

26 June 2003

Here Comes the Bride, All Dressed in *Purple*?:

The Inherent Dual Reality of American Women

^{¶1} Next May, I will join the ranks of America's married women. For the past six months, I have spent all of my previously free time planning the wedding of a lifetime. This is only going to happen once for me, and it has to be a day to remember. So, I struggle to create the "perfect" day by making sure every detail, from the number of guests to the number of bobby pins that will hold my hair in place, is just perfect. Would it be easier to catch a plane to Las Vegas? Certainly! But would that be acceptable? Certainly not, considering that many of my friends and family members have been waiting a very long time for this. Naturally, so have I; however, I have always thought this was supposed to be *my* day. Slowly, I am realizing that by entering into married life, I will officially personify the typical American woman.

^{¶2} With that realization, I have to ask myself several questions. What *is* the typical American woman, and where does she come from? Is she married, domesticated, and devoting her life to raising children and keeping house? Or is she independent, successful in her chosen line of work, and devoted to staying that way? Perhaps the experience of selecting and donning the perfect wedding gown helps answer those questions. The wedding gown may be the ultimate symbol of the American woman. Presently, my gown hangs in my closet, wrapped in layers of white sheets and a stiff plastic dress bag. This is how it must be stored, according to the instruction manual that accompanied its purchase. It is imperative that it does not touch the floor. Likewise, it must remain tightly bound in clean white sheets, to ward off any dust or unclean particles that may be floating about in my home. Under no circumstances is my fiancé to see the dress until our wedding day. My gown is preserved, untouched, sealed away from the world until its unveiling.

^{¶3} Privately, I unzip the plastic dress bag and remove the layers of sheets. The gown is beautiful, new and white, with layers of organza and chiffon, tiny rhinestone-encrusted straps, and a long, flowing train. It is precious but sturdy, subdued yet slightly on the extravagant side. It has a life of its own, fully emerged from its cocoon. Contradicting its smooth appearance, it is incredibly stiff, not unlike the protocol surrounding its purchase. The

etiquette books I pored over daily during the months leading up to my selection warned against choosing the wrong dress for certain times of day, specifying the styles appropriate for certain venues. Even my wedding planner contains a special reference chart that matches each wedding style and the time of day with the proper dress style. For example, for my semiformal daytime wedding, I should be wearing a “street-length dress” with a “short veil.”

¹⁴ Standing there looking at my dress, something becomes clear to me: this gown symbolizes not only my experience as a bride but also my experience as a woman. I can stand up on my own, but I am definitely precious. I am subdued and extravagant all at once. Up until this point, I have been pure and preserved, just like my gown, waiting for my husband to whisk me off into womanhood. Just like Cinderella, I wait patiently to be swept off my feet by my handsome prince. This is how it must be, of course, since that is the image of love and marriage women grow up with. I wear white to symbolize my virginity, and I strive to appear as desirable as possible. Of course, none of this is more than an image, since I live in the real world like everyone else. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find an American woman who could live up to such expectations. These days, we know full well that Prince Charming only exists in fairy tales, and young brides in America these days are rarely expected to be pure and virginal. Yet we go through the motions, enjoying our moment in the spotlight, while we fully know that more than one person in the crowd will whisper, “I can’t believe she’s wearing white!” at least once during the ceremony.

¹⁵ For these reasons, I am inclined to agree with a professor of media and American studies, Susan Douglas, who states, “American women today are a bundle of contradictions” (291). Like my wedding gown, I am full of mixed messages. I love the delicate, feminine nature of my gown, yet I am by no means settling into that same role as a woman. I am quite subdued at times, even when I would prefer to be loud. Women live in a world of dual realities. We say one thing when we mean another and we constantly embrace opposite images simultaneously. We love to be regarded as delicate and cute, and we know full well that we are neither of those things. My wedding is a perfect example of this contradiction: while I will happily conform to the basic expectations of my gender during the wedding celebration, I will secretly roll my eyes at the very implication of such outdated notions.

¹⁶ Where does this dual reality come from? Perhaps the manner in which the female gender is constructed in America directly results in the contradictory life-style women find themselves in during adulthood. Phyllis A. Katz, author of “The Development of Female Identity,” emphasizes the importance of gender in American culture, saying, “gender is an integral part of who we are, how we think about ourselves, and how others respond to us” (4). From

the time a girl is born, she begins constantly training in order to one day enter womanhood, traditionally marked by her wedding. An examination of the dominant interpretation of marriage in modern society leads to this interesting conclusion: men and women have been specifically modeled into stereotypes reflective of masculinity or femininity. However, perhaps these stereotypes are no longer sufficient for today's American woman. In fact, it seems as though gender is constructed in a manner that reflects age-old traditions, and not the dual reality in which modern American women live.

Under Construction

¹⁷ The process by which a traditional gender role is embedded in the behavior and actions of men and women is a lifelong method of creation. To explore this process of construction it is imperative to understand the difference between sex and gender. As stated by Judith Howard and Jocelyn Hollander, professors of sociology who study gender differences, the term *sex* encompasses the “biological characteristics” that differentiate males and females (9). The authors continue in their discussion of sex and gender, defining gender as “the social behaviors and characteristics associated with biological sex” (10). We should steer clear of the conventional American perception of gender, described by Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon in a study of gender in American culture as the tendency to regard “socially determined gender roles . . . as naturally dictated sexual necessities” (440). Only by separating sex and gender can we begin to comprehend the implication of gender construction on all areas of life.

¹⁸ The gender construction process involves a “very long and pervasive apprenticeship in maleness or femaleness” (Katz 4). Holly Devor, author of an essay that discusses the social meaning of gender, explains that between the ages of eighteen months and two years, a child will have settled into a gender identity, and by the age of three, her notion of gender is “fairly firm and consistent” (414-415). Phyllis A. Magrab of the Department of Pediatrics at Georgetown University agrees that sex-type, or gender, begins at birth, but she argues that it does not become stabilized until age four or five (117). Whatever the completion age, the conclusion is the same: gender is a construction process that is initialized and made constant during childhood.

¹⁹ Out of the construction of gender comes the permanence of gender identity. Howard and Hollander define gender identity as “one’s inner sense of oneself as female or male” and agree that gender identity, like gender itself, “develops during very early childhood, and once established, it is quite resistant to change” (16). Femininity is established through pink ruffles, cuddly dolls, and E-Z Bake Ovens. Young girls are given a Barbie doll and her

dream house as a replica of real life. The female gender identity is seemingly nonfunctional in today's world, yet it is instilled almost permanently into young girls. American women are not the image of frills and ball gowns that Barbie portrays, and we need more in our lives than Ken and a mansion. In response to this reality, there are new, more modern Barbie dolls for young girls to choose from. These days, Princess Barbie stands on the shelf right next to Lawyer Barbie. Interestingly, their clothes are completely interchangeable. Thus, by day, Barbie is a high-powered lawyer, while by night she dons a frilly dress and takes care of her dream mansion and her perfect, handsome husband. The traditional model for gender construction remains in place: Barbie's life choices may be changing, but she is still a proper lady. What message about reality does a young girl receive from such an image? Is it okay to live in a dual reality? To answer these questions, it may help to discuss who is responsible for the construction of America's vision of femininity.

Do as I say, *and* as I do

^{¶10} The parental role surrounding gender construction is perhaps the most influential. The first role models for a child are her mother and father. As Phyllis A. Katz states, “acquiring the constellation of behaviors involved in gender-role patterning is accomplished primarily by years of observing parents” (5). Katz also points out that “most parents hold definite ideas about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior for boys and girls” (5). For the most part, it is acceptable to let little boys run around and generally make messes of themselves. Boys will be boys. In contrast, little girls are often taught that they are responsible for cleaning up after these messes, given play vacuums and other related toys. Katz illustrates the shaping of a child's gender through a discussion of life stages, concluding that the key influence in categorizing gender identity is parental (17). Likewise, as Howard and Hollander profess, children “learn gendered behavior from their environment” (28). The first environment for a child is her home, and her only models are her parents. Thus, a young girl naturally imitates parental behavior and is subject to her parent's notion of gender identity. She is most likely rewarded for being “appropriately . . . feminine” (29).

^{¶11} Early childhood contains the first instances of gender performances. Interestingly, most early gendered activities and symbols of gender involve specific clothing, such as the Easter dress. For example, I remember how hard my mother worked to find Easter dresses for my sister and me. We got new dresses every year as we went through the various stages of “cute.” I especially remember the jealousy I felt while watching my brother lounge and

relax during those long Easter Sunday services in the hot, stuffy church. He wore pants, of course, while I had to figure out how to get comfortable underneath layers of tulle, ribbon, and panty hose that properly displayed me as a little girl. I certainly did revel in my cuteness back at the house for Easter brunch, however. I could not get enough oohs and aahs from my relatives. Though I did not realize it, I was already accepting my place in the dual reality of femininity.

^{¶12} There are, of course, differences in the influence of mothers and fathers. Though it is often overlooked, fathers do indeed play a role in the gender construction of their daughters. Michael E. Lamb, Margaret Tresch Owen, and Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, members of the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan, contend in “The Father-Daughter Relationship” that fathers concern themselves “with the attainment and maintenance of conformity to traditional sex roles” and leave the majority of the responsibility for their daughters’ development to their wives (89). Although fathers tend to leave the task of shaping their daughters’ appropriate behavior to their female counterparts, research shows that “both parents [expect] trustworthiness, truthfulness, and ‘ladylike’ behavior from their daughters” (101). “Ladylike behavior” often includes following the model of the mother, that is, learning to appreciate the domestic, nurturing role that a young girl sees her mother embrace. Research also shows that the extent to which the parental influence is masculine affects the femininity of young girls: a heightened degree of masculinity leads to a similar increase in feminine behavior (102). This is to be expected, considering that a heightened level of masculinity on the father’s part will most likely contribute to an equivalently high level of femininity in the mother’s actions, and as will be discussed next, the mother’s influence on her daughter is perhaps the most influential.

^{¶13} Ultimately, a girl’s mother will provide the “major model of femininity” (Lamb, Owen, and Chase-Lansdale 103). Katz points out that gender-specific behaviors are acquired through “imitating characteristic behaviors of the same-sex parent” (5). In the case of a girl, the model would be her mother. Magrab agrees, saying that “as women, we carry our mothers with us in every breath, in every decision, in every success, and in every failure” (113). As all of these experts concur, a girl’s mother accomplishes the majority of gender construction in the familial sense. “Through her mother [a girl] will learn about feminine role behavior and cultural expectations” (Magrab 118). Typically, those behaviors include caring for all members of the family, ensuring her male counterpart’s contentment, and the general presentation of herself as desirable to her male counterpart. In conclusion, the mother’s role as parent most strongly influences a girl’s gender identity and motivation toward

gender identity (Magrab 117). Combined with the influence of her father, a young girl's femininity is powerfully imprinted by parental influence.

^{¶14} It is also interesting to consider the effect of childhood play on the creation of gendered boys and girls. Brian Smith-Sutton, in an essay describing childhood play and its influence on gender construction, concludes that “although there has been considerable historical change in girls’ play and games, there has also been considerable persistence of older stereotypical forms” (229). Smith-Sutton goes on to add that studies of childhood play give evidence of the female tendency to maintain “traditional female ways” (250). Remember Barbie and her dream house? A girl could spend hours rearranging the furniture and cooking Ken’s favorite meal. Smith-Sutton cites a study done in Ohio regarding the most popular types of play for girls. “Dressing up” rates second only to “dolls” (Smith-Sutton 245). Young girls imitate their mothers’ choices in this popular form of play, even donning their mother’s clothing. The parental influence on gender blends with the selection of games offered to girls by their parents to create properly gendered little ladies.

^{¶15} Now we must ask ourselves if homemaker is the typical role for today’s woman. Should young girls be made to think that their future consists of pleasing a man and having children? These days, more and more women are entering the work force, contradicting the notion that marrying and raising children signify adulthood. Young girls are increasingly urged to pursue their goals, career or otherwise, by their parents. Perhaps most interesting is that many American families today consist of two working parents, so while Mom is instilling traditional expectations her daughter, she is contradicting her own influence every day as she goes off to work. Is parental influence truly preparing young women for later life, or does this aspect of gender construction need a makeover?



But All My Friends Are Doing It!

^{¶16} Mother and father are not wholly responsible for the creation of a gendered female. Societal influence takes precedence the moment a young girl enters the world outside her family. Society reinforces the standard version of femininity by supporting traditional gender roles. Maasik and Solomon point out that gender roles are highly dependant on the expectations of society (440). American society has its own ideas of appropriate roles for men and women. Rhoda K. Unger, A professor of psychology at Montclair State College, goes as far as to say that society is almost completely responsible for a gendered male or female (116). She maintains that “the major determinants of sex-related behavior are the expectations, social roles, and demands conferred on the individual by



his or her social sex” (116). Some theorists believe that gender construction is one of the main goals of a society. Holly Devor accepts this idea, saying, “the process of learning to think about gender . . . is one prerequisite to becoming a full member of society” (416). Thus, it is suggested that society not only determines proper gender identity but also determines whether a girl is “feminine” enough to become a member.

^{¶17} American culture holds a specific view of social reality based on steadfast traditions, which are reflected in the expectations of men and women. According to Rachel Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek, two professors who focus on gender construction as it applies to women, “gender has emerged as a significant category of social reality” (“On Making” 2). Psychologists encompass this idea in the term *gender code*. Maasik and Solomon define this as “a culturally constructed belief system that dictates the appropriate roles and behavior for men and women in society” (438). These authors go on to point out that cultural values are most often reflected in our gender codes (438). Other analysts refer to gender codes as *gender roles*. Howard and Hollander characterize this as the referral to “characteristics and behaviors believed to be appropriate for men or for women” (15). Again, society emerges most often as the deciding factor in the suitability of male and female behaviors.

^{¶18} These gender codes, or expectations, are displayed in gender performances. Holly Devor elaborates on this idea, saying, “learning to behave in accordance with one’s gender is a lifelong process...society demands different gender performances from us . . .” (414). A wedding can be viewed as such a performance, in which the bride and groom take center stage as the lead actors. Another example of a gender performance is the prom, when young men and women experience an initial attempt at formal masculinity and femininity. Girls search endlessly for the perfect dress, while boys practice incessantly to perfect their invitation. At the prom, one lucky couple takes center stage as the King and Queen, voted into this position by their peers. This example of a gender performance nicely reveals people’s perceptions, feelings, and actions toward one another resulting from gender construction that social psychologists Peter Glick and Susan Fiske discuss in a joint essay (“Gender” 365). These factors are evident in the interaction of participants and observers in both the prom performance and the wedding ceremony.

^{¶19} Whether using the term *gender code* or *gender role*, the meaning is the same: society has definite expectations of men and women and helps to shape traditional gender roles through interactions. Howard and Hollander point out that it would be difficult to find an individual who remains unaffected by culture’s standards

(32), so to reject those values would mean rejection of the culture itself. Devor validates this assumption, saying, “society demands different gender performances from us and rewards, tolerates, or punishes us differently for conformity to, or digression from, social norms” (414). It is quite undesirable for a woman to ignore society’s expectations. These days, those expectations include embracing the traditional female persona, married, docile, and family oriented, with the modern one, independent and successful. Society as a whole looks upon women who focus solely on their careers or professional lives as deficient and defective, in effect punishing these women for rejecting the American female dual reality.

^{¶20} That being said, it seems as though the reality of modern society denies traditional prescriptions for men and women in most cases while continuing to uphold them theoretically. A wedding, for example, certainly reflects the conventional female persona, but it is doubtful whether a bride will continue to maintain the image of femininity she reflects on her wedding day. Though for the most part women place family over occupation in terms of priority, more women attend college and pursue careers than ever before. This is entirely acceptable in society, since as much emphasis seems to be placed on women to attain success as is on men. It is becoming clear that women lead very complicated lives. Family and society strive to instill traditions of past decades into young women while simultaneously suggesting that girls can be anything and do anything. The acceptable gender code for women does not seem to have changed to reflect the new reality for American women. Hence, women find themselves living in a dual reality, attempting to live two lives, contradicting themselves on a daily basis.

I Want to Be Just Like Her when I Grow Up!

^{¶21} The existence of gender stereotypes in American culture certainly influences gender construction and the female duality. Men and women alike are bombarded with images every day. Walking by a storefront, we cannot help but notice the beautifully dressed, tall, thin mannequin who sports the latest in acceptable fashion. Even turning on the television or opening a magazine exposes what a woman should look like. Peter Glick and Susan Fiske describe the stereotype phenomenon well, saying, “the influence of gender stereotypes is particularly strong because, unlike many other stereotypes that are merely descriptive, gender stereotypes are also prescriptive” (“Gender” 382). So, when we stroll past the storefront and see all of these perfect, yet fake, mannequins, we feel as though we must live up to that image in real life.



^{¶22} Where do these gender stereotypes come from? Devor believes that they are derived from assessments of the “natural” standards for men and women (418). Glick and Fiske agree with Devor and go on to conclude that “gender stereotypes serve to justify gender roles” (“Gender” 382). Interestingly, evidence shows that today’s stereotypes may still be partially based on those of fifty years ago. While stereotypes may “change and mutate and evolve over different time periods and within different cultural contexts,” as Professor of Sociology Suzanna Danuta Walters argues (226), but this evolution of stereotypes does not necessarily result in the alteration of associated gender expectations. Glick and Fiske agree, citing research that shows that any new expectations for women or changes in society are not enough to alter the traditional stereotypes. Rather, these changes are encompassed in a variety of subtypes (“Gender” 382). Glick and Fiske list “career woman and feminist” among the subtypes, and conclude that these subtypes are “not likeable” (“Sexism” 201). Recall society’s tendency to punish those women who stray from the norm. This punishment includes different labels, such as “femi-nazi” or “dyke.” Women in these deviant stereotypical subtypes differ too much from society’s general female stereotype. This stereotypical woman is emotional and “content to serve in subordinate roles” (“Sexism” 195). In the end, the “female stereotype presupposes conventional women, including subtypes such as housewife . . .”(Glick and Fiske “Sexism” 201).

^{¶23} When considering the acceptable stereotypes for American women, the question of adequacy is raised again. Are traditional stereotypes sufficient in today’s society? As Glick and Fiske say, “surely as social roles change so ought the stereotypes” (“Gender” 382). Walters wonders, as I do, “Who gets to say what is a stereotype and what is a more ‘realistic’ portrayal?” (226). In fact, reality does indeed seem to contradict traditional stereotypes. Today while strolling past a storefront, a woman might see a tall, thin mannequin, sporting the latest style of evening wear while simultaneously carrying a briefcase and talking on her cell phone. After browsing the women’s wear shops, a woman might go purchase Doctor Barbie or Lawyer Barbie for her daughter.

^{¶24} So, in addition to gender construction itself, the stereotypes that result from gender construction need alteration. It seems as though society may be on the right track. For example, young women have Madonna as a stereotype today, which provides them with an image of complete freedom of choice combined with the acceptance and approval of traditional motherhood. However, many young girls are warned not to follow in the footsteps of someone like Madonna; her actions and decisions make her seem immoral to many adults in our society.

Here Comes the Bride

^{¶25} A typical American wedding illustrates a woman's contradictory life-style as no other gender performance can. Marriage is a girl's springboard into womanhood, and the ultimate expression of the gender stereotype. American culture maintains a very traditional interpretation of marriage that serves to uphold long-established feminine ideals while ignoring modern realities, hence establishing a contradictory life-style. The vast majority of the country expects a girl in a white dress walk to the aisle on the arm of her father to be "given" to her new husband, creating the image of dependence and purity, even though in reality, many young brides could not, and would not want to, live up to that image.

^{¶26} The association between gender construction and marriage begins at an early age. Naturally, a child's parents provide the model for marriage (Katz 20). As I mentioned in the section discussing parental influence on gender construction, girls' games frequently revolve around housekeeping and marriage, emphasizing the construction of a stereotypical femininity from a young age. As women mature, parental influence continues to promote a specific gender code. Katz acknowledges that during adolescence, "marriage becomes a much more significant goal for girls" (19). Women are molded into the traditional accepted gender code for a young bride, one that reflects purity, virginity, and above all, femininity. Lamb, Owen, and Chase-Lansdale discuss this idea in their essay concerning the father-daughter relationship. They reiterate the fact that a female is most likely to model her behavior after that of her mother, however, the authors suggest that this is due to the father's encouragement (99). The majority of fathers feel: that their daughters, for their own good, "must learn their place in the world and be aware of being overly assertive or competent lest they make themselves unattractive marriage prospects" (90). Though this sounds extreme, what father would not want his daughter to end up in a fulfilling love relationship? However, many fathers and parents in general continually reinforce the values listed above while simultaneously encouraging their daughters to succeed in their professional lives. This results in the contradictory life-style girls follow.

^{¶27} A young girl is rewarded for behaving in a feminine manner and is encouraged to repeat sex-stereotyped activities by both family and society. For example, young women are encouraged not to engage in provocative relations with the opposite sex and are even ridiculed for doing so. Acting promiscuously can earn a young girl a lasting negative reputation, as it is society's tendency to punish those who deviate from the norm. To avoid this,

women are most likely trained to fit into a subordinate category of society. As Grace Baruch, Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers suggest, society encourages girls to develop qualities such as “dependency, docility, [and] submissiveness . . .” (70). Glick and Fiske contend that one objective of the female gender role as it is created by society is to instill ideal characteristics of femininity (“Gender” 376). A wedding encompasses these traits in a physical manner. The bride moves from the arm of one man, her father, to another, her new husband, apparently being given away. This undermines the fact that she has actually chosen her mate and emphasizes the dependant nature of femininity. The bride complies with tradition, donning the white dress to signify her virginity and covering her face with a veil. These expectations may appear outdated, but they remain a part of America’s dominant interpretation of a wedding, and gender construction as it is in this culture directly contributes to upholding these beliefs. As Glick and Fiske conclude, “Societies are structured such that social institutions [such as weddings] are imbued with and depend on gender” (“Gender” 372).

¹²⁸ Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers spent three years compiling empirical research concerning women’s lives. In their publication, they explain that “the conventional prescription [for a woman] has been: find a man, have children, and if you are still miserable, figure out how to be a more supportive wife to your husband . . .” (13). The authors conclude that because of the programming they have undergone over a lifetime, the majority of women possess an inflated idea of marriage. American women continue to be under the impression that “true happiness comes from love relationships”(20). Maasik and Solomon illustrate this belief, citing America’s return to the “docile gender roles” to which women conformed in the 1950s and 1960s (442). Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers agree, describing society’s “emphasis on the importance of traditional family life and relationships” (20). The problem arises when we realize that America is not the way it was in the 1950s and 60s. As a society we have advanced beyond the docility and temperance of that era, yet we expect women as a gender to reflect those ideals.

¹²⁹ I do not mean to imply that society has not made advancements in the conception of marriage. Evidence shows that although the dominant interpretation of a wedding is as I have described it, American marriages themselves are changing. Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers agree, saying, “marriage is not the same institution it was thirty years ago, and the trends in society . . . make it unlikely that the old forms will return in the near future” (57). Women are not simply moving from dependence on one man to a life of dependence on another; they move into

independence from their former role. Therefore, it seems strange to adhere to the rigid, gendered expectations culture has for a wedding when those expectations do not necessarily reflect the marriage. Yet women bend to tradition every day, myself included. The day after I became engaged, I invested in the latest bridal fashion magazines to begin my search for the perfect dress. A typical *Bride's* magazine is about 600 pages long, and well over half of those pages are filled with pictures of wedding gowns. There is even a special “Fashion Q & A” section that relays advice from the experts. In the December/January edition, one bride wanted to make sure she had chosen the proper dress for her upcoming wedding in a castle (100). After my bridal magazine experience, I spent weeks, even months, on the quest for my dress, enlisting the help of my mother, sister, best friend, and future sister-in-law along the way, just as I spent years in training to become an American woman, with the help of family and friends along the way. Upon entering the bridal boutiques, I was amazed at the selection of beautiful gowns, glittering headpieces, and flowing veils. I hardly knew where to begin on my quest for that perfect wedding gown, except that I did know I would be wearing white. After all, the bridal magazines picture white, the fairy tales glorify gorgeous white gowns on your wedding day, and every mannequin I saw was adorned in either white or ivory. I knew I had the right dress when my mother gasped and said, “You look just like an angel.” Aha! Finally I had met the challenge of the stereotype. Though we had previously hinted at the possibility of not purchasing the traditional white gown, since both of us realize that I may not perfectly embody tradition, it was never really an option. I bought my perfect gown and continued my planning process.

³⁰ A modern wedding reflects the complicated life of a woman perfectly. It also suggests that perhaps gender construction must change to reflect reality. Values instilled in young girls are reminiscent of decades past, when a young bride truly was sheltered and preserved until her wedding day. Today, there are more options than ever available to women, and by choosing them, women contradict the very idea of a traditional wedding. We are no longer moving from one state of dependence to another. Instead, we are affirming our place in the dual reality that classifies life as a modern American woman.

I Do?

³¹ How are American women to handle this dual reality? Traditional stereotypes receive more and more scrutiny these days as Americans in general are “constructing their own marriages, rather than accepting old patterns and roles” (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 57). Many women choose to place their career before marriage, and the



pursuit of education and success continue to be supported, in addition to healthy relationships. Katz points out “that the traditional message may be changing somewhat. Career interests are certainly becoming more common in adolescent females, and the importance of marriage may be diminishing” (20). In addition, many families delegate the role of caretaker to the father, negating the idea that a woman’s only foreseeable future revolves around child raising. Finally, American culture continues to put a great deal of emphasis on the individual, which opens the door to a break in customary expectations placed on women. Single women these days are not “marital rejects . . . the products of pathological families, or victims of some kind of physical or emotional handicap”; (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 209) instead, these outdated stereotypes simply do not apply to today’s single woman. Modern beliefs and behaviors that reject those stereotypes represent an interpretation of gender coding and marriage in our culture that is quickly gaining momentum.

^{¶32} Some women choose to deal with their contradictory life-style by simply rejecting one aspect of this reality altogether. The “effects of training all women for marriage and motherhood” (Hare-Mustin and Marecek, “On Making” 15, are especially disconcerting to certain branches of the feminism movement. Although an in-depth discussion of feminism is beyond the scope of this essay, it is necessary to briefly touch on this issue as it applies to marriage. Rosemarie Tong, professor of feminist theory at Williams College, explains that there are several different feminist theories, including Marxist, radical, liberal, postmodern, existentialist, and psychoanalytical (“Feminist” 2-7). As Tong indicates, many radical feminists believe that femininity must be given a whole new meaning, since as it stands, the qualities associated with being feminine are simply not valued (4). It is safe to assume that radical feminists reject the notion of a dual reality, since they are divided on the value of motherhood as a female function. Tong explains that while some do not discard wife and mother as acceptable roles for the female gender, they would not choose to have that be a woman’s only reality. On the other hand, other radical feminists dismiss motherhood as a valuable function for women altogether (84). Existentialist feminists, according to Tong, believe that the role of wife/mother greatly limits a woman’s development (207). Some existentialist theory goes so far as to say that “marriage enslaves women” and marriage’s benefits “drain [their] soul[s]” (207). Thus, as Tong says, existentialists say that the first step a woman must take to attain true happiness is to find gainful employment outside the home (211).

^{¶33} However, some feminist theory actually embraces the traditional ideals of femininity, reflecting the view of many American women. As Hare-Mustin and Marecek point out, “not all individuals find prescribed roles

oppressive or confining” (“On Making” 16). Although feminist theory as a whole focuses on attempts to even the playing field for the male and female genders, some theorists do not find fault in living a dual reality. In fact, some feminist approaches to gender differentiation support the continuation of the construction of specific roles. In an essay discussing three waves of feminism in the United States, Tong indicates that feminists in the first wave urged mainly for equality in education for men and women (“Millennial” 173). These feminists did not necessarily believe that women had to give up their domestic lives to attain equality. Hare-Mustin and Marecek confirm this theory in modern times: “[Feminist psychoanalytic theories] celebrate the personal and cultural value of feminine qualities and of the female experience” (“On Making” 18). Hare-Mustin and Marecek explain that some feminists believe that affirming the difference between men and women using gender coding establishes value and feminist distinction for women (“Gender” 52). This theory views the “differences between men and women as essential, universal (at least in contemporary Western culture) . . . and enduring (“Gender” 23). In their direct support of sustaining gender stereotypes, some feminist psychoanalysts are standing behind the conventional gendered vision of marriage.

^{¶34} Perhaps these opposing views summarize what it means to be an American woman. We want desperately to avoid being stereotyped, yet we do not want to lose our identity as women. This is what makes womanhood and feminism as a concept and as a theory so “difficult to analyze,” as Rosemarie Tong says (“Millennial” 193). Of the many feminist theories, none seem to offer women a combination of the different roles they will ultimately face. Some theories dictate the necessity of choosing professional life over domestic or vice versa. Marxist feminism attempts to bridge the gap by suggesting wages for housewives equal to wages for women in the professional sector (Tong, “Feminist” 55). However, maybe it is okay to want two things at once and to accept Susan Douglas’s proposal that “feeling these contradictions on a daily basis is what it means to be an American woman” (297). I suggest that true feminism embraces this contradictory life-style. Douglas agrees, that “such contradictions . . . are also at the heart of what it means to be a feminist” (297). The boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior seem to be widening. These days, women can have it all. In fact, some experts believe that living solely in one area of womanhood, professional or domestic, is ultimately detrimental (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 246). Evidence shows that “women who [are] involved in a combination of roles—marriage, motherhood, and employment—[are] the highest in well-being” (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 247). Although as a gender, women are constructed to conform to traditional expectations and stereotypes, reality is such that women can live in two worlds. Therefore, I suggest that living a life of daily contradiction is not only normal; it is what makes a healthy woman.

I Do.

¹³⁵ I conclude that while gender construction has a long way to go to catch up to the reality of the modern woman, once women come to terms with the natural contradiction of their lives, they will actually come to appreciate it. What woman does not want to be considered beautiful and attractive? What woman does not also want to be appreciated for her success in the workplace and for her strength as a nurturer? We really do say one thing
Smith 15

when we mean something else, but that is okay, because it is what makes us American women. So, while I cannot tell you why gender construction does not yet reflect the reality of modern women, I can attest to the fact that our complicated lives in fact reflect what it means to be a woman. With this in mind, I will smile through the tedious months of planning and agree to disagree with my new mother-in-law over what is proper and what is not. I will be beautiful when I walk down the aisle on my father's arm on my wedding day. I will revel in the oohs and aahs all over again, and I will love every minute of clinging to my new husband. I will preserve my gown for my own daughter to wear if she chooses. I will pursue a successful career and still have dinner ready for my husband when he gets home, should I choose. In the end, I will conform to traditional expectations, but I will not mind. I know that after my wedding day, I am still going to be the average American woman, the average American feminist, accepting this life of contradiction that we all lead. After all, I have spent the past twenty-four years in training for this. So, next May, when I join the ranks of American married women, I will not hesitate to say "I do."

Works Cited

- Baruch, Grace, Rosalind Barnett, and Caryl Rivers. *Lifeprints: New Pattern of Love and Work for Today's Women*. New York: McGraw, 1983.
- Bride's*. Dec. 2001-Jan. 2002: 100.
- Devor, Holly. "Becoming Members of Society: Learning the Social Meanings of Gender." *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*. English 200 Packet.
- Douglas, Susan. "Where the Girls Are." English 200 Packet 1994.
- Glick, Peter, and Susan T. Fiske. "Gender, Power Dynamics, and Social Interaction." *Revisioning Gender* The Gender Lens Series. Ed. Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999. 365-398.
- - -. "Sexism and Other 'Isms': Interdependence, Status, and the Ambivalent Content of Stereotypes." *Sexism and Stereotypes in Modern Society*. Ed. William B. Swann, Jr., Judith H. Langlois, and Lucia Albino Gilbert. Washington: American Psychological Association, 1999. 193-221.
- Hare-Mustin, Rachel T., and Jeanne Marecek. "On Making a Difference." *Making a Difference: Psychology and the Construction of Gender*. Ed. Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek. New Haven: Yale, 1990. 1-21.
- - -. "Gender and the Meaning of Difference: Postmodernism and Psychology." *Making a Difference: Psychology and the Construction of Gender* Ed. Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. 23-64.
- Howard, Judith A., and Jocelyn A. Hollander. *Gendered Situations, Gendered Selves: A Gender Lens on Social Psychology* The Gender Lens Series. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997.
- Katz, Phyllis A. "The Development of Female Identity." *Becoming Female* Ed. Claire B. Kopp. New York: Plenum, 1979. 3-28.
- Lamb, Michael E., Margaret Tresch Owen, and Lindsay Chase-Lansdale. "The Father-Daughter Relationship: Past, Present, and Future." *Becoming Female* Ed. Claire B. Kopp. New York: Plenum Press, 1979. 89-112.

- Maasik, Sonia, and Jack Solomon. "We've Come a Long Way, Maybe." *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers* 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford-St. Martin's, 2000. 437-446.
- Magrab, Phyllis R. "Mothers and Daughters." *Becoming Female*. Ed. Claire B. Kopp. New York: Plenum, 1979. 113-132.
- Smith-Sutton, Brian. "The Play of Girls." *Becoming Female*. Ed. Claire B. Kopp. New York: Plenum, 1979. 229-258.
- Tong, Rosemarie. "A Millennial Feminist Vision." *Controversies in Feminism*. Ed. James P. Sterba. Lanham: Rowan, 2001. 173-193.
- - -. *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Boulder: Westview, 1989.
- Unger, Rhoda K. "Imperfect Reflections of Reality: Psychology Constructs Gender." *Making a Difference: Psychology and the Construction of Gender*. Ed. Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek. New Haven: Yale, 1990. 102-149.
- Walters, Suzanna Danuta. "Sex, Text, and Context: (In) Between Feminism and Cultural Studies." *Revisioning Gender* The Gender Lens Series. Ed. Myra Marx Ferree, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999. 222-257.