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## Discourse and Discography: The Pushback of Female Writers, Characters, and Pop Stars

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Murray State University Honors College

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Discourse and Discography: The Pushback of Female Writers, Characters, and Pop Stars

Amara Stroud

November 2020

Approved to honor fulfill  
the requirements of HON 437

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Dr. Andrew Black, Professor

Approved to fulfill the  
requirement of the Murray State  
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Discourse and Discography: The Pushback of Female Characters, Writers, and Pop Stars

Submitted in partial fulfillment to the requirements for the  
Murray State University Honors Diploma

Amara Stroud

November 2020

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## Discourse and Discography: The Pushback of Female Writers, Characters, and Pop Stars

*Condemn me not for making such a coil*

*About my book: alas, it is my child.*

- Margaret Cavendish “Excuse for So Much Writ Upon My Verses”

*Living in a world where no one's innocent*

*Oh, but at least we try*

*Gotta live my truth, not keep it bottled in*

*So I don't lose my mind*

- Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande, “Rain on Me”

In surveying women in literature and media, the long-lasting implications of publishing and expressing one’s truth have been met with skepticism. As men have traditionally controlled both the literary and musical realm, talented women have been silenced by harsh criticism in the form of manipulated publications and lawsuits. Though many of their works have received less exposure than that of their male counterparts, women have always been pushing back, defying societal standards, and responding to one’s critics so that their work is taken seriously. Since the pushback from feminist critics, the inclusion of English women writers in the literary canon has grown leaps and bounds compared to early literary anthologies. While may seem less relevant, contemporary female pop artists experience similar circumstances concerning their careers. Not only are these women constantly under a public lens, but they also are critiqued as to how they present themselves and those around them within their music. The need to be self-conscious, for women, has always been an issue. Consider the quotes above. Margaret Cavendish, a well-respected naturalist writer, philosopher, and scientist, began publishing in the mid seventeenth century. Though her work still inspires scientific debate today, her published works did not go without being criticized. Her “Excuse for So Much Writ Upon My Verses" focuses on her

dedication of not being written off by critics for expressing her thoughts. Her book – which is as dear to her as her own child – is something she is dedicated to as it encompasses her emotions and feelings. Because the information she publishes is so personal, she feels the need to apologize to her audience. What was once personal experience is no longer kept in private; Cavendish is outwardly expressing what has occurred in her life. This conflict between private and public identity can also be seen in the modern pop sphere as well - especially in Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande's "Rain on Me." While the intention of the song is to celebrate the triumph of stressful, private matters, "Rain on Me " also expresses the need to share these feelings publicly. While Cavendish worries about the fate of her text, Gaga and Grande express that they *have* to publish these emotional thoughts so that they are not driven mad by bottling up their truths. As "An Excuse for Writing So Much Upon My Verses" received heavy criticism for its "lack of social decorum," as did many of Cavendish's works, there was still praise that celebrated Cavendish's writing, her wit, and critical eye (Skouen 550). The effects of Gaga and Grande's collaboration directly parallel this publication as shouts of praise and criticism surrounded the release of "Rain on Me." With twenty-one million music video views in the first hour, it easily moved up the charts. As views started to pour in, the music video's comment section began filling with notes from viewers who shared thoughts like "This is a disgrace to Bad Romance." Though over 350 years have passed in between the releases of "An Excuse for So Much Writ Upon My Verse" and "Rain on Me," the messages that these women produce and the criticism that they receive are similar and show the consistent struggle that women face in publishing meaningful works.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* explores problems similar to the example mentioned above that women face in male-dominated fields. She focuses her lens upon the

agency of male writers and their neglectful attitude towards women. Perhaps Woolf's most famous example is her distinct speculation of Shakespeare's sister. As Shakespeare's legacy has proved him to be the most recognizable writer to ever live, Woolf questions where gender plays a role in his success. Woolf asks if this bard, who "certainly [had] the state of mind most favourable to poetry," had a sister who produced texts, would anyone know about her? (57)

From her point of view, if Shakespeare had a sister, she would not have the opportunity to be recognized – let alone canonized – for contributions to the literary world while Shakespeare himself produced easily recognizable work that remains in anthologies today. The opportunities for women writers are far removed from that of male writers – especially for a woman who was not granted the "goodwill of her father" (Woolf 58). Women who lacked nobility lacked agency in publishing - or they had no opportunity to publish - as their work did not seem special in comparison to other socially undistinguishable female writers. Woolf's motive is to expose the prejudices that not only she, an agent of literary change, faced but also that of women like her whose voices were silenced by outside judges who prodded for errors. Her conscious efforts to discuss these issues stirred up controversy as she remained dedicated to her privacy by removing herself from the argument. Instead of sharing detailed and personal experiences of sexism, she instead formats her discussion of women's opportunities to be on someone who is accessible. Shakespeare, as a universally praised figure, gives her argument more support than if she spoke from her own specific viewpoint. Her removal of the self was not "marked by an absence of details" but rather the sensitivity of the female situation was measured by more flexible, abstract claims (Fernald 168). In addressing direct problems with outside-the-box examples, Woolf plants into her readers minds that the fine line between praised and doubted work relies solely on the basis of gender. Her analysis of women's publishing capabilities directly pushes back on the



status quo. Though Woolf argues that “it is time that the effect of discouragement upon the mind of the artist should be measured,” men’s perceptions concerning women’s credibility and capability as writers remain questioned (59). Her argument, though bright and invigorating, has not altered the notions of critics today.

Woolf’s gender-based critique shows the complex fixation on feminine identity in writing. Though writers like Cavendish began publishing centuries before Woolf and artists such as Gaga and Grande, the bias that these women – and others soon to be mentioned – experience is based on the conceptualized hierarchy of gender and the capability for women to defy gender norms. Through characterization, personal narrative, and complex imagery in modern music videos, women have received critical (and sometimes detrimental) comments that have altered the public’s perception of them. However, these women – whether it be through a character’s perception or the personal experience of a writer – continuously push back against career-defining comments from spectators in order to relay the truth concerning personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs.

## **Critical Feminism**

Readings of literature from a feminist perspective help us understand the issues that pop stars face as well. With the earliest writers focusing heavily on standards that their patriarchal ancestors set into place, the necessity for women to conform to particular ideologies was seen in both literature and life. With the expectations of women being followed closely by the male gaze - a determining feature of visual art, in the words of Laura Mulvey, that “projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” - audiences are directed to the notion that women are unable to control the portrayal of their bodies and thoughts (63). This male gaze that

Mulvey describes also occurs in written literature as well. Woolf also deals with this male gaze as she claims that “women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses” (41). The male gaze becomes problematic as narratives are skewed by those who cannot or make no attempt to understand women. A male perspective complicates the specific narrative that women are trying to write about which removes men from a situation in which they have always been present. While removing this male gaze would allow for honesty, male critics keep producing inherently sexist comments.

In works written by men, like Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” the implications of men’s concerns are brought to light. As he goes against the contemporary Catholic expectations of femininity, Chaucer develops his “Wife of Bath”, character, Alison, as one that defies expectations as to what a woman should be. Because most “Chaucerian women are often disempowered or objectified by the law,” the push for Alison to be labeled as attention-seeking or a gold-digger is present even in scholarship (Lipton). As individualism for women is not supported by medieval society, the male critique of Alison’s self-concern creates questions of reliability. How can she, critics ask, be both “in command and obedient?” (Parker 96) It is through Chaucer’s sympathy towards women and understanding of complex human emotion and action that Alison can hold these conflicting ideals. Though he is a male writer, he sees the imbalance between the expectations of women and the complex nature of human beings. As women in the Middle Ages were regularly portrayed as simple and unlearned, Alison’s position as the decision maker in her marriages shows the opportunities for women that had hardly been previously presented. While he does not provide any real opportunity to hold a meaningful position of power in medieval society, he allows her to have a voice - something that had rarely if ever been done before. Rather than

acting as a ventriloquist, he allows Alison to represent a version of femininity that had yet to be explored. By offering her a voice, the opportunity to see a new perspective arose. In this way, Chaucer effectively explains issues concerning women while still holding ambiguity to allow his readers to question him.

While Chaucer's stance on female empowerment can be read either in favor of Alison's femininity or against it, Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room" critiques Strephon for his blindness towards Celia's disgusting behaviors that she hides underneath caked-on beauty products. Yet Swift objectifies women – with Celia as his scapegoat – by scrutinizing her as a woman and also turning her into an object of desire so that men see the importance of patriarchal structures in writing and refuse to give women agency. In "The Lady's Dressing Room," one receives a first-person view into the "dogmatic, hegemonic, and sexist beliefs that Swift's work has been understood to both promote and indict" (Holm 1). Though Swift's work has been tested under feminist lens over time, responses from period writers like Lady Mary Montagu directly defy these misogynistic and sexist values promoted by Swift. Her faculty and wealth of knowledge as a writer allowed her to extensively shame Swift's male gaze. Montagu argues that a woman's influence and position within the eighteenth-century literary society are continuously linked to the eyes of men. In this situation, the male gaze comes straight from Swift, even if he suggests it's only Strephon's. Because of negative experiences with women, claims Montagu, Swift harshly approaches the mere idea of a woman's body through a crude lens to shift the male gaze from desire to disgust.

Unfortunately, women are still being seen through controlling lenses on which they push back against. For Taylor Swift, her "long list of ex-lovers" will "tell you I'm insane" because the perception the male gaze separates what is happening in her relationships and what is said about

them by critics (“Blank Space”). However, she recognizes the difference between what is seen publicly in her relationships and what is hidden by veils of privacy, offering her new beau to fill in a blank space in her life. In Lady Gaga’s case, those who gaze upon her want to “see the girl who lives behind the aura” (“Aura”). Though she separates her identity into two distinctive parts, there is a longing by those who desire her deeply to see every part that is hidden. She pushes back against her listeners by unapologetically leaving her veil of privacy on, yet she is still sought after. Ariana Grande faces similar issues here as she must defend herself through they say/I say remarks. She dissociates how others perceive her experiences (“they say”) and what her life is truly like (“I say”). These outside judgements claim one thing about her while she diminishes these claims by boldly explaining her experiences. She shows that what the outside world suggests being true is far from what she feels in her day-to-day life. For example, Grande is manipulated into commenting on personal information concerning her mental health. After her objectors say “her system is overloaded,” she shares that she is “too much in my head, did you notice?” as her actions are constantly under the surveillance of a critic’s gaze (“Get Well Soon”). Not only does she sarcastically call out her critics, but she shares that the deterioration of her mental health is supplemented by harsh commentary made about her looks and actions. This gaze, that looks over hundreds of years of literary and media discourse, expresses an ever-present watchfulness over women’s writing. The criticism that these women are bound to receive are representative effects of the male gaze as each woman proves to be defiant to a societal expectation in some manner. As these women are being watched, critiqued, and argued against, the development of their pushing arguments towards these critics show understanding of the expectations in which they question.

## **Critical and Historical Context**

Medieval literature from roughly 1100-1500 relies heavily on features from chivalry and courtly love, gallantry towards women, and brave heroes to further plot lines. Because chivalrous conduct was expected of gentlemen of the day, implementing those details into stories reinforced the most valued characteristics one could have. Religion – especially Catholicism – played a key role as to what topics and lessons were to be focused on in medieval literature. Because the “sole purpose of life was to please God,” the literature produced needed to reflect that (Alvarez). Early modern literature, which spans from 1485 until about 1800, changed with the rise of literacy and the consumption of printed literature. With literacy becoming more and more prevalent among the middle class, more opportunities for those outside the aristocracy to read, write, and be educated began to come to light. There are developments in formal education which allowed writers to have better access to materials like classic Greek literature and accessible translations of the Bible. While it was still a highly religious society, early modern writers began to dip into “hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, age, religious affiliation, and social status” (“Early Modern Literature”). Also, within literary culture, a new entanglement of royal politics comes into play. With these opening pathways for ideas to surge, there was a climate for classics like Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen* and the works of Shakespeare.

The canon is accessible to students around the globe; texts within both periods are discussed in detail to showcase personal problems or to teach a valuable lesson. Even though it seems very different, popular music has the same goals. Pop songs have dramatic themes and tell stories about love and loss - just like medieval and early modern literature. Because of this, canonical works feel more accessible to their readers as universal themes are shared with popular songs. Though classic literature and pop songs may vary in quality, both forms of media include an important lesson or decision that the audience is meant to learn from. These two expressive

forms of art are distanced due to their canonization and the general acceptance of their worth. While works of Shakespeare are held with high-esteem, contemporary artists like Ariana Grande or Taylor Swift are seen as frivolous and overly feminine. While pop music seems disposable because of the reputations of women who are producing it, evaluating similar circumstances in which both female writers and artists are critiqued shows that the problems for women are intergenerational. As both classic literature and pop music send messages to their audience, the response received by these artists either further or demolish their careers.

Popular, or “pop,” music is the genre of music that produces the most hits – or songs that sell many copies or receive high amounts of streams on platforms like Apple Music or Spotify. Many times, these hit songs are released as singles and are tracked on charts like Billboard. Pop music stands out from that of blues, country, and rock due to its immediate catchy nature. While rock or country songs bleed into the pop-sphere, the expectations listening have for pop songs are of an upbeat and repetitive nature. The higher the song climbs on the charts, the more popular it becomes. Following the so-called “pop-music formula”, these songs “have a good rhythm, a catchy melody, and are easy to remember and sing along to” (Errey). Pop music originated in Black American culture; it has withstood various eras and changes in pop culture. Typical pop songs vary in length from two to five minutes, are typically upbeat, and focus on relatable topics like break-ups and falling in love. Their lyrics are meant to get stuck in one’s head and play over and over. The definition of popular music has broadened since its birth in the 1950s. While audiences now expect catchy choruses about love from multi-millionaire popstars, the creation of pop music relied solely on the growing popularity of Elvis Presley. By mixing aspects of country and blues, Presley’s innovative thinking and handsome looks made him a star. Presley took common beats and harmonies and altered them in ways no one had heard before - skyrocketing

him into the limelight. This kind of innovation can be seen again in the 1960s with *The Beatles* who “dominated pop music...with a new-folk sound” (“A Short History of Pop”). Utilizing the pop-music formula, singers like Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, and Beyoncé were set for stardom.

With medieval literature focusing on values of honor and strict connections to Catholicism and early modern literature’s expression of individualized experience, the consideration of pop music in scholarship concerning classic works is unconventional but necessary. Though hundreds of years have passed between Chaucer’s publications and Taylor Swift’s newest album release, the connection of these works through criticism concerning female characters and writers are deeply entwined. When women begin speaking out for themselves, the dominant men in literature alter their roles. Instead of producing works for themselves, they move to comment on what women are writing.

In examining the relationship between classical works of literature and pop music, I will be exploring several different topics to show parallels between the two forms of media. First, I will examine women’s *experiences* and *public performance*. I will then move into discussing *assumptions* about women, and finally I will be focusing on women’s *reputations*. In looking through these four specific lenses, I will be able to further the argument that women writers in the domains of classic literature and contemporary pop music should be paired together for analysis as they both reveal that women in the public eye have faced similar issues across generations.

## **Experience - Educated through Experience**

Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century poem *The Canterbury Tales* has endured the test of time by addressing concerns of medieval society - like the influence of the Catholic church and chivalry - through satirical criticism. Chaucer focuses on strangers connecting with one another through personal stories and tales they share on a pilgrimage to Canterbury; these stories break boundaries by satirizing commonly held views concerning the social hierarchy of the medieval period. Perhaps Chaucer's most notable character is Alison - also known as the Wife of Bath. In response to the church's misogynistic views concerning women's abilities and its less-than-comprehensive understanding of the female rationale and social responsibilities, she defiantly justifies her beliefs based on her own experiences rather than its teachings. It's clear that Alison recognizes the divide between acceptable actions from both men and women as she discusses her abusive husband Janekyn's reading of *Wicked Book of Wives*. She shares that "Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght/Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke/I with my fest so took hym on the cheke" which shows her reactive nature when she disagrees with an opposing view (Chaucer ll. 796-798). Seeing that wives were meant to submit to their husbands, she goes against what action is socially right for her to do as she physically harms her abusive and manipulative fifth husband, Janekyn, for reading a sexist book. In justifying actions like this throughout her prologue, Chaucer uses Alison to satirize "the shallowness of the stereotypes of women and marriage in antifeminist writings and in demonstrating how much the largeness and complexity of her character rise above that stereotype" (Norton Volume A 284). Chaucer's ability to sympathize and recognize cultural constraints on women allows him to have an unusual understanding concerning their desires. He sees the conflict between strong women and male religious leadership. His experiences as a writer and a firsthand observer of the imbalance of equality that women faced in the Middle Ages allowed him to critique what he saw. Because he



sees how women are being ignored and recognizes how unfair the opportunities are for women compared to men, he gains authority to write about it.

Alison begins the prologue to her tale with the line “Experience, though noon auctoritee/were in this world, is right ynough for me” (ll. 1-2). Diving directly into her argument, she expresses that *her* experience – not established authority – allows her to speak about marriage. Though she is not formally educated by the Church’s doctrine, her five husbands have given her enough background to share the triumphs and woes of marriage. Her = thoughts concerning marriage have, over the course of five romantic entanglements, altered how she views a marital state. She is presumably middle-aged during this pilgrimage so it has been argued “her ‘advancement into age’ is coupled with ‘the acquisition of a special kind of wisdom superior to merely instinctive knowledge or to...purely practical wit” (Oberemebt 289). This special kind of wisdom – her experience – cannot be found in formal doctrine. She has a vast amount of knowledge outside of that regulated by the church, making her a threat to the established societal norm. It is experience, not formal teachings, that make her more knowledgeable concerning marriage than anyone else on the pilgrimage.

Readers soon learn that as a mere twelve-year-old, Alison was made a bride by her parents. Though she was not educated by the Catholic church, she is aware that since Christ attended only one wedding that the Church believed that a person should only be married once. She rebuts by saying that Christ never said how many times one could be married – he simply only attended one wedding. The altering of the scripture to satisfy the wants of the Church prompt her to say that “men may divine and glosen, up and down,” but unless Christ made a mention of number, “Why shoulde men thanne speke of it vilainye” (ll.34). Alison’s questioning of a worldly interpretation of Christ’s teaching continues as she mentions biblical figures

Abraham and Jacob who took more than one wife. How is it acceptable for these men to be involved in multiple marriages while she is criticized for it? In this moment, she becomes critical of the establishment that has forced her into less-than-comfortable positions. She has a full understanding of her situation; because she is a woman, she is restricted from acting in the same way as a man.

Alison has direct knowledge of what men can, and women cannot, get away with. As a wife, she is expected to dote on her husband and submit to him. Not only is she in complete defiance to this, but she explains why she is allowed to act as she does. By rating her husbands according to their willingness to submit, it is clear that love is not the main focus in her relationships. It is authoritative power that makes her a happy wife. Readers learn that her first three husbands were adequate (only because of their old-age and submissiveness) and her fourth and fifth husbands were problematic as they tried to take control back from her. Though she and her unnamed fourth husband suffered from infidelity in their marriage, her most interesting marriage is with her fifth husband, Janekyn. He suppresses everything Alison believes concerning her feminine power as seen through his use of the “book of wikked wyves” – a respected text that highlights the wrongdoings of women in a condemning manner (ll.691). Though she loves him, Janekyn’s learned bias against women through this text reflects the ideas of the Church. Both deem women to be inherently evil – forcing constant criticism and attack onto Alison based on her womanhood.

The complexity of Alison’s experience is highlighted even further by the famous lines:

“Who painted the leon, tel me who?

By God, if wommen hadden writen stories,

as clerkes han within hir oratories,  
they wolde han writen of men more wikkednesse  
than al the merk of Adam may redresse” (ll. 698-702).

Alluding to Aesop’s age-old fable, Alison showcases that only the male perspective is considered in medieval society. Aesop uses the image of a lion and a man who are fighting in order to criticize how humans perceive who is right and wrong. A male-centered society automatically sides with the man being attacked and condemns the lion. However, the counterargument of this challenges the initial reaction of the audience by simply stating that: “it all depends on the point of view, and who tells the story” (Aesop). Alison does the same thing with the expectations of men in her experience. Men set the rules and criticize those who do not match their standards. Not only is she reemphasizing her frustration with the standards of the patriarchy, but she argues that women – if given the chance to establish these rules and standards – would have made men out to be far worse. Barbara Gottfried explains that “because men have had control...that women are daily confronted with distorted, one-sided, and, for the most part negative images of themselves which affect not only the way they perceive themselves but the ways in which men perceive women as well” (206). Chaucer shows that medieval society forced criticism onto women which was then internalized, and that promoted values of the Church and its influencers.

Chaucer compromises the standards created by men as he deters from the status quo of women’s actions. As Alison becomes vulnerable with her listeners, her mainly male audience seemingly critique her actions as a wife. The distortion of feminine power is reflective in the reactive statements she receives from the Pardoner who asks if his wife will take power over him

once they are married, because if so, he will not marry her. The Pardoner becomes terrified that his bride has the potential to become educated through experience like Alison and that she will have agency when she speaks. Unable to truly argue with her, he claims that "so have I joye or blis... This is a long preamble of a tale!" (Chaucer ll.836-837). Because Alison's arguments are so detailed, the Pardoner is unable to accurately critique her on anything other than the length of her prologue. By going for an easy jab, the Pardoner attempts to maintain his respected identity within medieval society. Alison clearly can understand far more than what is expected of her - making the men around her fearful of her knowledge. Because of Alison's empowering experience as the controlling agent in her relationships, the Pardoner sees her educated-through-experience mindset as a threat to his authority-based way of thinking.

This common argument about a woman's position to comment on personal situations extends into the pop music realm. The 2010s Nickelodeon star turned pop sensation, Ariana Grande is frequently criticized for her openness and vulnerability concerning her relationships. She has turned tables as a Grammy award winning performer by writing about critical experiences that define her as an artist. Not only was she named Billboard's 2019 Top Female Artist, but she has amassed a net worth of one hundred million dollars. Though she is one of the most successful female pop artists, she has been heavily criticized for her implementation of the educated-through-experience mindset in her hit single, "Thank U, Next." After suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder from a bombing at her Manchester concert, a failed engagement to *Saturday Night Live* star, Pete Davidson, and the death of her long-time boyfriend/rapper, Malcolm "Mac" Miller, Grande obliterated charts and streaming platforms with her biggest single release. This piece, which dominated Billboard's Pop Charts for seven weeks as the top single, challenges the authority of popular media and paparazzi who tend to put words in her

mouth. “Thank U, Next” opens with her naming four of her past boyfriends – Big Sean, Ricky Alvarez, Pete Davidson, and Mac Miller. Grande assumes her audience knows private details about her through her experiences. She is open and vulnerable when it comes to discussing issues with her mental health and her deteriorated engagement with Davidson after Miller’s death. Though her openness is unconventional, she is honest with her audience. She does not sugarcoat bad experiences but she addresses them maturely with a “take it from me” attitude to educate her listeners through her bad experiences. Grande claims that she thought she would:

End up with Sean, but it wasn’t a match.  
Wrote some songs about Ricky now I listen and laugh.  
Even almost got married and for Pete, I’m so thankful.  
Wish I could say thank you to Malcolm ‘cause he was an angel

The introduction of each of these men and Grande’s experience with each boyfriend mimics Chaucer’s Alison. The listener receives background about these four men within the opening lines of her song. She is not leaving her audience out in the cold – rather, she is giving them a small but honest piece of inside information from her relationships to better understand her experience and her knowledge from being in these relationships.

In the bridge, Grande shares that these men – through their experiences – have “taught” her about love, patience, and pain. Grande here addresses her critics by saying that they will “say I’ve loved and I’ve lost” but that is “not what I see” (“Thank U, Next”). There is a clear split between the way the public sees her relationships and the private circumstances that she endures. She is not merely jumping from relationship from relationship to profit from writing songs about her boyfriends nor is she a tease. This can be seen in how she describes her less-than-successful

relationships. She respects those that she has dated and wishes them well. However, those outside of her relationships - whether it be her critics or her fans - believe that she has experienced loss. Grande, because she has experienced each of these relationships herself, has a different stance. She “looks” at what she has gained from these situations and expresses that it “taught” her how to grow (“Thank U, Next”). It is not through authority or formal teaching that she masters relationships with both others and herself but it is through day-to-day experiences that she comes to terms with who she is - just like Alison. Though both women face criticism as to how they have developed their mindsets concerning relationships, Grande’s is public as her relationships are captured through paparazzi. Her place in the spotlight and the directed headlines concerning her relationships have overtaken the internet as seen in articles like *Insider’s* “Ariana Grande and Pete Davidson Relationship Timeline,” *People’s* “Ariana Grande on ‘All-Consuming’ Grief After Mac Miller Death” and *CheatSheet’s* “The Real Reason Ariana Grande and Big Sean Called It Quits.” Grande’s awareness of how public her private experiences are allowing her to have the final word within this song. She knows that she is being constantly criticized due to her relationships, but she expresses her thoughts, based on what her circumstances have been, to have the final word. She leads out of the bridge and into the chorus by reiterating that these experiences have allowed her to learn. After reflecting on her relationships, she calmly says “Look what you’ve taught me” (“Thank U, Next”). Grande, here, shows her audience that her relationships have not defined her capabilities as an artist but these experiences have given her the agency to speak her truth.

Moving into the pop-formulated catchy chorus, Grande repeats the line “Thank U, Next” three times before sharing that “I’m so fucking grateful for my ex” (“Thank U, Next”). Instead of criticizing the men that she has dated, she maturely addresses them by telling them “thank you.”

Grande recognizes that she has grown within these relationships and, like Chaucer's Alison, the knowledge that she has from these relationships has allowed her to cope with difficult life events – like loss of love and death – and she knows that she is better because of it. Not only did Grande grow within herself, but she also is sharing this personal, private information with her audience, like Alison, to extend their wealth of knowledge too. In an Instagram post, she shared:

making this project...gave me the courage to be vulnerable and be honest with people.  
thank u for making me feel heard, safe, and incredibly human. it is nice (and so healing)  
to know that I don't have to hide behind a weird, polished pop star façade and that i'm  
able to connect with so many people over my truths and pain. (Aubrey)

While Chaucer's Wife of Bath may not have felt as heard or safe, Alison also removed the façade of expectations for women of her society. No longer was she following the standards of the misogynistic patriarchy of the Catholic Church – she was vulnerable through her honesty.

Grande's second verse focuses more on her ability to move forward with an introspective relationship with herself while also noting the criticism she receives. She sings:

Plus, I met someone else, We havin' better discussions,  
I know they say I move on too fast, But this one gon' last,  
'Cause her name is Ari, and I'm so good with that

Grande opens up about a developing relationship with an unnamed source in the first few lines of this verse. Clearly, she is establishing a different kind of connection here; implying that this relationship allows for more communication than those previously mentioned. Interestingly, she includes a coy mention of how society will respond to this relationship. Grande knows she is

bound to be criticized by those who claim she is moving past failed relationships too quickly. Though self-love seems to be pushed more towards women more now than ever before, Grande's position as a pop starlet nudges her to place public relationships over her private ones. While she is able to love herself, her critics are unable to comment as to what goes on within her finding herself. Because of this, Grande's taking time away from relationships to focus on herself negatively affects how she will be seen in the press but it does not bother her. She separates herself from her critics in order to grow as a person. Her critics claim - or "they say" - that she should not be moving forward in a new relationship ("Thank U, Next"). However, Grande gets the final word by sharing that she has a newfound relationship that only concerns her loving herself. While she acknowledges her critics' arguments, she does not waste time contemplating their statements. Like Alison, her experiences have allowed her to understand the implications of society and its backbiting remarks. Both women are not going to bow down to their critics. In this moment, it is clear that Grande does not let her critics take over her actions; she decides what is best for her and acts upon her decision. She does not allow her critics to influence her life - "they" can say whatever they want about her but ultimately, she does not care. Grande is in control. Like Alison, Grande is expecting to be criticized for her actions - she knows that this developing relationship is not something that will be easily accepted by those who write society's rules. Though she is not fighting back against the Church's restraints on education, she is fighting back against the question of appropriate self-love. Grande knows that the relationship that she is building with herself through the experiences and wisdom she has gained from previous relationships is important for moving forward. The acceptable standard of caring for oneself will not stop Grande from doing what is best for her. She has experienced enough that the criticism will not define her actions.



Ariana Grande is “so good with” defying the what others expect of her because, through self-love and the painful circumstances she has faced in her relationships, Grande herself “taught me love, she taught me patience, she handles pain, that shit’s amazing” (“Thank U, Next”). Though each one of her exes taught her these concepts of love, patience, and pain, Grande has taught herself how to cope with these situations in a way that best suits her. She does not need outside forces to influence how she acts – she only needs herself. Again, the similarities to Alison emerges. It is not through expected standards that these women behave. It is through personal influence that these women share their experiences and work against criticism. These women understand their critics yet they pay them no mind. The focus for Ariana and Alison is personal and defiant. Over five hundred years apart, these women are centered on the self rather than the expectations of someone else. These women can behave how they want, say what they want, and feel how they want because their experiences have given them the knowledge to do so. It is “right enough” for both women to express how they feel because they have the authority and agency to do so through their experiences (11.2).

### **Idealism of the Woman’s Body - Swift/Montagu, Eilish**

Men have always obsessed over women's bodies. A notable example of this is Jonathon Swift’s 1726 poem “The Lady’s Dressing Room.” As a self-styled Christian who stood against pride of all kinds, he believed that his writing should “shatter the illusion” of women’s beauty to showcase the impurity of human nature (Norton Volume C 2766). His satire reflected heavily on the dirtiness and ugliness of women. Swift’s honest beliefs are “professedly inimical to womankind” as he digs for ways to criticize anything related to femininity (Doody 1). It is as if he paints women to have two identities - the one seen in front of the man and the one seen in

private. By stepping into the lady's private place, he unmasks the side to women that he believes they hide. Swift's belief as to how women should be seen is odd - he wants the flaws rather than the beauty of women to be showcased. Though some critics celebrate this, Swift's writing can be defined as misogynistic and "The Lady's Dressing Room" shows clear support for his direct attack on women's bodies and whether or not they should be accepted. His central character, Strephon, steps into the disgustingly unmanicured lady's room to search for his girlfriend, Celia.

Swift undermines women in the first line by sharing that it had taken Celia "five hours (and who can do it less in)" to get dressed for going out (Swift ll.1). While he sees her as a "goddess" dressed in her "lace, brocade, and tissue," the exhaustive upcoming description of the "litter" that laid upon the floor of the lady's dressing room will soon expose the private identity that contrasts his perception of her (ll. 3-4). Swift focuses on sweat-stained smocks, dirtied combs and powder to dismantle Celia's beauty. Through Strephon's eyes, Swift identifies the ways that she makes herself look better to the world by removing a love-induced fog. As he steps into this new world, Strephon has removed himself from the clouded version of Celia that he has experienced and has moved into a position where he sees the flaws that, at one point, were blind to him. Strephon begins to stumble across even more disgusting items like the "scraping of her teeth and gums, a nasty compound of all hues," and tweezers used to pluck her chin hair (Swift ll. 40-41). These grotesque images force shame upon Celia's character as her beauty is diminished to both Strephon and the audience due to the items she leaves strewn around. What makes her appealing has quickly been stripped away and it leaves Strephon questioning who Celia truly is.

Swift continues to try to "reproduce empirical reality" by having Strephon react to Celia's excrement (Real and Vienken 44). By taking a normal bodily function and applying vile,

disturbing descriptions to it, he further removes Celia from being human and labels her “the remains of a pox-ridden, painted-up old hag” (Real and Vienken 43). Strephon is completely removed from the experience of his relationship because what has made Celia special has been taken away. What made her stand out was how exceptionally beautiful she was - but now that she has been stripped of what has made her attractive, he now finds her to be repulsive due to what he has found. Swift criticizes the use of beauty products and features of the feminine image in order to argue that women, by nature, are foul creatures that do not deserve praise and are only beautiful because of the time they spend fixing their imperfections. By exposing her masked flaws, he “examined the role deception plays in the creation of a saving but inadequate fiction of femininity” (Gubar 387). Swift’s divide between beautifully fake and disgustingly real femininity spans throughout his publications. In his most notable work, *Gulliver’s Travels*, a smaller-than-normal Gulliver enters a dressing room and is horrified by the grotesquely large women that surround him (108). Though they find his pint-sized nature to be adorable, he is less than thrilled to be doted on by these women. Swift’s defining criticism of women tears down the chance to be accepted - especially in Celia’s case - as he rips away the things that allow a relationship to flourish.

The unnamed narrator now steps in to share that he pities Strephon’s blindness to the true identity of womankind. If Strephon, like the narrator, had enough experience to understand that women were disgusting by nature then he would not be caught up in the “ointments, daubs, and paints, and creams” that she uses to make herself into a beautiful woman (Swift ll. 35-36). The contrast of seeing someone beautiful through eyes like Strephon’s and ugliness through that of the narrator’s (presumably Swift) shows a turning away from expectations concerning women to understanding what who women truly are. As he tries to argue here, the true understanding of

women comes through personal observation - not desire-filled descriptions. A made-up woman, claims Swift, does not show what one is truly. He claims that Celia hides behind a mask of femininity - through makeup and perfume - to conceal what makes her hideous. While he paints both her vanity and bodily imperfections as problematic, his focus on her body and what she does to it becomes his prime focus. By stripping away her mask of beauty, Strephon's experiences in "The Lady's Dressing Room" delegate that women are hideous creatures of vanity. By criticizing what makes a woman disgusting and gross, Swift gives men the opportunity to develop skewed views.

"The Lady's Dressing Room" was widely appreciated in its time but is now controversial for obvious reasons as it portrays women and their actions to be brutally vile. Swift's perception of women, one that manipulates a simple narrative with gross imagery, denounces what it means to be feminine. He criticizes makeup as not a beauty enhancer but a hider of imperfections and impurities. By exposing Celia, he breaks ideas concerning expectations for women - something he cannot fully grasp. He blindly attacks and criticizes experiences that he knows nothing about yet his agency as a male writer gives him the grounds for his satire to be accepted. One of the only notable critiques of his work during the period came from Lady Mary Montagu. Her response to Swift's blatant skewing of the feminine image in "The Reasons That Induced Dr. Swift to Write A Poem Called the Lady's Dressing Room" objects to his indecency towards women and criticizes his being out-of-touch with femininity and for lacking true experiences on which he based his conclusions.

It is clear that Montagu is not a fan of Swift, so much so, that she is introduced in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* as someone who does not like him (Vol. C 2770). She was not a supporter of his political stance or intense vulgarity in his published writing. Frustrated

with Swift's degradation of femininity and his criticism of women, she spins the story in order to critique him. She focuses on the reasons why he would deem women to be vile by claiming that he is sexually frustrated and impotent. Women do not want Swift; therefore, he wants to criticize them through a specific male gaze that trumps rationality. In her poem, Montagu opens with imagery of Swift adorned in gaudy "diamond ring displays and artful shows it various rays" to show that Swift is a man focused on outward appearance, just as he describes Celia (ll. 3-4).. By including the items that Swift uses to elevate his looks, she highlights the double standard in male and female dress. His irritating narcissism and overlooking of his own pride while criticizing others allows for her to throw tough punches his way. Swift goes to meet his lady of the hour - who he pays to embrace. Montagu implies that he has an ongoing relationship with a prostitute named Betty. If Swift's focus on Celia's grossness stemmed simply from basic human actions, then Montagu's portrayal of Swift's relationship with a woman who would be deemed unclean by religious establishments is appallingly dirty and fully supportive of the double standard.

Montagu follows by furthering the romance of Swift and Betty's relationship by sharing that the "reverend lover... kisses both and tries - and tries" (ll.63-65). She digs hard at Swift's masculinity by accusing him of being impotent and unable to give his lady a pleasurable experience. Because of his frustration and inability, Swift begins blaming Betty's "dirty smock, and stinking toes" for his inability to have a sexual encounter with her (Montagu ll.71). Outraged, he refuses to pay her and says that he will write about how disgusting she is. She responds with the poem's brilliant ending lines "I'm glad you'll write / you'll furnish paper when I shite" (Montagu ll. 88-89). In an effort to get one last dig in, Montagu allows Betty to claim that Swift's writing is only useful as toilet paper - that reading his writing is not an option for

her. Betty, foiling Montagu's own beliefs concerning Swift, shows that his writing served no purpose for women. Because he focuses so heavily on the male experience, the connection for women is null and void. Montagu's Betty speaks up for herself as her experience with the irritable, impotent Swift has been less than pleasurable.

Clearly, Montagu pushes against Swift's criticism against women by analyzing his flaws. The experience of women cannot be limited to the standards set by men; the overt realm where women are naturally disgusting that he introduces fails to exist. Her counterattack allows for there to be understanding of a woman's experience with a man like Swift. She shows that it is his own fault that he is unsuccessful in his goals with Betty and this frustration caused him to force negative ideas and thoughts onto his readers. Montagu showcases the double standard that Swift is a part of by highlighting how the demands of men divide women by socially reprimanding them for doing as they please. The standard that women must try to meet to please men like Swift is unreachable. He is stuck in-between the idea that women are free to make their own choices and the male expectations for beauty. Montagu calls out the problems in Swift's writings by showcasing the double standards that women are forced to experience.

Montagu challenges Swift's writing to show the reality of women's issues through a feminine lens. Without this necessary approach considered, "The Lady's Dressing Room" upheld an accepted view from male writers. By implementing a woman's voice, she shows the imbalance of acceptable actions based on gender. The gaudy application of jewelry and cologne that Swift uses to elevate his status is like the actions that he critiques of women. As a newcomer to the pop music industry, Billie Eilish has steadily encountered issues with body shamers who critique her ability to conceal imperfections in ways similar to that of Jonathon Swift. Not only did she sweep the 2019 Grammy's with five wins, but she also grossed around fifty million

dollars the same year. The eighteen-year-old powerhouse, however, marches to the beat of her own drum. Her first song “Ocean Eyes” was released on the free streaming server, Soundcloud, in 2016 and has since amassed 43.4 million streams. Eilish, who gains anywhere from 2,000 - 26,000 Instagram followers a day, produces her music in her childhood bedroom with her brother, Finneas. This dynamic duo outsold both Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift in 2019 by 400,000 albums after the release of her album *Where Do We Go When We Fall Asleep?* Though her sound distinctively disconnects from most trending pop tunes, the depth of her writing style and the personal matters in which she chooses to describe in her lyrics strangely connect with the eighteenth-century stylings of female poets. She goes against the grain of popular songs by emphasizing what makes her different from other artists. Her EP *Don't Smile at Me* describes her dislike of the prying public eye. Her intention, similar to that of Lady Mary Montagu, is to push back against the societal expectations of women in her field. Instead of building her brand on stereotypical pop formulations, Eilish allows her personal experiences to define her credibility as an artist. What makes her a standout artist is her ability to defy what others expect.



Photo Credits: Elle

One way that Eilish defies what is expected of her is by dressing androgynously. Instead of dressing in high fashion gowns, she sticks to surprisingly modest apparel. She is known for wearing oversized sweatshirts and baggy sweatpants onstage, at events, and out on the town. However, Billie has shared that her main reason for dressing in oversized clothing was because “I hated my body” (Torres). Because she hit puberty at such a young age, she experienced significant anxiety concerning the way she looked. After not wanting to conform to the rules of women’s fashion, Eilish chose to cover her body. Even more than her own personal experience with body image, she says “I dress the way I dress as I don’t like to think of you guys - I mean anyone, everyone - judging my body, or the size of it” (*Insider*). Here, she responds to outsiders like Montagu does. Both are separating what can be thought about women’s bodies by showing one’s perception of the self. In doing this, both women are combating the rules that others are trying to apply to them. Montagu fights Swift’s vile expectations of women’s bodies; Eilish fights to be accepted for choosing to look the way she wants amongst harsh critics.

In a fashionably oversized way, Billie Eilish complicates the status quo. While she accepts that people will judge her for her appearance, she chooses how they get to judge her. She allows her audience to experience the part of her that she chooses to be public. She makes her body private - it is her choice what others see of her. She argues that the world wants to see her body but by holding back, she can experience her body in private. Choosing not to conform to what others expect of her, she independently decides on how she should look without any outside help. On one occasion, however, she wore an open sweater and tank-top that revealed her body shape. Twitter went crazy. In an interview with Elle Magazine, she shared that “My boobs were trending on Twitter! At number one! What is that?!” (Bate). This objectification that she



experienced helps to validate her reason for layering her clothing. This experience allowed for outsiders to see the impact of the comments towards her as she began layering more and more. Eilish no longer needed to validate her reasoning for hiding her body because the world had seen the effects go viral.

Eilish not only focuses on her defiance of standards for women's fashion, but she often writes about it in her music. In her song, "idontwanttobeyouanymore" she deals with her body-specific insecurities. Before the song begins, her audience contextualizes from the title that Eilish is straying away from a part of her identity. By condensing the title into one word, she manipulates the complexity of the situation she is in, minimizing how the statement she makes is consumed by leaving no spaces in between her words. She is falling away from a part of herself that she finds problematic and that she does not want others to see. She opens with the line "Don't be that way, fall apart twice a day, I just wish you could feel what you say" where she implies that she tells herself that she is one way - directly discussing the way she looks - when she feels completely different about herself. Though what Eilish tells herself is ideally how she should feel, she experiences a world where those thoughts are not possible. Because of how she views herself, she cannot feel the way that she describes. She describes this as the "kind of mood that you wish you could sell" - there is a value in expressing her private thoughts. Though her inner self is filled with conflict about how she truly feels, Eilish shares that these thoughts are necessary and valuable as she evaluates herself in different ways. Here, she focuses on knowing how her mind perceives her body. She clearly understands that there is a disconnect from what she truly feels and what she tells herself. She deals with how others know her and how the outside perceptions of her determine the value of her body. Similar to how she works, the condescending, outward expressions about her body from others disconnects what she tells

herself in the mirror. These body-shaming comments promote unhealthy beliefs about herself. Eilish must intervene between what others want, what she wants, and who she is. The imbalance of power causes a mental struggle for her. Seeing as the chorus begins with “If teardrops could be bottled, there’d be swimming pools filled by models, told ‘a tight dress is what makes you a whore,’” there are distinct images that stand out about how Eilish perceives this negative body image to extend outside of herself (“idontwanttobeyouanymore”). She paints an image of broken models who are criticized over their bodies and what they wear. She expresses that not only are they sad, but their tears could fill swimming pools. She acknowledges the constant pressure that models experience and feels this weight herself. Eilish implies that models represent the expectation that the general population should uphold. She also holds herself at a disadvantage as she does not feel the pressure of being a model yet she is struggling with accepting what both she and others feel concerning her body. As she does not match the standard based on the perception of her body, she feels disheartened. Eilish sees the criticism of others and applies it as to how she views herself which takes the comfort of being herself away.

Eilish also explores the way that these models are dressed makes them be labeled as a “whore.” Her strong use of derogatory language helps to show that judgement will come no matter if she is a model or not. If she wears baggy clothing, she is labeled as weird or odd. If she wears a tight dress and imitates a model, she becomes a “whore.” This portion of the song strongly connects to Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room” as he sees the flaws in Celia’s beauty as equivalent to the flaws in her humanity. Because she is beautiful, she is prideful and vain - highlighting her vile human nature. Once Strephon finds out what she has held privately behind her makeup, he becomes disgusted by what she has hidden. Both Swift’s Celia and Eilish are stuck in a tug-of-war between public and private affairs when it comes to their bodies. Spectators

from the public world are trying to peek behind the veil of privacy that both women have created. There is a definitive friction between what they want to show and what people want to see. The expectations that Swift has for Celia are unmatchable as are the model-like standards that Eilish has for herself. Both of these situations focus on the interpretation of standards that each society has put into place and these women are in realistic situations that allow them to fail in comparison to what is being demanded of them to be.

Eilish finishes out the chorus by sharing that she will “tell the mirror what you know she’s heard before; I don’t want to be you...anymore.” She re-establishes the thoughts she has about herself that do not match the desired standards of others. Because she believes that being a “model” is what society wants her to be - and her body does not allow her to do so - she tells herself that she does not want her body anymore. She wants her body to be what is accepted in society, but she cannot place herself amongst those who are respected for their size.



Photo Rights: Entertainment Weekly

However, Billie Eilish does confront the woes of living in the public eye. In a YouTube video called “NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY,” she strips off the oversized, baggy layers to reveal her true self. She bears her skin to an audience as the short film is used as an interlude at her

concert. While taking off her oversized sweatshirt, she questions the crowd “Do you know me? You have opinions...about my opinions, about my clothes, about my body” (Billie Eilish, YouTube). She directly acknowledges the criticism that she receives for hiding her body in baggy clothing. She has chosen to publicize a private, personal moment. Because she has wanted her body to be something only she can experience, she allows herself in this moment to publicly experience a deep moment of vulnerability. She establishes a thought that must be considered by her audience - people do not know her and it is not until she strips off the layers that people’s perceptions about her change. Because she is always being watched, she is always going to be under scrutiny. By peeling these layers, Eilish pushes back against this criticism over what she wears and what she looks like to say that no one else - other than her - understands her experience or her body. Because she is a rising pop superstar, she - by society’s standards - should show off her body. The expectation for her to reveal herself to her audience holds more weight as she balances in between the public and private issue of body image. She clearly wants her audience to know that because they are not her, they do not get to see who she truly is unless she says so.

Though she is personally more vulnerable to her critics than Montagu, Eilish pushes back against the expectations that others want her to conform to in a way that is similar to that of female writers. In Montagu’s poem, Swift wants to be perceived as a high style man with diamond rings and lots of money, but she paints him to be impotent and unable to have relations with a prostitute. The sexist reality that Swift dwells in is shattered through claims made in her poem.” Montagu - like Swift - exploits the private experiences that allow for criticism to occur. Eilish does the same in “NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY” by shutting down the person that others have painted for her by showing them what is real. She does not have to hide behind her clothes -

she is able to give her audience the opportunity to experience something she has held in private. She directly addresses her audience and their claims about her in the video as she strips down - removing their ability to comment about how she dresses. Both Montagu and Eilish remove male-set standards from their experiences to showcase the truth that remains. In Montagu's case, she argues that Swift's frustration causes him to blame and criticize women for their looks. In Eilish's case, she argues that the standards of models cause women to question their worth in comparison to what is to be expected of them.

## **Performance**

One of the earliest examples of women's writing, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, prompts important questions concerning the way women perform their identities. As a middle-class mother in the medieval period, Kempe switched from devoting herself to domestic duties to committing herself to God. Through visions and what she claimed were passionate one-on-one experiences with Christ himself, she develops what she believes to be is a non-platonic relationship with Jesus. Her spiritual autobiography concerning her relationship with Jesus Christ received heavy criticism because of her explicit and performative expression of religion. She was known for outlandish spectacles of performance where she would weep and throw herself in front of crowds to promote her relationship with Christ so others would believe her. Kempe's intimate relationship that she believed she had with Christ proved problematic as she was already married. Not only did those around her look down on her for her choosing to leave behind her husband to explore a metaphysical relationship with Jesus, but her outrageous actions in public caused her manic narration to be labeled unreliable as she recorded her spiritual encounters nearly twenty years after they began. Her eccentric weeping and uncontrollable emotions allow for Kempe to take control of her crowds and captivate them. Notably, she separates herself from

her personal identity and the performing character that *The Book of Margery Kempe* focuses on. There is a distinct difference between the middle-class, middle-aged version of Kempe with fourteen children and a dissatisfied husband and the version of herself whose gift of undrying, dramatic tears is the driving force for spectators' dislike. As a performer and narrator, she "gives voices to a largely silent and unsung force, the voice of the middle-class uneducated woman determined to be understood on her own terms" (Glenn 541). Her position to publish her work offers the opportunity for a new kind of narrative to take form.

Kempe separates herself as well by referring to herself as "creature" in a third-person format. Strictly sharing her experience, she removes her personal identity to showcase the identity that others have come to know. By referring to herself as "creature" no longer does she identify as Margery Kempe, but merely a creature created by God. She opens her *Book* by discussing her "great attacks of illness" before her unnamed child was born and thoughts of death prior to the delivery of said child (425). She even further separates her personal and performative personas by refusing to share personal details, such as her child and husband's name, with her audience. Her division of the self proves that she is two completely different entities; she is either the performative character or the writer – there is no in-between. Following her child's birth, Kempe begins to experience intense hallucinations and visions concerning hell: "In this time she saw, as she thought, devils open their mouths, all inflamed with burning flames of fire as if they should have swallowed her in, sometimes menacing her, sometimes threatening her..." (426). As she begins listening to the devils that she truly believed in, she begins to base her decisions on what they share with her. From this moment on, readers recognize that she – the performing character - experiences cognitive dissonance. Her hallucinations and emotional reactions to them highlight the dramatization of her experiences in religion. Though her readers

may perceive Kempe's delusions for what they truly are, she truly believes these hellish creatures visited her. Her recounting of these events, throughout the entirety of her *Book*, are never presented as anything other than real - a testament to what she insists is her mental state and memory.

One of Kempe's early performances occurred when she went to Mass. As the priest held up a sacrament, she received a vision from Jesus telling her that he seeks vengeance for his suffering on the cross at Golgotha. She had a stirring within her during this conversation as she yearns for more consecrations. Though her actions did not evoke a response from the audience at the church, she shows off for her readers. She addresses her experiences through her writing. Her intense language concerning her longing for more time with the sacrament and thought-provoking consecrations show her dedication to performing as a devout worshipper of Christ. Kempe insists that Christ tells her that "the more envy they have for you because of my grace, the better shall I love you...For I know...whatever men say of you" (429). She has already faced backlash from public observers but that harsh criticism fuels the relationship that she believes to have with God. What she wants - a deeply rich love from God - she will receive by making others envious due to her performances. Because of this direct relationship with God, she uses her position to brag throughout her *Book*. She believes that, since others will envy this devotion she has to God, that she will be rewarded for her actions eternally. Though this is what she perceives to truly exist, her emotional shows concerning her visions drive spectators mad. She reiterates that she and God both know the criticism of her outward affection toward God as he mentions that he knows what people say about her. The criticism concerning her open and odd actions are not hidden - they are meant to be seen by as many people as possible. Because of this friction between what her audience wants - which is for her to calm down - and the eccentric

actions concerning her relationship with God, the criticism that Kempe receives is encapsulated within her personal discussion of her religious devotion as it played such a large role in how she responds in other situations.

Kempe's pilgrimage to Jerusalem also played a key factor in her performative approach to her storytelling. In a time where travelling alone for women "was a controversial issue because freedom of movement conflicted with traditional concepts of the society," she is willing to take the risk in order to please God and expand her audience (Bowers 5). With a deep need to prove her dedication to Christ, she makes a dangerous journey to Jerusalem to visit holy landmarks. While in Jerusalem, she claims that Christ gave her the desires of her heart by allowing her to see Jerusalem from a heavenly view. In this daydream, she "was in point to have fallen off her ass, for she might not bear the sweetness and grace that God wrought in her soul" (Kempe 429). She then is assisted by two men who comforted her – one of these being a German priest – because they thought she was sick based on her actions. Though she claims that God had influenced her ability to see beautiful images, her spectators see a sick, rather than blessed, woman who overwhelms those around her with emotional displays of religious passion. Kempe's public identity as the creature not only begins to "weep sorely" at the place of Christ's tomb but also becomes "wallowed and twisted with her body" due to her vision of the Passion of the Christ (429). Her actions became more and more often and intense on her return. Similarly, her spectators become more bothered by her outlandish acts of religion. Using the identity of her private persona to write, she shares that "the people should not have heard [her cries] for it annoyed them...some banned her" (Kempe 430). However, her devotion to God was far more important to her than the acceptance of her peers.



Though Kempe became more and more famous concerning her religious actions and their intensity, the fame soon turned into infamy. She became fixated on performing so that her audience would understand her. Because her onlookers did not have an intense relationship with Christ like she claimed to, they could not begin to comprehend the complex position in which she had been absorbed. She became the eyesore of her town as she cried and flailed when given the chance. As she believed these divinely inspired shows to be the only way to continue a strong relationship with Christ, her audience became critical of her performance. Not only did they begin to distance themselves from her, but they looked down upon her. Clearly, the divide between her life and that of her peers has extended even further. This division only furthers Kempe from seeing beyond her veil of personal belief into daily life. Her removal from a normal life only makes her feel more and more isolated within herself, causing her to cry more. Her mental health had been declining for years prior to her pilgrimage to Jerusalem but her intensified productions and reactions to God pulled her far away from what little bit of normalcy that was left – she was left with nothing but her false reality - the question concerning the authenticity and reliability of these experiences are still being argued about today. Though Kempe believes that her divine experiences exist, her manic behavior and altered mind demote her writings to almost that of religious fanfiction. These visions that she truly believes she experiences alter the readers’ understanding of her as a private worshipper and public performer of her faith.

Again, she shows her readers her staunch devotion to religious duty as she emotionally produced a show for an audience at a Pietà in Norwich. In this moment, she “cried, she roared, she wept, she fell down to the ground, so fervently the fire of love burnt in her heart” (Kempe 434). Her earthly affection to Christ drives Kempe to act out her internal emotions outwardly.

She is moved by the scene of Christ's crucified body being held by the Virgin Mary that it overwhelms and stirs her to react in a way that makes someone ask her "what ails you, woman?" (Kempe 434) Her reaction to this piece of art is not normal – the audience she has created for herself stands in "great marvel" as she flails and flaps in response to the image of Christ's dead body (434). Her actions are not kept secretive as "priests...who knew her manner of working" led her to get a drink after her expressive performance (434). Her outward, public expression of her inward, private thoughts intensified the experience of the Pietà for her audience. The statue itself is one that is emotion-provoking and raw and her reaction is nothing short of dramatic. Her cries are that of roars – a description that has yet to be mentioned within her autobiography thus far. This scene is different for Kempe as there is a stronger emotional connection for her at this scene as the love in her heart for Christ begins to burn. She recognizes the emotions within the Pietà and reconstructs them herself; it is not that she is recreating these emotions but that she is reinventing these emotions in both private and public manners. However, her dramatic outcry is nothing short of unexpected. Also seen in her show at Christ's place of crucifixion, Kempe doubles over in raw emotion to showcase a reaction of deep sorrow – an emotional connection seen in Christianity concerning the Passion of Christ. In these ways, she "presents herself not only as a proficient reader of devotional objects but also as a powerful reenactor of the meaning of that particular object" (Varnam). Her ability to show off these intense emotions surrounding the crucifixion and the Pietà allow her to manipulate her private emotions and knowledge in order to extend her shows and build a crowd. Kempe's ability to create an identity that engages in beyond-spiritual experiences in disconnect to her private life shows a clear separation – and distinct knowledge – about performative identities. These identities help to shape the how Kempe's audience – both her viewers and readers alike – see her.



Photo Credits (Far Left): Blush | Photo Credits (Middle): PopSugar | Photo Credits (Far Right): Medium

While Margery Kempe’s performances showed dedication to God, eleven-time Grammy-winning artist, Lady Gaga has consistently used alter egos to promote messages that she weaves into her music. Born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, Lady Gaga has released six studio albums, thirty-three singles, and collaborated on the Oscar-winning soundtrack for 2018’s film adaptation of *A Star is Born*. Throughout the development of each album, she has produced diverse personas that have helped to further messages of love and loss that inspire her music. These various roles in which she plays, she says, are “this stronger individual part of myself,” not truly “what I am” (Begley). She separates Stefani – an Italian American woman whose family-restaurant she works at on occasion – from the demanding, ever-changing personas of Lady Gaga. Through these various personas and egos, “her every move seems to be an elaborate, *avant-garde* performance” (Lush 173). Take 2011’s Lady Gaga, who introduced the world to alter-ego Jo Calderone at MTV Video Music Awards. Jo, a rugged raspy-voiced fellow with a love for cigarettes, opened the show with Lady Gaga’s hit “You and I.” In doing this, she splits her public self into two identities – there is Lady Gaga and there is Jo. In an interview with *V Magazine*, she shares “In a culture that attempts to quantify beauty with a visual paradigm and

almost mathematical standard how can we...shift the world's perspective on what's beautiful? I asked myself this question. And the answer? Drag" (Richardson). She knows what is expected of her as a public performer – something that matches this high standard of beauty. By twisting the beauty standard, Lady Gaga is able to show an alternative, yet necessary view. She “deliberately obscures her core personal identity” thus challenging what people want to see and, in doing so, keeps her audience intrigued and guessing (Lush 181).

During the production of each release, Lady Gaga creates a new image for herself that focuses on themes of her album. Her first album *The Fame* allows the public to see her first identity. With the album art engaging the audience with an up-close image of her dripping in diamonds on her sunglasses, she tries to show her audience that she is a woman of luxury. Though she was not yet incredibly famous, her album title and façade seen in the album's artwork sell her as a rich, famous, and powerful artist. Even her music videos during this era promote this persona. In the video for her first single, “Just Dance,” she rolls into a party with diamond-studded stilettos sticking out of the window of a vintage limousine. These early images establish her identity as a woman who comes at an expensive price; she means to be desired by her audience as a woman of wealth. Walking into the party, she strolls in with sunglasses similar to those in *The Fame*'s artwork with a posse of well-dressed band members. She reinforces herself as the focal character in the video with multiple, elaborate costume changes. As she begins parading around the house party, she dances and captures the attention of her audience – like that of Margery Kempe as she . . . She – in her expressive public state – wants to be seen and noticed by those around her. She is meant to be the focal point of the video; Lady Gaga wants to express through her words and actions that she should be the center of attention. Both her and Kempe's performative identity parallel one another as they both need to express the

emotions and thoughts within themselves to the public. Both of these women have thoughts concerning how to live – with Lady Gaga’s “brush it off” attitude and Kempe’s “come to Jesus” belief system – that they feel must be expressed to their audience in unconventional ways. Though pop artists depict thoughts in their music videos, her approach of parading, dancing, and singing directly to the members of her audience shows that she is ambitious and purposeful in the ways she interacts with. This can be seen in the direct eye-contact she makes with the camera during close-up shots, and in this manner, she directly speaks to her audience in both a public and private way. She establishes a relationship with her audience yet it is Lady Gaga – not Stefani – who is connecting with her viewers and party attendees. In this way, she connects to Kempe again as they both rely on connection to captivate their audiences with their performances. By using strong images of movement in both the “Just Dance” music video and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, these women are able to communicate their “purpose and ambition” easily to their audience (Park). Though the purposes of their actions may differ, their strict ambition of captivating audiences is accessible for both women.

After Lady Gaga had built a strong fanbase, she began to diversify how she performed more by focusing on a specific version of herself for each album. While *The Fame*’s era showed Lady Gaga adorned in pleather and diamonds, her *Joanne* phase showed her in pastel pinks as while riding a horse - softening her once rough-and-tough image. In her *ARTPOP* era, Lady Gaga becomes more vulnerable in her album’s artwork and the way she allows her audience to see her. The *ARTPOP* period was defined by vibrant colors and vivid images similar to that of the mid-to-late 1950s Pop Art era. Seeing as this period of art challenged the traditions of fine art by exploiting cultural objects in paintings, she emulates these ideals by inserting herself - a well-known pop culture persona - into obscure imagery. Intertwining renaissance paintings into her

name for *ARTPOP*'s artwork, Gaga poses nude with a blue orb that reflects the camera's flash. Whether it be Stefani or Lady Gaga who allows herself to be photographed in this manner – she publicizes her most private self. Her approach to this openness and honesty with her audience gives the performer Lady Gaga nowhere to hide. She keeps her audience engaged by allowing them to question what antics she will produce - no one can expect the same persona twice. Her nakedness gives her agency. While this image gives her audience more access to her once private/now public body, she still keeps her private identity a secret – a technique also used by Kempe to separate her public and private life into separate entities. While she can show off her body as an outside image, she does not have to expose her private thoughts, emotions, and relationships in order to bring in an audience. This album, collectively decided upon by fans as “a celebration and a poetic musical journey” with influence from “reverse Warholian phenomenon” gave Lady Gaga a new opportunity to approach her new persona with a darker, more immature nature (“ARTPOP”). In her first released video from this era, “Applause” accentuates her new vulnerability while still protecting her privacy.



*Photo Credits: BuzzFeed*

Her opening image shows her as a butterfly – symbolizing the metamorphosis that both she and a caterpillar have gone through. In this chrysalis between her previous and current era, she has developed into a more dynamic figure. In the next image, she strips down to her underwear. She is vulnerable and uncovered to her audience as she prepares to sing to them. Approaching this like Kempe, she validates her thoughts within this album through her public persona. She points to the need to express her inner thoughts in a way that must be expressed; she needs to work out what is going on inside her brain through outward performances. In this way, she is able to establish a strong, necessary connection to her audience. She continues to entertain with a variety of outfits that change how the audience engages with her. It is her need, she claims, to be applauded for her actions. Her ability to change into personas that people want to see allows her to become more pleasing to her audience – which, in a way similar to Margery Kempe, gives Lady Gaga something that satisfies her internal needs and outward projection of those needs. Though this album produced multiple attention-grabbing singles, one of the most provocative pieces to come from Lady Gaga’s *ARTPOP* era is “Do What U Want” featuring Christina Aguilera. This song complicates the relationship with the inner self and the backlash from critics. She opens by expressing that she has to “walk alone” down this road of stardom but somehow, she trips “upon myself and I fall.” Though her inner self is confident, the mistakes that she makes are seen in through her outside identity. Even when she can recover, her critics “print some shit that makes me wanna scream.”

To her critics, the mistakes she makes are intended for outside view and need to be critiqued. To her audience, there are limits as to what can be commented on. In doing this, she gives both identities (performative Lady Gaga/private Stefani) the power to fight back. Though she has full expectations that her critics and audience will comment on her failures, the backlash

that she has for both of her public/private identities affects her negatively. She even has addressed the implications behind the first release of the song with R. Kelly shared that “I made both the song and the video at a dark time in life...My intention was to create something extremely defiant and provocative...” (Bloom). As a performer, she is struggling with destructive emotions surrounding criticism and pain that she has been internalized privately. By expressing these intense feelings, she is able to express how she goes against her critics’ demands of her.

Lady Gaga tells her audience that they can take the liberty of manipulating her body in whatever way they see fit. She offers a private portion of herself that she has already begun to expose through *ARTPOP*’s artwork in the most direct way possible – she demands for her audience to do whatever they choose to with her body. She freely gives a portion of herself externally in order to defy her critics’ claims and to push back against their expectations of her yet she hides her internal feelings and emotions from those who most desire to see them. In this manner, she both exposes herself and limits her audience as to what they are allowed to see. This altered vision of her changes what her viewers can see and dizzies how she allows herself to be perceived. While her critics are being given the opportunity to “write what you want, say what you want about me,” she gives her audience the faculty to say these things by being vulnerable (“Do What U Want”). By taking these matters into her own hands, she fights back against these people who write crude comments about her. However, she switches up her claim by giving limitations to her audience. “You can’t have my heart,” she writes, “and you won’t use my mind, but do what you want with my body.” She emphasizes her personal, private thoughts and feelings are off limits to the public sphere in which she must perform unless she decides to open up to her audience. She does not want to be bothered with questions as she will only show her



audience as much as she wants them to see. As an artist, she decides what gets to be shown and what remains connected to her private identity. In establishing the limitations that her critics have for how they attack her, she gets to keep both of her identities in the way she so chooses. Lady Gaga gives herself agency in concern to the self she wants showcased. Her critics can “write what you want, say what you want about me” but she is unapologetic. She allows there to be discussion about her on her own terms; her limitations are not to be crossed and she has the power to ensure no one can attack her private identity.

Both Kempe and Lady Gaga have to show their private emotions publicly in order to be successful. For Kempe to please God, she must show her feelings in front of anyone who will listen. While Lady Gaga does not have to entice her listeners, she has to keep their attention on her performance by adapting and changing her persona. These women struggle to be taken seriously because of how outsiders perceive them. However, both are able to express private matters in unconventional ways. While Lady Gaga adorns herself in lush fabrics and bites back at her critics by giving them more explicit images of herself, Kempe ventures out into different areas to share her knowledge and emotional distress with those who will listen. It is critical that these women share their emotions – even if they are not understood by their audiences. Lady Gaga gives her audiences puzzles to solve. She lets them chip away at some portion of her identity before she switches into another version of herself. Their audiences are invited to combine expressive oddities with truth to reach understanding of the women they perceive. As beings that thrive when showing their positions in the public eye, both thrive on the attention and relationships they build through their performances.

## **Assumption**

Consistently, women have had to deal with assumptions being made about how they portray different opportunities in their respective societies. Inserting women's values into a predominately male area complicates the presumed values of one's writing in a male-dominated world. When texts of focused feminine concepts are applied under polarized, masculine microscopes, meaning and understanding concerning the struggles of women become critiqued in ways that assume the author's purpose without truly valuing the author's work. In this way, the typical approach to assessing one's experience and purpose for writing "devalues the normative, the univocal, and the hierarchical and valorizes the particular, the contextualized, and the polyvocal" that specifically calls for "feminist aesthetic [to] invite us to see things in a different way" (Duran 37). This feminine aesthetic, perceived differently based on gender, alters how narratives are spun in the public.

Anne Finch, a notable female poet from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, had opportunities unlike many women in her time. She was not only born into a wealthy family but married into the title of Countess of Winchilsea. Seeing as she was formally educated and wealthy, her rich language and stories enchanted her readers as they were often published. She and her husband became favorable within King James II's court and remained sympathetic to his cause during his brief reign over England. Once he was removed from the throne, the Finches moved to Eastwell where Anne began publishing poetry under the name Ardelia until the time of her death.

Finch's poetry, which has been celebrated across cultures, allows for readers to see between the lines of the assumed and the author's truth. "The Introduction" encompasses these conflicting actions in a quiet manner that quickly developed into a critique of her own society. Acting as an opening to a book, this piece critiques the position that Finch as a published writer

has to face. Though she is respected, she still believes she will be criticized for what she writes mainly on the basis of her gender. Her rich commentary concerning the expectations of fellow writers and critics allows her to alternate between “would-be wits and criticism in general to justify her authorship as a woman” (Gavin 633). In this manner, she provides her audience with insight concerning her personal experiences, her assumptions about her critics and vice versa. With engaging language and pointed fingers, she questions both herself and her audience within the first line of her poem saying “Did I, my lines intend for public view,” as a means of immediately addressing the backlash she is receiving (“The Introduction” ll.1). Right away, she implies to her audience that her writing – though successful – may not have been meant for others to read. In this case, her writing was meant to be kept privately as a means for self-expression. In fact, “The Introduction” was never meant to be published. Finch’s manuscripts, found years after her death, contained poems that were published without her consent. Her lines that she specifically kept away from public eyes were published in a manner that mocks her poem’s main point. Her publications at that point were already respected and successful but her fear of having to meet expectations of male critics worried her. For this reason, Finch did not personally publish every piece she wrote. Though “The Introduction” is a celebrated poem for its beautiful language and strong imagery, those who published her poem without her consent put her reputation on the line in a way she tried to avoid.

Because of Finch’s assumption concerning the necessity to publish, she must endure the “censures” that “their faults pursue” (ll. 2). She, at this point, believes that criticism and negative feedback from her peers will soon come as she removes herself from the expected values of masculine writing and applies a feminine aesthetic to poetry. Seemingly, she “imagines this hypercritical readership as an always-present specter of male disapproval” that will come into

play through publishing (Gavin 633). As she defies the submissive manner that men want, she focuses on the dominant, derogatory nature of male critics within the literary realm. It is as though she is caught in an internal conflict between her dissatisfaction of not publishing poetry and the backlash she thinks she will encounter because she is writing. The uncomfortable in-between allows Finch to develop her thoughts and consider both sides. Finch faces potential criticism from readers because of how her words “do affect” men who “cry they’re insipid, empty and uncorrect” (ll. 3-4). Her realization as to what other voices will say about personal experiences causes her to expect the worst. While Finch wants to share these intimate details, the agency of her critics, to her, outweighs the rich rewards of publishing. By taking her expectations and experience, though, she tackles her obstacle by combining both personal and outside assumptions into her writing.

Finch focuses on a crucial aspect of masculine poetic virtue - wit. Because of the male-emphasized “self-management of literary reputation” seen through witty productions of rhyme or reasoning, she shifts her view onto the expectations and assumptions of male critics (Young). Her critique of these outside voices who demand the use of masculine wit in writing cannot approach Finch’s writing with that of a feminine eye - putting them at a disadvantage for understanding the issues concerning women in writing. Because of the “dull, and untaught” men who seek only to satisfy their own beliefs concerning writing, they lose out on the true value of what is being published (Finch ll.5). The criticism of men, then, who use “wit by only finding fault” ignores Finch’s struggles because they do not match their own (ll.6). Respecting her own identity and what she assumes others will believe about her through her writing, her “reluctance to insert a too-authoritative woman's voice in a public sphere dominated by men” preserves her reputation without creating problems with her critics. (Gavin 634) Her position that “True judges

might condemn their want of wit/And all might say, they're by a woman writ" can be claimed through her experience - and that of other women - to be true (Finch ll.7-8). While she analyzes the society in which she lives, she treads this path lightly. In this manner, Finch quietly evaluates what women are allowed to produce. She does not try to overthrow successful male writers but merely points out the imbalance of opportunity and acceptance for women. Seemingly, the male expectation for women to produce bad writing is accepted as legitimate criticism. Through her questioning of these assumptions, her writing shows Finch as a strong writer who uses wit in order to condemn its use in criticism.

Because of women who "attempt the pen," men are having to shift their comfortable positions within literary society because of the new wave of women writers (Finch ll.9). Seeing as her writing is making others uncomfortable as it pushes the limits as to what is acceptable in the masculine world of publishing, Finch believes that she is seen as "an intruder on the rights of men" whose "fault can by not virtue be redeemed" (ll.10-12). She has stepped into an arena of men whose comments are bound to bite at her words and actions. The experiences of publishing and receiving negative comments has left her feeling stuck in this identity that she expects will be assumed of her every time she produces writing. In doing this, Finch is able to address the assumptions about what she can achieve as she notes that "good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play" are the goals that men set aside for women to desire (ll.14). Her identity as a woman directly connects to her skillset as a writer. Her position as a woman will not allow her to be as successful as she would be if she were male. For men, Finch implies, success is easy as the literary society praises their writing while women are criticized solely for their gender. For her, this is an expected outcome of her publishing that proves to be a reality.

Finch includes religious imagery in “The Introduction” to connect features of male-written literature. Instead of sticking to imagery that the audience would assume from her, she dives into deep images that give her and other women agency as writers. She describes a female leader – possibly herself – who “leads fainting Israel on” during a harsh war (Finch ll.45). While the parallelism between Finch and this leader is strong – as two women are pushing back against some form of enemy force – she expresses these clear thoughts concerning the characteristics of this leader. This “devout, majestic” fighter who “exalts her wit” does not need to be limited in a way that is presumed to exist within her society (Finch ll. 47-48). Likewise, she sends the same message to critics. Her influence and ambition as a writer, while lacking the presumptive qualities of male writing, expresses information that is crucial for women writers. These female writers who Finch cautions should not “be despised, aiming to be admired” as she believes, they will face the same backlash as her (ll. 60). As she critiques this complex gender structure within the literary realm, she is not only the one who gives advice to her successors but also addresses the problems that women face by calling out to male critics. By doing this, Finch gives herself agency as a knowledgeable poet who can assume the outcome for female writers who would follow.

Though her work was published prior to Finch, Katherine Philips deals with assumptions from her critics as well. As a fairly well-known writer because of her class, Philips (like Finch) is prodded by sexist comments from critics to meet certain expectations. Born into a middle-class family, she penned well over 100 poems in her lifetime that circulated throughout England in the 1650s and 1660s. Her work centered on the value of female friendship which can be seen in letters to her closest friends. Though it has been argued that the topic of female friendship helped to conceal homoerotic feelings with her acquaintances, she remained married to her husband,

royalist support James Philips, until her death in 1661. Her poems were celebrated by major authors like John Milton who praised Philips for her delicate writing style and her intricate wordplay. Though her works are not always included in anthologies, Philips's work showed seventeenth-century social expectations and the problems created by these stereotypes through a feminine perspective that had not been openly considered before.

Her "A Married State" separates beliefs concerning the standards of marriage for women and the actuality of marital woes. As a woman whose arranged marriage occurred when she was only sixteen, Philips has vast knowledge concerning the assumptions that she should have a blissful married life and the true issues that can come by becoming a wife outside of one's choice to do so. Feeling unsatisfied as her "juvenilia shows that she preferred a Royalist husband," it was clear that her chosen-for-her-husband "...James Philips was not this man..." as he served the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell (Limbert 29). Though they had a solid partnership with a lasting marriage, Katherine and John Philips clearly were not part of a fairy-tale like love story that she had expected she would receive. As her goal was to remain a woman who lived to "avoid any accusations of immodesty," her position as a writer backfired as she spoke against the assumptions of women in marriage (Tubb). Though one would expect that her marriage to John would give her financial and social support, Philips's marriage and the way that a married state is perceived in society defies presumptions concerning how supported a woman feels within a heterosexual marriage.

Philips directly addresses assumptions about women's perspectives of marriage in her first line as she shares that "a married state affords but little ease" as even "the best of husbands are so hard to please" (ll. 1-2). As women have had to submit to the masculine efforts to control different faculties of life like politics and literature, it is crucial that she has the agency to open

the conversations for women to express their truth under “the conventions of poetry where a woman could situate herself to speak” (Mermin 335.) While the male-centered society may position women to believe marriage is the greatest joy one could experience, Philips challenges the conventional expectations of marriage by showing hardships that she has faced. As Dorothy Mermin shows in her article about female poets facing criticism concerning gender-specific situations, Philips is able to “tune male convention to female experience and a female voice” that allows for vulnerability and honesty concerning her own personal experiences (343). Though this is unconventional for women, she has to explain that a marriage is “always happy as it’s innocent” that highlights that ignorance within a marriage can create a blissful life for wives (Philips ll.6). This important distinction between expectation and reality proves important for both Finch and Philips as the outside critics can perceive some form of a relationship but the pure truth as to what occurs within a woman’s mind or marriage. Both poets provide this urging voice to educate their audience to see beyond the assumptions. In doing this, Finch and Philips remove a purified filter that deals with stereotypical feelings about publishing opportunities and marriage for women.

Though marriage is what is expected to be the greatest accomplishment for societal gain that a woman can achieve, Philips spins this in a way that supports the refusal of marriage. Seeing that she expresses the happiness and calmness that a virgin life offers alters the male belief as to what marriage should be perceived as. Her experience shows that she is able to “overcome some of society’s restrictions against women on a personal level” yet she is put into a compromising position as a writer for the criticism that she will receive for speaking out against marriage (Limbert 31). She knows that the standards for marriage are different between men and women and the way that she writes about marriage deters the male conjecture that marriage is



blissful and sweet for women. The virgin life does not have to deal with childbearing pains or griping husbands. As a wife, Philips implies that she is filled with cares and worries that “attend on matrimony and a husband too” (ll.12). She is not satisfied in this role as outside critics may believe. In Claudia Limbert’s scholarly analysis of Philips’s agency as a writer, we see her as she pushes to redefine the women’s roles of wife and writer by “attempting to control the things that most threaten to constrain her” (28). While social positions and career opportunities may be limited due to male influence, she recognizes the ability for women to move beyond their limits by speaking out.

Though Philips’s “A Married State” is short, she breaks down societal standards and shows the heightened expectations that men have set aside for women. In addressing the problems of marriage, her personal experiences set aside the flowery presumptions of a wife’s life to give an alternative, more accurate perspective to her readers. In doing so, her identity as both an author and a wife became the “prime object of critical regard” (Mermin 338). The weight between private writings and their exposure opened up vulnerable areas for attack for her critics, thus combatting the marital expectations that “A Married State” offer as an alternative, more accurate view on women’s issues.

Centuries after the publications of “The Introduction” and “A Married State” came Katy Perry. The thirteen-time Grammy nominated singer has sold 6.5 million physical and 70 million digital albums within the past decade. As one of Billboard’s top ten artists of the 2010s, her albums still rocket to the top of the charts as her September 2020 release *Smile* debuted at No. 5 on charts worldwide. However, her success has not come without criticism. After the release of her fourth album, *Witness*, she seemed to be spiraling into a has-been wonderland filled with songwriters with several big hits but a lacking presence in an ever-changing musical world.

Though *Witness*'s sound was "more consistent and tasteful here than it has ever been," the album's lack of focus and unclear wordplay limited it to a 4.8 rating (Mapes). The album's harsh criticism even had personal effects on Perry, as she had "put so much validity in the reaction of the public, and the public didn't react in the way I had expected to ... which broke my heart," causing her to spiral into depression (Vivinetto). What she had assumed to be the closing of a door turned into opportunities for her to address underlying emotional issues that increased her mental health issues.

Though *Witness* may have fallen in popularity compared to *One of the Boys* and *Teenage Dream*, Perry's lyrics – clouded in songs like "Miss You More" – critique states of living in current society. The first single off *Witness*, "Chained to the Rhythm," sees beyond the veil of accepted actions in American society to show how individuality is frowned upon. She does this in a way that allows her to critique not only herself but also the world in which she lives. Perry deconstructs gender and marital norms by showing how the once rigid structures of nuclear families and heterosexuality are now questioned. What chains her listeners, she implies, is unwavering conformity. Not only does "Chained to the Rhythm" have probing lyrics, but the images that are produced in her music video reflect critical assumptions that she denounces in her lyrics.



Photo Credit: The Sights and Sounds Music Magazine

Perry’s music video pairs pastel-colored images to showcase deep, dark meanings concerning the assumed acceptable actions of twenty-first century society. The video opens with the camera panning across a sleek and modern spectacle – an amusement park called Oblivia. As she sees no need to be subtle, her audience is introduced to a world in which “infinite distractions of modern society” can be critiqued and proven as a false reality (Savage). Her characters – all dressed in rich pastels – don clothes representative of the 1950s era of optimism. As she and her peers gaze in awe at the captivating visuals of Oblivia, the other park attendees move in unison with cameras held up to their faces while striking similar poses. In this manner, her audience is meant to believe these ladies in pastel are representative of the lack of individuality that now consumes modern society. These ladies, instead of owning up to what makes them different, feels the need to shift into a shared identity where criticism is less prevalent. As spectators, we are to expect that these actions are normal – just like the actors do - as the video powers on. As the conforming individuals bob towards the Great American Dream ride – a ride that throws

male and female counterparts into a home - Perry pricks her finger on a thorn of a vibrant red rose – indicating that the assumptions that she has made at first-glance of Oblivia are false. This white-picket fence world shows this bright assumption concerning the wonders of American society while she breaks this mold. Because she pricks her finger on the rose, she is taken away from the idealistic society that modern America is assumed to have and is brought to a painful realization. While Perry cautiously steps away from the rose, we receive the first indication that she is living in a world that will soon show that there is “no more time for avoidance and escapism” as the beliefs of optimism and greatness are countered with the pains of day-to-day life (Thorp and Bullock). This coming to consciousness that Perry has completely removed her from the innocent lies she once believed.

The expectation of conforming to the norm concerning American expectations about relationships is notable as well. Perry shows a rollercoaster with pink and blue hearts placed beside one another – implying that heterosexuality is the only acceptable way of approaching a relationship in Oblivia. There is something to be said concerning how every person is “comfortable with unquestioning conformity” – everyone is happy and cheerful to bounce along to a world where the presumed boundaries of one’s existence are limited to decisions made for them (Savage). She and her peers have no opportunity to approach a same-sex relationship as Oblivia’s society has silently forced heterosexual relationships onto the park’s attendees. Seeing as Perry’s breakout hit “I Kissed A Girl” expressed her defiance against morality that elevates heterosexuality Perry has criticized these boundaries before. Her criticism turns away from personal conformity in which she had to take on a heterosexual identity – a time in which she “prayed the gay away at my Jesus camps” – showing individual expression as the true value to achieve (“Katy Perry Opens Up”). Perry’s upbringing forced her to assume that “homosexuality

was synonymous with the word ‘abomination’” – chaining to the standards that had been established by her parents. Through her individual opportunities to explore her sexuality, Perry is able to critique this restriction that affected her so much. Though the park attendees march in unison – controlled by the society that forces best practices onto them – she is not oblivious to the problems in Oblivia.

Another special feature of Perry’s Oblivia is “The Nuclear Family” cinema show as one of the main attractions. As her peers begin to put on their 3D glasses to submerge themselves in a film showing the expectations of what a family “should” be, she finds herself stumbling to put on her glasses and fit in. In this moment, she acts in a way that would allow her to fit into the mold of her peers by acting like everyone else. While others bob their heads along to the beat of “Chained to the Rhythm,” she glances around and notices that she is not like the other people within Oblivia. Perry sees the puzzle pieces coming together of how assumptions concerning the best way to live take away the ability to innovate. Her audience, through her critical lens, sees Oblivia in its purest form; it is a cruel conformist society that takes away individuality by removing individual choice. By eliminating the “system’s shock absorbers [that] have kept us too comfortable for too long” in American society, Perry breaks down the expectations as to what is necessary to be deemed normal. Because of the criticism about her own “far removed... concept of the traditional family” concerning her extremely evangelical upbringing, she pushes against what is assumed to be acceptable and expresses, in her own right, that conforming to societal or religious expectations does not guarantee a prosperous life (Das). Individuality, claims an unchained Perry, is what gives her agency.

The lyrics of “Chained to the Rhythm” also help Katy Perry’s audience to see the validity of her criticism. Perry first questions her audience by asking “Are we crazy living our lives

through a lens?" ("Chained to the Rhythm") This lens – of conforming to assumed correct values of American society – are evident in the images of Oblivia. This narrow view of the world is critiqued by focusing on a person's becoming of a mere decoration in "bubble" society – that she refers to as an "ornament" – rather than being an individual with personal means as the driving force of one's choices. In what one would expect to be ideal, the "utopia" that Perry experiences is filled with "happily numb" and empty persons. In this manner, she breaks the accepted "drift of modern mass-thought" to prompt engagement from her listeners (Thorp and Bullock). Though she breaks the conjectures of greatness dealing with an empty society, Perry still urges her listeners to enjoy the broken society by having them put on "rose-colored glasses...and party on" ("Chained to the Rhythm"). Though she sees these problems, she is still willing to ignore the issues to enjoy what she believes will be a good time.

The chorus of "Chained to the Rhythm" features a lighthearted beat that contrasts the dark lyrics that are used to examine a society deeply engrossed in creating conformity. She assesses her audience by claiming that they are "stumbling around like wasted zombies" ("Chained to the Rhythm"). She does this to show those who look beyond the crooked views of Oblivia are still conformist fans who remain "ineffective but also mindless..." as they listen to her song, because they still do "not think for themselves" (Stumme). Perry's focus on how trapped society is within these expectations concerning how one should be gives her the chance to manipulate her stance. She is able to switch between being a part of this empty society and being an outsider who sees the importance of developing one's own views. Against the underlying tones of her conforming to both heterosexual and familial standards, she retaliates. This retaliation is not in an evil way but in a way that shows knowledge and understanding concerning the complexity of American issues. By being able to see both sides, Perry gives her

audience the option to either conform or to develop their own opinions and pushback against the society that wants them to conform.

The issues that Perry faces concerning homosexuality and non-nuclear families in part stem from viewpoints that were prevalent during the days of Finch and Philips. Finch's position as a female writer complicate her ability to speak out – something that Perry has continuously faced during her career concerning her sexuality. Philips's ability to act as both a wife and a writer is questioned as others try to limit her capabilities based on her gender. The images that Perry incorporates of the unhappy family dynamics in her music video criticize this perspective. Though each face assumptions, they all have a different way of approaching their critics in a way that pushes back against the expectations of others. Finch's ability to publish without being critiqued due to gender is near nonexistent. She is unable to truly say what she feels without her readers becoming sympathetic to her cause. In showing the problems women face, she critiques the men who criticize her, questioning them with complex ideas as they do her. Philips's experience, similar to that of Finch, shows the limitations of women writers as well as she has to struggle through marriage that brings more worry than satisfaction upon her. She is constantly juggling the views of women as wives and how the identity between woman and wife fail to be split. In critiquing the society that has forced her to balance different gender roles, she expresses that her position gives her more agency to write about women's affairs than men's beliefs can. Somehow, Perry manages to balance these within "Chained to the Rhythm." She directly critiques a society ruled by men - the established patriarchy that deals with heavily religious and heterosexual norms within American life that criticizes her individuality. All three women, given their experience, have the agency to push back against the critics. Finch, Philips, and Perry all question how outsiders can force values of goodness onto women when those who push these

values are not utilizing them. The empty ignorance of these critics lacks the feminine faculty needed to fully comprehend the struggles of women. These women live in a world where their critics – who assume what is best for them and enforce conformity – experience Oblivia-esque numbness.

## **Reputation**

Women who create always have to worry about their reputation. While one's standing seemingly plays a role for all the media producers that I have before mentioned, the outstanding view of Queen Elizabeth I as a rhetor allows her to be a forerunner when discussing reputation. As the most famous monarch in European history, she accomplished many progressive goals during her forty-four year reign such as her installation of English Protestantism, her involvement in England's victory over the Spanish Armada, and her creation of "an environment where the arts flourished" during the Renaissance period ("Queen Elizabeth I – Siblings"). Another progressive move made by Queen Elizabeth I was her choice to remain a virgin queen who, instead of devoting herself to a marriage and children, stood in strict devotion to her country. Though her reasons for skipping domestic life for the throne are not clear, she addressed her autonomous choices in Parliament through statements like "better beggar woman and single than Queen and married" or "I have already joined myself in marriage to a husband, namely the kingdom of England" (Sharnette). Though she was loyal to her country through acts of servitude, she spent time in leisure where she practiced the lute and watched plays. She expressed her femininity through makeup and jewelry as seen in her many portraits. By combining feminine fashion and leisurely activities with masculine leadership skills, her reputation is one of ambiguity and fluidity. With certainty, one can claim that her reign was one of stability and consistency as she conducted plans for England's financial and political growth. However, her



statements concerning her actions have moments in which her audience must read between the lines in order to truly understand this quick-witted royal. Queen Elizabeth I's complex actions and speeches helped to form a character that refutes criticism even today.

Queen Elizabeth I's reputation for demonstrating both masculine and feminine traits is notable in her "Speech to the Troops at Tilbury" – a speech given prior to England's show stopping defense against Spanish fleets in 1588. England's strongarm fight against the Spanish boosted the prestige of both the British army and her role as monarch. As "she intended to rule in more than name only," it was crucial that her speech at Tilbury showed her dedication to the war and, because of her devotion to England, that "she would not subordinate her judgment to that of any one individual or faction" (Morrill). Being entrusted with a royal title, Queen Elizabeth I's clean position was crucial if she wanted to be respected by men in political office. If she doted on an individual or faction, she shows bias. In showing bias, her critics would be able to analyze and evaluate her actions in a destructive way. She took her role as the monarch seriously as the leading lady in a patriarchal world. Her marriage to England instead of a man showed a reputable stance of authority that she could not afford to lose. Even after a critical pamphlet about her denial of a marriage proposal was released, both the author and publisher had their right hands removed in order for the queen to show her authority. Only she could write her own narrative and those who critiqued her staunch commitment to her title were made examples. While it may seem cruel for her to have caused such harm onto these men, the criticism that she received because of her gender reduced respect towards her. Instead of being lessened to "just a woman," she uses her powerful position to show who has control. As these men act mercilessly unto her, she did the same unto them. Queen Elizabeth I was focused solely on her state of affairs as

England's sole monarch and her reputation concerning her achievements of English society remain today.

In the opening of "Speech to the Troops at Tilbury," Queen Elizabeth I establishes a fond connection to her audience by addressing them as her "loving people" who she does not "desire to live to distrust" (762). Because she knows her audience is aware of her accomplishments concerning English success, she commits to establishing a kind, understanding tone. The queen here also establishes a sense of trust – a reputable quality that is necessary for her to support her people. As the monarch of the nation, she must both nurture and nudge her people. By committing herself to the role as monarch and leading them into winning battles, she has nurtured a kind of reliability into the minds of her soldiers that would normally come from a man. Judith Butler, who has produced some of the most influential writings on gender, discusses the friction between gender-specific writing. Because feminine rhetoric is "differentiated from the masculine...and recognizable in its difference", her mixing of masculinity and femininity creates conflict in how she is viewed (Butler 7). This strategy of showing concern for her audience before giving the troops a boost before battle is approached in a way that makes her androgynous. In doing this, she is able to hold power without being criticized for simply being a woman. Before Queen Elizabeth I can move into strong, passionate statements like "let tyrants fear" she must allow there to be balance (762). By having this fluid movement in between masculine and feminine rhetoric incorporated into her speech, the queen prevents her critics from calling her too much of one quality and not enough of the other.

In maintaining her reputation by floating between gendered standards of speaking, Queen Elizabeth I continues by implementing contrasting gender-based phrases. When she mentions the "chiefest strength" that she holds as the sole leader of England that is placed within the "loyal

hearts and good-will” of her soldiers, she connects images of strength and of the intrinsic self in a way that incorporates male and female values. By showing strength, a distinctly masculine trait, she is able to show the power that she holds as a monarch. She needed the trust and respect of her soldiers if she were to inspire them to win the victory. She steps away from the dainty idea of femininity to show her power as a leader. This is seen especially so in Queen Elizabeth I’s most famous line: “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; But I have the heart and stomach of a king, And of a king of England too” (763). Though she is a strong leader, being a woman makes her seem less capable of succeeding in war. To use her power, she has to navigate two distinctly different expectations for men and women. By implementing masculine imagery, Queen Elizabeth I has the opportunity to give herself credit and capability as the sole monarch. In challenging how women were seen in this era as being lesser, Queen Elizabeth I allows both genders to work as how she is perceived by her audience. Because those in the sixteenth century critiqued as not being fit to rule due to her being a woman, she needed to prove them wrong as a formidable leader needed to leave prints of masculine features whenever she spoke. By denouncing herself as a woman who is “weak and feeble,” it is almost that she agrees with these comments concerning her ability to lead (“Speech to the Troops at Tilbury” 763). It seemed almost necessary to distance herself from the physical attributes of femininity and play off the masculine power that she holds. Her ability to be ruthless and cunning with the “heart and stomach of a king” refutes how her external self is seen (763). This distinct line between the masculine leadership skills that she has internalized in relation to her outer feminine dress proves her reputation is one that goes “above and beyond the social and biological mandates that her age attached to womanhood” (Mueller 1). In defying these intensely demanding standards, her leadership goes unmatched.

Queen Elizabeth I offers to not only serve her audience through words, but also through actions. Seeing as women were unable to fight in war, the queen's statement that she "will take up arms, I myself will be your general..." concentrates heavily on the opportunity for her power as Queen to guide her as a soldier (763). Though she cannot physically fight, her words bring honor to those fighting beneath her. By standing now in two roles that are reserved for men, the queen's duty as a monarch and commander remove constrictive gender roles which allow her to position herself as a leader more freely. In this way, she has the agency to act in ways that go beyond the role of women. In this manner, though, her soldiers and anyone else below her must listen. This turning away from being male or female solely stresses her position as a monarch, which ultimately leads to the true reputation that she argues for herself - that "her gender... is irrelevant" (Mueller 4). Although she is a woman, her capability to lead is not dependent on this. She is powerful in her own regard and being a woman does not aid nor disempower this. However, she must alter her words in order to show that her understanding of a woman's place in the sixteenth century is different from the position she holds. Socially, she must act diligently to uphold royal standards by commanding and expressing her position as a leader. Elizabeth's gender allowed her esteem to conflict with defined, motherly standards of women that acted as means for criticism. Yet these comments concerning her unmarried state laid a foundation for her to rule. Defying criticism that offered her identity to be one of "a conscious propagandist" who manipulated her audience gave her the faculty and motivation to rule (Davye 14). In setting aside the illusion of women's capabilities, Queen Elizabeth I carved out her own reputation in history to be one of androgyny and defiance.

While the mere idea of comparing Queen Elizabeth I with Taylor Swift seems outlandish, these women face similar circumstances in how they approach gender more fluidly by separating

themselves from established standards of their respective societies. In order to keep a clean reputation, these women are put in positions where they must break away from conventional ideas of gender to be successful. With a net worth of \$360 million dollars, 10 Grammys, and 200 million records sold worldwide, Taylor Swift's esteem as a stadium-selling performer is widely known. Since she was sixteen, she has been producing music that has skyrocketed to the top of the charts. Starting off in country music, Swift released "Tim McGraw" – a slow, sad ballad that captured attention from those outside of the country music genre. As a teen country starlet, she became heavily criticized by fans and critics alike by creating music that became staples on pop radio stations. Though she made a major career switch, she has never failed to produce innovative and fun music that is streamed by audiences worldwide. Swift bloomed in the pop sphere where she released chart-dominating songs like "Shake It Off" – a song that directly addresses her position as a woman in the public eye. Her songs address what is being said about her – things that define her reputation – but she combats these lies by telling her audience the truth. Her catchy lyrics address her critics who say she "stays out too late" or "goes on too many dates" ("Shake It Off"). She takes what is being said about her and complicates the narrative that others are writing about her by removing gendered statements about herself. Swift merely shakes off these comments because "the players gonna play, play, play, play, play" and the "haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate" ("Shake It Off"). Swift, instead of backfiring with words of criticism, shows that "she's simply having more fun than her faceless detractors" (Lipshutz). Her talent gives her power.

However, the criticism goes further than just analyzing Swift in the public sphere. In 2017, songwriters Sean Hall and Nathan Butler sued her for copying lyrics from "Playas Gon' Play" – a song written in 2001 for the girl-group 3LW. Banking on the defamation of her

squeaky-clean esteem, Hall’s lawsuit – which was overturned in 2018 for reasons concerning the legitimacy of the claims – proved to be one that was “not a crusade for all creatives” but “a crusade for Mr. Hall’s bank account” (Richards). By trying to tarnish Swift’s reputation through a suit that questions her credibility as a writer, Hall and Butler attempt to alter the way she is perceived in the public eye failed as Swift’s narratives proved reliable. Because she is a powerful woman, the attempt to disempower her by questioning her creativity shows the blatant misogyny that she faces. Hall and Butler tried to manipulate Swift because she is a successful woman but failed due to their lack of professional integrity and her respect within the music industry as a creative force. Her success is not defined by her gender; neither is her demise.

Swift also faced scandals related to her gender and reputations in a years-long dispute with rapper Kanye West, who claims he “made that bitch famous” (“Famous”). Not only did West entertain the idea that he and Swift may enter into a romantic relationship in “Famous” but he undermines her capabilities as an artist simply because she is a woman. He tries to overpower her by twisting her words and manipulating how other people view her. As he acts without consulting her, she released her most defiant album, *reputation*, in response as a means of expressing her truth – that she does not care about those who discern her as an artist simply because she is a talented woman. In response to West’s deception of Swift and her talent, she writes “I don’t like your little games, don’t like your tilted stage...I don’t like you” (“Look What You Made Me Do”). Seeing as West had used Swift for multiple publicity stunts that ranged from derailing her acceptance speech at the 2009 MTV Music Video Awards to placing a nude replica of Swift’s body in bed with him in his “Famous” music video without her consent, Swift had been take advantage of by West but failed to receive respect from critics. Because they “rain on my parade,” she sees that her reputation is being broken and she hears “all the things you said

about me,” she realizes that her critics and those who work to deteriorate her image are “why we can’t have nice things” (“This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things”). Because her initial start in the music industry was one of youthful innocence, her critics began to push her as someone who victimizes herself for fame and power. Swift, through *reputation*, annihilates this critique. For her, she truly is the victim of situations that are controlling her simply based on her gender. She has consistently experienced sexist remarks and criticism throughout her career. By pulling away from a years-old perception, she reestablishes her presence as a woman that can hold her own against critics and shows that she is not limited in exercising her power because of her gender.

Taylor Swift is also well known for writing about her relationships in songs. Instead of allowing her audience to believe the outside stories written about her, she gives her audience proof as to what goes on. Because of her position as a female artist, her songs concerning failed relationships ultimately lead her to be labeled as the victim. Even Swift, who in 2014 refuted these claims, shared that male artists like Ed Sheeran or Bruno Mars “[are] all writing songs about their exes, their current girlfriends, their love life, and no one raises the red flag there” (Dockterman). Though she discusses her relationships like male artists do, her place as a woman creating unspoken dialogue with her male counterparts takes the dominant position away from whomever she is dealing with. While critics claim this is narcissistic or that she spins a “complicated web of victimhood and tired gossip,” she simply combats the notion that discussing a relationship can only be through the voice of a man (Gannon). She has the privilege to respond to her critics and speak out about her relationships; she does so in a way that allows her to manipulate the narrative in a way that takes feminine rhetoric of storytelling in a masculine, dominant way. Even though Swift’s name gets raked through societal mud – whether it be in

concern to a relationship or some kind of stirred-up drama – she always bounces back and her reputation of being coy and honest with her audience allows her to do so.

Though *reputation* showed Swift's lack of concern for criticism, her experiences have forced her into feeling as though she must comment on the toxic situation in which she is placed. She directly attacks her critics in her song "The Man." In considering her past actions, Swift addresses the male-focused claims that separate her from being as successful as possible. Her reputation, one of being boy-crazy and devoted to drama kind of woman, is painted differently from those outside of her private sphere. Because of her critics, the world views her differently than how others are viewed. In "The Man," she dedicates herself to taking down the patriarchal standards of how a successful woman's character can be destroyed in the pop sphere. Her music video for "The Man" portrays Swift dressed in male drag as a man named Tyler. Tyler's presence in this video shows the strict double-standard encountered by Taylor Swift. Not only does Tyler dismissively show concern for others, but he also is enabled and celebrated for his toxic actions. When he shouts his demands, he is applauded and immediately served. Tyler even urinates on a wall with all of her albums' names on it and, as he steps away, "The Man" is left in graffiti-styled glitter letters.





*Photo Credits: Mashable*

Tyler, acting as an example of those who will criticize the images that Swift produces in this video, can ruin the accomplishments of those around him without question. While Swift’s voice plays in the background, Tyler’s actions begin to align with other toxic men in the media. By implementing specific movements used in the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Swift chose “to align her macho, overconfident male persona with a movie whose main character...is corrupt” (Shepherd and Chiu). Though he is dressed well, his actions – yelling at cohorts and throwing objects around the office – set Tyler up within the early moments of the music video to be a dynamically negative figure. Tyler, embodying another scene from *The Wolf of Wall Street*, flaunts young models on a yacht while yelling at a butler. Champagne starts to fly as the women celebrate him. Swift, here, shows this clear double standard as “Tyler can flirt and play with dozens of women without causing a stir, but she has long been publicly mocked for her long list of ex-boyfriends” (Shepherd and Chiu). While Tyler’s actions are problematic, they are still accepted and not critiqued. The same cannot be said about Swift whose reputation lays in the hands of the public. Her critics are able to mold whatever version of her they want and sell it - even when she is innocent. As she portrays a man, she is able to show the judgement that women

face that men are excused from. Throughout this video, she implies that as a woman she would not be celebrated if the roles were reversed. The images in “The Man’s” music video set up the blatant sexism that Swift experiences on a daily basis by her critics.

The lyrics of “The Man” allow Swift to express the demanding pressure that she feels to upkeep her image while critiquing how a man in her position can get away with being rude and crude. In addressing her constantly speculated relationships, she says that “they’d say I played the field before I found someone to commit to” rather than wondering “Why Taylor Swift Sucks at Relationships” (“The Man;” Alexis). This distinct line between what is acceptable for a man versus what is acceptable for a woman keeps her from conquering these critics. She shares that she does not know what it is like to have her narrative believed as everyone around her gets to imprint their own perceptions on her narrative. Because of this, she has to “run as fast as I can” as she questions “if I’d get there quicker if I was a man.” Whether she is running towards higher earnings, more awards, or general respect from the public, the general consensus is the same - Swift’s career moves would not be questioned if she were of the opposite sex. Because of the differences in Swift’s wants and what others expect of her, “The Man” places her defense of her gender as being the driving force behind her criticism. Gender is her main obstacle as the actions she performs or how she describes the men she dates, defines how clean of a reputation that Swift can keep. If this social structure were not a factor, she inherently would be more successful and would not have to deal with these staunch critiques. If Swift were a man, then she’d be “the man” based on her success and her ability to win over the public. By applying a more gender-fluid approach, she can question her critics’ double standard. She recognizes and stresses to her audience that as a woman, her critics “question how much of this I deserve” while as a man she’d be celebrated for “putting in the work.” Though she should be celebrated for her success,

Swift believes she will get no opportunity to feel accomplished as a woman because of the impending side effects her actions will soon produce.

In her bridge, Swift furthers the conversation more asking “What’s it like to brag about drinking and dollars...” as she is not given the authority to do this based solely on her gender (“The Man”). Swift, through experience, shares “if I was out flashing my dollars, I’d be a bitch not a baller” – furthering her ability to critique the people who critique her (“The Man”). Seeing the expectations for women concerning her position shows why it is okay for her to be upset. Not only has the media attacked her for her relationships and her capability to produce quality work as an artist, but her ability to act in a way that pleases herself – not the public – are unknown. “The Man” shows that the “negativity surrounding her career would not factor into her reputation and would, perhaps, enhance her public perception” if these expectations were gone (Idika). While flaws and failures are a part of human nature, she is constantly under a microscope that awaits her plunder. When she fails, she is immediately criticized or joked about. Instead of allowing her to write her own narrative, outside, public spectators take the liberty of writing Swift’s experience for her and they critique her along the way. While she may be tired of running away from her critics, her status in the public pop universe is bound to put her in this position again. She expects for her reputation to be questioned and she is ready to defend herself.

With their reputations on the line, Queen Elizabeth I and Taylor Swift have to handle their public personas delicately. The mere idea of pairing these women together is undoubtedly strange as they deal with opposite sides of history, but the way both of these women use gender in order to show their power is incredible. For Queen Elizabeth I, her innate androgyny and application of masculine rhetoric to her speeches allow her to dutifully preside over the English monarchy. For Taylor Swift, she must take on the role of a man in order to be taken seriously.

Both women, however, face criticism simply based on their gender. They recognize their position as women and offer an alternative, more gender fluid perspective in order to show off their power. The queen exhibits power through her leadership skills that are still praised. While she is critiqued for being a woman, she takes on a traditionally male role and leads undoubtedly well. Swift, who is one of the highest paid musicians, sees her gender as a way to critique what has been said to her as a woman and turn the tables as she offers a look into reality in “The Man.” Though both of these women have to deal with criticism, their positions of feminine solidarity remain unhinged. Both are able to combat the criticism by explaining their actions and showing the control that is given to them in their respective positions. Queen Elizabeth I, for example, directly makes examples of those who critique her while Taylor Swift produces major money-making singles that are bound to send her into the top of the charts. Both women use their authority to stray away from gender norms to ground their arguments and, in doing so, show their power.

### **Conclusion: A Room of Their Own**

While the successes of female characters, authors, and performers can be questioned by society, it is not their ability to produce quality work that is being criticized. It is not by “obstacle” or “foreign matter unconsumed” that women are analyzed (Woolf 63). It *is* bias, constructed solely on the basis of gender, that these creative revolutionaries are questioned in their different faculties. Though centuries pass in between these publications, the implications of female action remain the same in the public light. In the area of experience, both Chaucer’s Alison and Ariana Grande have relationships that exhaust women’s opportunity to be seen as equal. Though these women may not be formally educated in concerns to the relationships they form, their authority through personal experience gives them the agency needed in order to speak

upon the subject. Both of these women talk back to their critics and defy what is expected of them. They refuse to be silenced as they are independent and knowledgeable in their own merit. Through the critique of Jonathon Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room," Lady Mary Montagu produces an unexpected but necessary portrayal of Swift as she claims his incompetence towards the struggle of women came from a lack of experience. Swift's criticism over the imperfections of women's bodies, as well as the push back by Montagu, align with the experiences of Billie Eilish and her critics. By privatizing her body, Eilish removes narratives similar to that of Swift from her radar. She reclaims her body from the public in a manner that parallels the literary stylings of Montagu. Though it may seem like a "pure waste of time to consult all those gentlemen who specialize in woman and her effect on whatever it may be," these male writers who characterize women in satirical or politically-defiant ways directly criticize either the manner of the woman perceived in society seen in Chaucer's work or the failures of women attempting to socially conform represented by Jonathon Swift's poetry (Woolf 36). Even through clouded experience, the implications of male criticism and the need for defiance is clear.

Concerning the area of performance, the parallel between Margery Kempe and Lady Gaga highlight the separation of identity through public and private actions. What drives both women is their audience – the more they can perform, the better off they will be. Though both these women are heavily doubted as serious beings, their ability to look beyond the criticism they receive to remain devoted to their cause is impeccable. Kempe, seen as manic, is disregarded by a society that merely sees her as an attention-seeking, over-devoted Catholic while Gaga is seen as being too innovative by gender-bending her identities. Both of these women, however, are seen as incapable of reaching legitimate status because of how they express themselves. By pushing back against these critical thoughts, these women are able to perform in a manner that

satisfies them. It is not for the male viewer that they perform but for the self. This defiance of conformity also occurs in the realm of assumption as well. Because of how Finch, Philips, and Perry present themselves to their audience, they are expected to fit inside a defined bubble. The positions in which these women thrive are far from what is presumed, thus complicating the narrative that is spun for them. Within this web of idealism, Finch and Philips deal with specific details of feminine identity that does not apply. As Finch and Philips address the truth in concern to their personal experiences, the connection to Perry becomes clearer. Exposing the truth behind societal constructs gives these women agency as they develop their own protocol for handling personal situations. These three women show that their differences from the expectations of womanhood make them successful.

Reputation also plays a role in the discussion of female criticism and the ability for women to push back against these narratives. As seen in the case of Queen Elizabeth I and Taylor Swift, the esteem of a woman is based on social constructs of leadership and capability that are focused mainly on masculine ability. This imbalance of status automatically sets women up to be seen as less capable than their male counterparts. Challenging these acceptable actions, however, alters one's reputation. Both women push back on stereotypes and expectations that exist within their respective cultures by removing the barriers of gender and applying a more fluid approach in their writings. Queen Elizabeth I, who leads men into battle and cuts off the hand of those who aim to defy her, allows for masculine rhetoric to aid her authority. Meanwhile, Taylor Swift uses masculine images and refutes counterproductive alternatives to her narrative's framework. Both effectively silence those who attempt to ruin their reputations by taking back their power and removing gender as a means of being critiqued.

Though both sexes face moments in life that are “arduous, difficult, a perpetual struggle,” the criticism received by these women complicate their expressions and narratives beyond reason (Woolf 40). Even as these texts span over the course of several centuries, the success of women publishing personal experiences and showcasing their talents through writing are influenced by the backlash that they receive. Instead of truly seeing the meaning behind the written words, the façade of feminine expectations in one’s society cloud what is meant to be perceived. However, using personal means of defiance to push back against the criticism that these women receive, each woman is given the agency to explain and alter her situation to showcase her own reality. By contrasting the critical means of approaching women’s writing with true experience and individual accounts, women are given the faculty to refute the claims made about them; they are able to express and explain themselves as they please. Both women authors and songwriters, though criticized, are no longer limited to the confines of a world designed by man – it is a woman’s place to decide what a woman says.

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