect themselves against physical attacks and verbal assaults on their chastity. Shakespeare's transvested heroines, such as Viola in *Twelfth Night*, are more than a match for the men mentally but are still weaker physically; the only battles they can win are battles of wits. Both Moll and Bess, however, are as strong (if not stronger) than the men, whether matching wits or matching swords. Moll physically defeats Laxton, and outwits Trapdoor and Sir Alexander. Bess wins when she parries both verbally and physically with Roughman.

Physical strength expressed through masculine attire is the most obvious, yet the least important and the least explored, facet of cross-dressing dealt with in these plays. Because gender in the Renaissance was much more a social than physical construct, there is less anxiety surrounding the notion of a strong and physically adept woman. Much more threatening to the social order was the economically and sexually independent woman. Physical strength was merely one characteristic of an individual whereas economic and sexual independence of women pointed to lack of control and disorder in individuals and social systems: the father, brother or husband is absent or unable to control this woman, and the regulatory systems of marriage and social mores have failed to properly place and manage the behavior of this woman.

Anxiety about financially independent women, the

economics of marriage, and the desire to control feminine behavior through economic pressure are themes which are evident in both plays. In her article on *Epicoene*, Karen Newman discusses the traditional view of woman as property, as a commodity: "She [woman] is represented in discourses of Jacobean London as at once consumer and consumed--her supposed desire for goods linked to her sexual availability" (Newman 506). This is a natural connection in a society where a woman's only assets, depending on her social and marital status, are her body and her chastity. Unless a woman was economically independent, as is Moll, she had to use her body as barter for any goods she desired. In this sense there is no difference between a married woman using sex to get her husband to buy her a new hat, a woman sleeping with a shopkeeper in exchange for silk, a courtesan whose keeper buys her jewels, or the prostitute who settles for straight cash. A financially dependent woman who truly desired or needed consumer goods was a woman who could be had sexually.

The step from individual women as the consumed commodity, to Woman and the very idea of femininity as a saleable commodity is very small. Newman discusses Jacobean texts as "discourses which managed and produced femininity" (Newman 506). As a "product," then, femininity itself is defined as a commodity, something which can be purchased, traded, and/or acquired. Women, by the very nature of the social construction which defines them as women, become property.

The anxiety surrounding the financially autonomous woman stems from her separation from the category of property. If she is no longer property, then she is no longer "feminine." If a woman is no longer feminine, then she has become Other, a source of social unease.

Moll maintains control over her own life and her own money, and by doing so, makes herself Other. Like Bess, Moll's cross-dressing, in this aspect, is a marker of her atypical nature. Moll is not a commodity but is an active consumer. She asks after the price of pipe tobacco (*The Roaring Girl* (RG) II.i.199); when she wants a "shag ruff," she tells Mistress Openwork "I come to buy" (RG II.i.234). In II.ii we can see Moll as consumer and Moll as Other come together as she is fitted for breeches. As the tailor fits her, they discuss the cut and style of the clothes and her dissatisfaction with the previous pair she had purchased from him. As this takes place Sir Alexander, eavesdropping on their conversation, uses cross-dressing as the focus for his distress at the prospect of Moll becoming his daughter-in-law:

Here's good gear towards! I have brought up my son to marry a Dutch slop and a French doublet: a codpiece daughter. (RG II.ii. 91-93)

Bess, on the other hand, has no desire to remain autonomous. She longs for marriage to her true love and wants to give up the life of a proprietress to become a wife. Male whim controls Bess's "autonomy:" she is only financially independent because her love has "died." Bess makes her money

from Spencer's bar, and should he return, the business and all its profits would be returned to him. However, as an unconventional woman, Bess is represented as a producer, not a consumer. She removes herself from the category of property when she refuses to consider marriage after Spencer has died. Bess's business skill and property holdings make her a very valuable catch, and the men in town court Bess for her business as well as her beauty. Yet she refuses to be bought and sold, as so many women were, with the marriage license as the bill of sale and the dowry as profit.

A financially independent woman, who did not marry, represented a failure of the regulatory function of the social systems. Economically independent women did not need men to support them. Without the financial dependence of women, men have a much more tenuous hold over them and their behavior, especially their sexual behavior. Orgel suggests that what men feared most was:

losing control of women's chastity, a very valuable possession that guaranteed the legitimacy of one's heirs, and especially valuable for fathers as a piece of disposable property. . . . (Orgel 18)

It is significant to note that neither Moll nor Bess has a male family member, a father, brother or uncle, to care for and protect them, to provide for them financially or to regulate their behavior. The presence of a dominant male figure would have severely hampered either woman's independence. This is most apparent when we consider Bess's actions. Her financial and sartorial independence flourish

only in Spencer's absence.

A financially independent woman was a sexual threat to the patriarchal system. If men have no hold over a woman's economic survival, then they have no hold over her sexuality. A financially independent woman did not depend on the size of her dowry or her husband's estate for her future security. Her chastity/sexuality need no longer be sold to provide her with the necessities and luxuries of life. Consequently a financially secure woman is free to give or withhold her sexuality as she pleases.

Orgel suggests that feminine sexual freedom provokes anxiety in the patriarchal society:

Beyond the outrage of public modesty is a real fear of women's sexuality, and more specifically, of its power to evoke men's sexuality. This is dangerous because it is not subject to rational control, which is a way of saying that it is not subject to any other kind of authority either. (Orgel 26)

As a consequence, Bess and Moll are required to answer, again and again, the question: "'Can this woman be trusted?'" (Jardine 69). They must prove themselves honest, both sexually and economically.

Both Moll and Bess take great pains to remind the other characters and the audience of their chastity. As cross-dressed women, women who wield swords, their virtue is called into question. And as financially independent women, they threaten the established social and economic order. With two such subversive characteristics there can be no space for questions of ambiguous virtue. Moll makes several statements



about her virtue, and physically defends her honor and her name. Bess's virtue is more problematic.

Bess's economic and hence social autonomy is closely tied to her chastity, or the perception of her chastity. When Spencer believes his end is near, he bequeaths her a legacy of 500£ per year, to be administered by Goodlack:

. . . with this proviso:  
If at thy arrival where my Bess remains,  
Thou find'st her well reported, free from scandal,  
My will stands firm; but if thou hear'st her branded  
For loose behavior or immodest life,  
What she should have I here bestow on thee,  
It is thine own. (FMW II.ii.81-87)

Spencer's proviso is an attempt to exert control over Bess's behavior, an attempt to assure that her economic support and her sexuality is still under masculine control. Much is made of Bess's sexual status throughout the play; Jean Howard suggests that Bess's status as a virgin who is "eroticized. . . desired and desiring. . . constitutes her power . . ." and consequently establishes her as a threat (Howard, "An English Lady..." 4). Her sexually-charged chastity and her cross-dressing create a tension that surrounds Bess "as an unmarried, and so unmastered, woman" (Howard "An English Lady..." 23). This tension, a result of the loss of masculine control over Bess's sexuality and behavior, can only be resolved through a reassertion of social controls resulting in Bess's re-dressing and subsequent marriage.

In this respect her autonomy is only superficial. Bess's true sexual freedom comes from her decision not to be sexually

active. As we have seen earlier, Bess's decision, as a barmaid, to remain chaste is viewed as peculiar. She makes this decision without financial coercion, as later when Spencer demands her purity in exchange for his legacy. Bess makes this decision on her own and stands by her choice in the face of social and personal pressure. In doing so, Bess exercises the masculine prerogative of choice. Renaissance beliefs about sexuality were in flux at the time, but they generally supported the socially necessary (for the patriarchal system) view that women had very little control over their sexual impulses. As Howard notes Bess was "desiring." She was a very sensual and sexually aware woman, and her love for Spencer is passionate and earthy. Her sexuality is evident in the willing kiss she gives to Mullisheg.

Moll too chooses to be chaste. However, she lacks the sexuality that distinguishes Bess. She is considered by the men to be a liberal, licentious woman; yet, she is curiously asexual. Moll does not, like Bess, desire men and marriage, but neither does she take the traditional convent route and shun the company of men. Moll continues to engage with men on a purely social level, another characteristic of her unusual nature in a genre where men and women relate to each other only in sexual or familial terms, i.e. lover, wife, sister or mother. Moll's apparent lack of sexual desire allows her to cross the traditional social barriers between men and women.

Moll's cross-dressing, in turn, places her outside the boundaries of conventional social sexuality, i.e. marriage. Sir Alexander is so appalled at his son's apparent choice of a cross-dressed bride that he would "Willingly resign up half my state to him,/So he would marry the meanest drudge I hire" (RG V.ii.64-65). Although undesirable as a wife, her masculine garb, free speech, and independence make Moll irresistible as a casual sexual partner. In her "frieze jerkin and . . . black safeguard" (RG II.i.174sd), she is the image of unrestrained sexuality. Her masculine attire and fighting ability are seen as the outward signs of an intense and lustful sexual nature. Yet, for all her desirability, Moll is curiously asexual. Her lack of desire for a husband is understandable; the social construct of marriage, within Renaissance England would seriously compromise her autonomy. However, Moll does not even desire sex. In this aspect she is contrasted to the "good" mistresses, the merchants' wives who freely grant their favors, both in and out of the marriage bed.

Both these good wives and the men like Sir Alexander and Laxton assume, because Moll dresses in the fashion of some whores and low fallen women, that she too is a prostitute. Laxton, who makes his money by sleeping with (or as in the case of Mistress Gallipot, by not sleeping with) married women, is willing to pay Moll: "Heart, I would give but too

much money to be nibbling with that wench" (RG II.i.187-188). Despite Laxton's attempts and Sir Alexander's and Mistress Openwork's misconceptions, Moll is not a whore. Spencer would have condemned Bess for an appearance of impropriety, but Moll, through her wits and her sword, proves that not all who are named as such are whores.

Both Bess and Moll through their cross-dressing and their independence in thought and action, help to reexamine and redefine femininity and social gender itself. Moll, Mary Fitzallard and the Mistresses Gallipot, Openwork and Tiltyard all represent different views of femininity, different ways of coping as a woman within their patriarchal society. Mary Fitzallard chooses the traditional route of love and marriage. The shop mistresses are also wives and possibly mothers, but they deceive their husbands and are, in turn, deceived by both husbands and lovers. Yet these traditional women are also shopkeepers, working with their husbands, engaging in masculine, mercantile behavior. Moll chooses to shun traditional femininity and creates a new place for herself within the social fabric.

In *The Fair Maid of the West, Part I* Bess is the lone representation of femininity. There are no other women for her to draw support from or to pattern herself after. Queen Tota, the only other woman in Part II, is a foil for Bess's already developed character. In essence, Bess inhabits an exclusively male world. (Actually, all the "women" in

Renaissance play inhabited a masculine world, themselves included, but there is not enough space to discuss all the levels of gender confusion and interpretation prompted by all-male casts.) Bess, as the sole representation of femininity in the play, defines femininity within the play world. Her ambition, strength, determination and business acumen become the feminine norm within the world of the play.

Bess, as the definitive female, is not an ambiguous figure either sexually or in terms of social gender. Although in the ship she tells her men: "I'll tell you all./ For mine own wearing I have rich apparel,/ For man or woman as occasion serves" (*FMW* IV.ii.86-88), neither they nor the audience are ever in doubt, as to Bess's sex/gender. Her cross-dressing occurs primarily while at sea, and once *The Negro* lands in Barbary she returns to her female garb and feminine social role. When Bess negotiates, with Mullisheg, the terms for her appearance in his court, she does not do so in person. The words are hers, but Goodlack reads them. Although Bess is still in control, she voluntarily steps back; she lets the men conduct business.

What little outright gender ambiguity Bess does possess is only explored while she is at sea, in a confined, contained environment. She does not resume her cross-dressing and her limited gender ambiguity on the return voyage. She is now a married woman, and any ambiguity on her part would be a reflection on her husband. In fact, Bess's strength and

gender redefinition are not located within an ambiguous gender, or even in the creation of a new gender. Instead, Bess's character helps to redraw the lines of feminine social gender to include "masculine" characteristics within the definition of the "feminine." Even in her female garb, Bess is strong and resourceful, taking command of the situations she finds herself in and using them to her advantage.

Like all women in male-authored, male-centered Renaissance plays, Bess and Moll do not create situations for themselves and others to act in. Rather, they are reactors, performing their roles in situations constructed by the male characters. Much as Bess does, Moll reacts in ways that suit her own ends. Unlike most of the transvested heroines in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, Moll never marries. She is not a Rosalind, a Portia or even a Bess Bridges, to be "rewarded with desirable marriages" (Garber 72). Neither does she "[speak] out in protest of patriarchy" as Garber says Rosalind, Viola, Beatrice and Katherina do (72). Rather, Moll takes great pains to point out that she is not and should not be considered an example for other women. Her choices are hers alone; she is not the spokeswoman for her generation. Her claim that she is not a new role model is supported by her concept of marriage within her society. Where marriage is concerned, Moll limits her blurring of gender lines. In her argument defending her decision not to marry, Moll acknowledges and tacitly supports the social construct of

marriage which requires the dominance of the man and the subservience of the woman:

. . . I have no humor to marry. I love to lie o' both sides o'th' bed myself; and again, o'th'other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore, I'll ne'er go about it . . . I have a head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman; marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head, and has a worse i'th' place.  
(RG II.ii.36-44)

Society has placed limits on female independence, and while Moll chooses to cross some of these boundaries, she allows herself only so much range.

Yet, in some respects, Moll is a role model. Her decision to maintain her autonomy rather than marry and her ability to remain independent of, but still to socially interact with, men are first steps towards redrawing gender relationships and redefining socially constructed gender roles. In choosing to shun marriage, which according to Rackin was "the paradigm that governed the lives and defined the identities of Renaissance women (Maclean, 18-20, 57, 75, 85)" (Rackin 114), Moll must create a new paradigm, a new model against which she can define herself.

This new model is the cultural hermaphrodite, the androgynous being who is complete in itself. As an androgyne, Moll has no desire for marriage, or even for sex. Cheney suggests that Moll lacks sexual desire "Because [she] is a figure embodying both subject and object, balancing reason and passion . . . she is asexual" (130). As an androgyne Moll is a complete person; she does not need a partner to make her

whole. Moll incorporates both genders in one body, providing physical and emotional strength, financial security, intelligence, compassion, artistry and tenderness.

Moll, in her blending of the two genders, creates in essence a new, third gender; an ambiguous, neuter gender, founded on flux and confusion rather than exclusion and antithesis. Moll is truly the "opposite sex" because the more rigid and restrictive "masculine" and "feminine" gender constructs are antithetical to her unified androgyny.

Both Moll Cutpurse and Bess Bridges explore and examine the social/gender constructions that shape their worlds. The assumption of male clothing does not define these women, but in conjunction with the incorporation of "masculine" characteristics, cross-dressing signals their desire for a new and different place in society. Neither Moll nor Bess should be seen as an ultimate expression or paradigm for new gender construction. However, through their sartorial, financial and sexual autonomy they create new spaces, within the social fabric for gender definition.



List of Works Consulted

"A Dark Girl Alone": Identity and Self Image in  
*Brown Girl, Brownstones, Maud Martha* and *The Bluest Eye*

Brooks, Gwendolyn. Maud Martha. New York: Harper and  
Brothers, 1953

Harris, Trudier. "No Outlet for the Blues: Silla Boyce's  
Plight in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*." Callaloo 6 (1983):  
57-67.

Hernton, Clavin. "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women  
Writers." Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American  
Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance. New  
Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990. 195-212.

Ingram, Elwanda D. "Selina and Reena: Paule Marshall's  
Assertive Black Women." Mawa Review 2 (1986): 25-27.

Leseur, Geta A. "*Brown Girl, Brownstones* as a Novel of  
Development." Obsidian II 1 (1986): 119-129.

Marshall, Paule. Brown Girl, Brownstones. New York: The  
Feminist Press, 1959.

Miner, Maddone M. "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues: Rape, Madness, and Silence in *The Bluest Eye*." Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition. Ed. Marjorie Pryse, and Hortense J. Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 176-191.

Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye. New York: Washington Square Press, 1970.

Pettis, Joyce. "Difficult Survival: Mothers and Daughters in *The Bluest Eye*." SAGE 4 (1987): 26-29.

Russell, Sandi. Render Me My Song: African-American Women Writers From Slavery to Present. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Sargent, Robert. "A Way of Ordering Experience: A Study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*." Faith of a (Woman) Writer. Ed. Alice Kessler-Harris, and William McBrien. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988. 229-236.

Shaw, Harry B. Gwendolyn Brooks. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980.

Somerville, Jane. "Idealized Beauty and the Denial of Love in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." The Bulletin of the

West Virginia Association of College English Teachers

9 (1986): 18-23.

Troester, Rosalie Riegle. "Turbulence and Tenderness: Mothers, Daughters, and 'Othermothers' in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*." SAGE 1 (1984): 13-16.

"Can this woman be trusted?": Cross-Dressing, Sexuality and Autonomy in *The Roaring Girl* and *The Fair Maid of the West*

Belsey, Catherine. The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama. London: Routledge, 1985.

Cheney, Patrick. "Moll Cutpurse as Hermaphrodite in Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*." Renaissance and Reformation 7 (1983): 120-134.

Dusinberre, Juliet. Shakespeare and the Nature of Women. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

Erickson, Peter. Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Fiction and Friction." Reconstructing Individualism. Eds. Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna, David E. Wellbery. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986. 30-52
- Helms, Lorraine. "Roaring Girls and Silent Women: The Politics of Androgyny on the Jacobean Stage." Women in Theater. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. 59-74.
- Heywood, Thomas. The Fair Maid of The West, Parts I and II. Ed. Robert K. Turner, Jr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967
- Howard, Jean. "Crossdressing, The Theater, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England." Shakespeare Quarterly 39 (1988): 418-440.
- Howard, Jean. "An English Lady Amid the Moors: Gender, Race, Sexuality and National Identity in The Fair Maid of the West." Unpublished, 1993.
- Jardine, Lisa. Still Harping on Daughters. Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1983.
- Kimbrough, Robert. "Androgyny, Old and New." Western Humanities Review 35 (1981): 197-215.

Laqueur, Thomas. Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.

Middleton, Thomas and Thomas Dekker. The Roaring Girl. Ed. Paul A. Mulholland. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987.

Newman, Karen. "City Talk: Women and Commodification in Jonson's *Epicoene*." ELH 56 (1989): 503-518.

Orgel, Stephen. "Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?" The South Atlantic Quarterly 88 (1989): 7-29.

Rackin, Phyllis. "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage." Speaking of Gender. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Routledge, 1989. 113-133.

## Vita

Jennifer Goldfarb was born on November 22, 1966 to Marc and Myra Goldfarb in Yale-New Haven Hospital in New Haven, Connecticut. She attended two yeshivas (religious day schools) before entering public junior high school. She attended Richard C. Lee High School in New Haven and graduated from the Hamden-New Haven Cooperative High School in 1984. Jennifer, A National Merit Scholarship runner-up, attended the University of Connecticut, and graduated in 1988 with a Bachelor's Degree in English. She then worked for three years as a desktop publisher while taking part-time graduate classes at Southern Connecticut State University. During that time she presented a paper at the 1990 West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Conference. In 1991 Jennifer attended Lehigh University on a tuition scholarship. In the fall semester she was the teaching assistant for Dr. Barbara Traister's undergraduate Shakespeare course. Jennifer will graduate from Lehigh with a Master's Degree and plans to continue her education.

2 **END**

**OF**

**TITLE**