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Silence of the Sexes: 
Gender Inversion in Jonathan Demme’s 
The Silence of the Lambs

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ABSTRACT: “Silence of the Sexes: Gender Inversion in Jonathan Demme’s The Silence of the Lambs” focuses on the role gender plays in and between the characters of Clarice Starling, Buffalo Bill, and Dr. Hannibal Lecter in Jonathan Demme’s film The Silence of the Lambs (1991). Specifically, the paper focuses on the struggle for Clarice to masculinize herself to be accepted in her career, and the struggle for Buffalo Bill to feminize himself in order to accept himself. The paper then discusses the inability for the one person to succeed while the other is still an obstacle in his or her path, which then brings in the role of the phallus for Clarice, who otherwise lacks the symbolic authority encoded in the phallus.
ESSAY

When Jonathan Demme's film *The Silence of the Lambs* entered theaters in 1991, many movie goers were highly entertained. However, for others, including many in the feminist and gay communities, irritation and, in some cases, outrage, surfaced. The film's portrayal of the homosexual serial killer Buffalo Bill (as played by Ted Levine) caused many scholars to criticize Demme's portrayal of homosexuality as negative and homophobic (Phillips 37). On the other hand, many feminist critics praised Jodie Foster's portrayal of Clarice Starling as a strong feminist making her way in a man's world while rejecting the male gaze (Phillips 42). However, one critic in particular, Martha Geever, rejected Clarice as a "feminist hero" as a "result of her subjugation by patriarchal superiors" (Phillips 40). In light of these conflicting viewpoints, it is apparent that Jonathan Demme provides in Buffalo Bill and Clarice a diverse mix of characteristics permitting them to defy and reinscribe gender stereotypes simultaneously. Specifically, Demme's film offers two principle characters, Clarice Starling and Buffalo Bill, who challenge traditional gender roles, but the film also suggests that to be feminine is fatal, as is seen in the deaths of Buffalo Bill's victims and his own death, and to be masculine is to survive and conquer in life-threatening situations, as is seen in Clarice's final battle with Buffalo Bill.

Buffalo Bill and Clarice Starling, despite their disruptions to longstanding cultural assumptions regarding masculinity and femininity, do not provide diversity within the film. Instead, they act as mirror images of each other, not only in the present action of the film, but also in both of the characters' histories. While Buffalo Bill strives to become a woman by constructing a suit made from his female victims' skin, Clarice also attempts to become a man, or man-like, through appropriating the symbolic power of the phallus as represented by Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), who, in Lacanian fashion, becomes the signifier through which Clarice overcomes the expectations that society places on the female. Furthermore, the gendered objectives that Buffalo Bill and Clarice Starling seek depend on defeating each other: to become a woman, Bill needs to kill the masculinized woman who threatens his goal of becoming a woman, and Clarice, to achieve her goal of being recognized and accepted as masculine in her job, must stop this feminized male serial killer. Thus, without the death of his/her nemesis, the other cannot achieve his/her goal to become identified with the opposite gender. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Buffalo Bill is a homosexual and a pseudo-transsexual who has been rejected for a sexual reassignment operation due to his psychoses; he therefore becomes a serial killer who skins size-fourteen women in order to assemble a woman—suit for himself, thus to obtain a feminine form. From the first, Bill's record for violence and the mutilation of his victims shocks and confounds in its brutality. Yet, when more is learned of Bill's psyche, his violent and malevolent behavior reveals his desire to become a delicate woman. As a woman, Bill can erase his homosexuality; his attraction to men would thus metamorphose into the social norm. Here, viewers see that Bill's goal of outwardly becoming a woman "expresses an illicit desire to be another sex [and] it reveals confusion about the function of the symbolic nature of 'skins' in the law of nature" (Wolfe and Elmer148). This "symbolic nature of skins" is the physiological division between male and female bodies. The roles these bodies play extend to the social definitions of what it means to be male or female, masculine or feminine, which determines the social rules other characters (not including Bill) live by. Thus, Bill's gender confusion is manifested in the symbolic wolf-in-sheep's camouflage with which he hopes to deceive people, while it also recognizes his need to change his outward identity so that it will conform to his internalized identity.

Bill's mental processes and overall psychological state reflect key concepts explored in Jacques Lacan's theoretical paradigm of the Mirror Stage. According to Lacan, "the mirror stage [is] an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term; namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" ("Mirror" 1124). Lacan points out that one of the symptoms of a negative response to the mirror stage is that the person will become inverted, isolated, and will feel a sense of displacement ("Mirror" 1126). For Bill, these aspects of his psychoses come to fruition in his behavior. Throughout the film, when Bill is shown communicating with another person, it is his victim whom he is ordering to prepare herself for the slaughter by rubbing lotion on her skin. Even Bill's home is in a small, isolated suburb, closed up with dusty, covered windows, and the defining feature of his residence is its basement that holds the only lives he cherishes: that of his poodle and the room of "deaths-head" moths. Therefore, with no person with whom to form a bond, Bill develops a narcissistic desire to admire his makeup and wig in a mirror. In regard to the film's mise-en-scene, the mirror stage takes on a tangible form in the physical mirror in front of which Bill transforms himself.

Bill's sexual orientation also plays a significant role in his mental processes. According to Guy Hocquenghem, "a
man who in intercourse with men feels himself to be a woman is inverted in respect to his own ego, [thus] he feels himself to be a woman, and this not only in genital intercourse, but in all relations of life” (Hocquenghem 1657). This definition fits Buffalo Bill in regard to his desire to become female. For him, it is not enough to feel like a woman, but he must be a woman. Yet, Bill's perception of himself does not end with an attainment of a female body. As Hocquenghem hypothesizes, the attitude associated with “subject-inversion” may also include “narcissism,” which is used to repress the unwanted gendered identity, which in Bill’s case, is male (Hocquenghem 1658). Specifically, Hocquenghem employs the term “narcissism” to identify behavior that involves excessive self-love, particularly physical self-love. Ironically, the physical self-love named for the Greek god, Narcissus, in this instance, is used to describe a character whose self-love involves viewing himself as a Greek goddess. In the scene in which Bill cross-dresses in his basement, this narcissism regarding typical female behavior is depicted in his gently applying makeup, wrapping himself in a delicate, colorful satin wrap, and tucking his genitalia between his legs. Here, the proof that Bill knows how to become feminine begins. However, it is when he poses in the form of a naked Greek goddess, in front of a camera, that the narcissism is most evident. And it is through this act that Bill also becomes more convinced that he must succeed at being a woman to feel comfortable in his own skin.

Why is it, though, that Bill can only be comfortable in the skin of the opposite sex? In theorizing the mind-set of the subject-inverted homosexual, Hocquenghem discusses a perversion in the minds of such feminized males. He states that this “perversion […]” leads both to a passive homosexuality and to a moral masochism—the fear of man as the father image” (Hocquenghem 1660). For Bill, though, only the latter part applies. In one of Clarice’s meetings with Dr. Lecter, Lecter explains that as a child Bill was sexually abused by a male figure (whether it is the father is not known), which explains why Bill covets the female form. It is the gender that has not harmed him, and therefore, one that he would rather embrace. This masochism, however, is the only part of this particular section of Hocquenghem’s theory that fits Bill. Lecter also says in the same scene that Bill “hates his own identity … and he thinks that makes him a transsexual. But his pathology is a thousand times more savage.”

Interestingly, this masochism and savagery do not make Bill a completely unfeeling and monstrous man, demonstrating the gendered complexity of Demme’s characters. According to Hocquenghem, “inversion is entangled with masochism because perversion is inevitably entangled with neurosis,” in which a cycle of “pleasure in guilt, the guilt of pleasure and … the pleasure of guilt, reign supreme” (Hocquenghem 1660). When Bill imprisons his newest victim, Catherine Martin (Brooke Smith), in the well of his basement, and orders her to “rub the lotion on its skin,” he begins to see Catherine as a human being rather than merely as skin for his suit. As she cries, “I want to see my mommy,” Bill’s lip begins to quiver and his eyes tear up. Then, irritated by the guilt he feels, Bill screams at Catherine and mockingly mimics her panic when she sees the fingernail of his last victim stuck in the wall of the well. His guilt here transforms into a perverted pleasure at reminding himself that he has power over the frightened Catherine. In a similar fashion, his stereotypical feminine behavior, his quivering lip and tears, transforms into stereotypical masculine behavior, as he demonstrates his power. This depiction of Bill demonstrates that his goal to achieve femininity threatens real women, not only his female victims, but also Clarice who is trying to slough off her own female identity. For Bill to achieve a female body to accompany his feminine behavior rewrites the sexual boundaries of the female gender. Specifically, if Bill attains the female form, and is able to deceive both men and women, barring them from realizing his biological sex, he will have redefined what it means to be female. This possibility of gender reassignment leaves women to reevaluate their own gender: can women completely erase their gender by obtaining a male body, or could a person who is born female be stripped of her right to call herself “woman” by men who become women? This is the threat Bill poses to all women, whether they identify themselves as feminine or lack a sexual identification, as is the case with Clarice. In his attempt to become feminine, Bill uses masculine physical strength to thwart Clarice, while also, although without his direct knowledge, risking Clarice’s career. Without Bill’s capture or death, Clarice cannot attain the masculine recognition she tries so hard to gain.

Bill is not the only obstacle that Clarice faces in her quest to attain masculine privilege. While Bill dresses up as a woman and attempts to behave in a feminine manner within that guise, Clarice attempts to look as non-feminine as possible. While her appearance and behavior do not cause terror for those she encounters, confusion
nonetheless surfaces, particularly in response to her wardrobe. Throughout the film Clarice hides her breasts by wearing some form of baggy clothing, such as a sweatshirt, sweater, or sport jacket, deliberately drawing attention away from her feminine form. In addition, she rarely, if ever, engages in feminine behavior. Rather than reinforcing gender stereotypes by acting in a flirtatious and chatty manner, she is reserved and shows little emotion in most situations. In fact, it is only when her psyche is deeply affected by Dr. Hannibal Lecter that she cries alone. Instead, she fights for her safety and that of Catherine Martin (overcoming the danger she faces and rescuing the damsel in distress, in a sense) to prove her strength to the men in her occupational sphere. However, despite Clarice’s strength, she does not rescue Catherine Martin, kill Buffalo Bill, or achieve her masculinity on her own. Instead, by modeling herself on her father, on successful men within her profession, and, curiously enough, on Dr. Lecter, Clarice gains a new psychological outlook on herself and thus is able to become masculine from what begins as an asexual identity.

In her essay “One Is Not Born a Woman,” Monique Wittig quotes Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that “one is not born, but becomes a woman.” No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society” (de Beauvoir qtd. in Wittig 1638). From this perspective, Wittig defines what does not make a “woman.” In biology, there is no gender, but only sexes. And psychologically, if there is no female role model to teach a young girl to follow societal standards of feminine behavior, then that girl will develop an identity that does not conform to the social standards and stereotypes of her gender. This lack of engagement with the female role, however, is not the only means by which Clarice subverts the notions of femininity. She also resists the conventional representation of the female body, as represented by the ‘myth of woman.’

Despite this upbringing that fails to shape her into a feminine mold, Clarice does not remain ignorant of the male gaze. Instead, as viewers look beyond Clarice’s childhood into her career and her decision to become a student at the FBI training school, it is apparent that the “myth of woman” is placed on her by her male superiors and co-workers. According to Wittig, this “myth of woman” is the mark imposed by the “oppressor” (1638). In the film, this “myth of woman” not only extends to the cantion which men take around Clarice in discussing Buffalo Bill’s victims due to their belief in the myth that women are delicate, but it also manifests itself in her colleagues’ and even Lecter’s sexual advances.

Because Clarice did not imbibe the woman myth in her youth, she is able to oppose the ways in which heterosexuality often subjugates women. Tim Edwards maintains that “sexuality is a socially constructed means for male domination of women,” and that the domination of women “seeks to deconstruct the idea of any central sexuality,” thereby validating sexual diversity (Edwards qtd. in Phillips 36). In Clarice, though, viewers see her constant attempt to subvert the male-dominant system in her ability to assert herself in places and situations where she is either not allowed or not wanted. For instance, when she interviews Lecter without the permission of Dr. Chilton (the warden of the mental hospital/prison where Lecter is imprisoned, as played by Anthony Heald), Dr. Chilton confronts her, claiming that he has a right to the information she is gathering. To this comment, Clarice tells him that he must contact the state office and let her do her job, which not only shows strength, but also her rejection of the social standards set up for female submissiveness. This lack of engagement with the female role, however, is not the only means by which Clarice is able to assert herself in a male-dominated profession.

While rejecting typical female behavior, Clarice does not express male behavior either, at least initially. Rather, she approaches her career and colleagues with an asexual attitude, so much in fact that she “seems utterly indifferent to any suggestion of romance” no matter who or in what form it is presented to her (Robbins 72). One such example of her gendered indifference is directed toward Dr. Chilton upon her first visit to his mental hospital. In his office, he asks her if she will be staying in Baltimore.
In this scene Clarice's training into masculinity begins. Bruce Robbins points out that, for Clarice, "to become a professional is to resemble the serial murderer [Hannibal Lecter] who is her mentor" (81). When Clarice initially offers Lecter the questionnaire, after having a civil conversation about the prisoner Miggs' comment ("I can smell your cunt"), and her status as a student at the FBI academy, Lecter says, "no, you were doing just fine. You had been courteous and receptive to courtesy. You had established trust with the embarrassing truth about Miggs." This is the first guidance Clarice receives from Lecter, and as the plot continues, this first piece of advice proves useful in obtaining entry into Buffalo Bill's home.

In the scene depicting Catherine's rescue, Clarice gains entrance into Buffalo Bill's home by courteously addressing him as James Gumb, faking ignorance that Gumb is Buffalo Bill. She acquires his trust by inquiring about the relationship between the previous owner of the home and Bill's first victim, implying that the former owner is the person whom she is investigating, and she lets Bill think that the FBI is close to capturing Buffalo Bill, but that they lack a physical description of him. Clarice's courteousness and her lies that pretend to be "embarrassing truth[s]" put Bill temporarily at ease, giving Clarice an advantage over the serial killer.

It is not enough, however, that Clarice learns how to be masculine. It is equally important that her desire for masculine power be recognized by the phallicus, which Lecter does not fail to decipher. According to Jacques Lacan, the phallicus is a signifier that the Other achieves through desire. This desire then must be recognized by the subject of the phallicus ("Phallicus" 1154). In the film, Lecter is the subject of the phallicus who must recognize Clarice's desire lies in achieving status within her career. Upon Clarice's leaving her first interview with Lecter, he calls her back and tells her, "I will make you happy. I'll give you a chance for what you love most … Advancement."

Nonetheless, achieving advancement through Lecter's guidance does not fully assist Clarice to realize her transformation into masculinity and masculine privilege. As it stands at this point in the film, Buffalo Bill threatens Clarice's advancement more than the sexual advances posed on her, or the delicacy with which her superiors
and fellow officers treat her. Robbins states that Clarice encounters Bill, who is “clearly a vision of herself. Like her, Buffalo Bill is a product of provincial poverty; like her, he wants to change his life by refusing or subduing his ‘natural’ sexuality. A would-be transsexual, he can hardly avoid echoing the woman who is forced to desex or ‘reset’ herself, to try to be a man in order to make a life for herself in a man’s world” (Robbins 74–75). It is this mirror image of herself that most threatens Clarice. As long as Bill continues to kill women in order to become a woman, Clarice cannot become masculine, for without his capture or death, Clarice’s efforts to capture Bill will go unrecorded and unrewarded. In this instance, masculinity and reward are synonymous, or, alternately, obtaining masculinity will secure the reward for Clarice.

In the first scene of the film, with her superior Jack Crawford, Clarice is told that she was chosen to interview Lecter (and as she finds out later, to secure information about Bill) based on her exceptional performance in her classes and her high grades. She clearly was not chosen for her beauty. However, because her appearance is not a key factor in her advancement, Clarice knows that without Bill’s death, she will not succeed in her highest desire. Therefore, as viewers approach the climax of the film that brings Bill and Clarice to fight for their chosen sexualities, it can be observed that Clarice “rises by suppressing both her own sexuality and Buffalo Bill’s” (Robbins 75). This suppression of sexualities, though, does not necessarily imply that Clarice is suppressing her heterosexuality or Bill’s homosexuality. Instead, she suppresses the male gaze that she is subject to, while suppressing Bill’s ability to gain the male gaze through deception, using his suit made from women’s skin.

Bill also plays a more symbolic role within the film, in regard to gender. Because, as Bruce Robbinis states, Bill is an inverse image of Clarice reversed, he represents the female that Clarice tries to kill within herself. And vice versa: Clarice tries to become the male that Bill tries to kill within himself through his ritual slaughter and skinning of women. Each character plays a crucial role in the other’s success, and therefore, neither can succeed while the other lives. Thus, for Clarice to achieve full masculinity, and to be accepted as an equal among her male colleagues, she must kill Buffalo Bill. When this final goal is achieved, Clarice is rewarded with recognition by her male colleagues and superiors.

In the final scene in which Clarice graduates from the FBI academy, viewers finally see her treated as an equal both in occupational and gendered status. For the first time in the film, Jack Crawford shakes Clarice’s hand upon congratulating her, and says, “Your father would have been proud today.” Here, not only is Clarice’s father acknowledged as contributing to his daughter’s success (as a father to his son), but the handshake also symbolizes that Clarice is now an equal in the male-dominated FBI. Thus, rather than Clarice Starling acting as an example of a feminist character who sheds a stereotypical feminine persona, as many feminist critics assert, Clarice adopts the gender role that best suits her, in this case, a masculine gender role, to replace her former asexual identity.

Conversely to Clarice’s positive outcome and acceptance in the male sphere, Bill’s outcome is significantly different. Whereas Clarice’s lack of a sexual orientation allows her to advance her career, Demme’s film provides a negative and homophobic outlook on Bill’s transsexuality. As the only gay represented within the film, Bill seeks to render his love of men socially acceptable by becoming a woman. In addition, when Bill dresses as a woman and undertakes his own version of sexual reassignment surgery, the film portrays Bill as almost inhuman in the shape-shifting transformation predicated upon skinning and sewing his murdered victims’ skin. Bill’s scenes in drag similarly portray him as creepily and threateningly psychotic, not as someone deserving of sympathy for finding himself trapped in the wrong body. Finally, Demme’s film assigns a stigma to gay men who might seek sexual reassignment by suggesting that they are dangerous, even fatal, to women, and that they could potentially replace women entirely. In actuality, most transsexuals do not identify themselves as homosexuals because they identify themselves as a man or woman trapped in the wrong body. Thus, the film attempts to skew the viewers’ perspectives on gay men and transgender men by combining these two separate identities into one psychotic character, providing a negative stigma on both identities.

This then leads to the underlying theme that to be feminine is to be flawed and frail, and to be masculine is to maintain physical and mental strength and stability. As revealed through Clarice’s case files, each woman whom Bill slaughters and skins responds in sympathy to Bill’s helplessness. In order to abduct Catherine Martin, for instance, Bill has his arm in a sling and attempts to push a couch into his van. Seeing his supposedly broken arm, Catherine approaches him and offers to help him, In
addition, unlike Clarice, Bill's female victims engaged in stereotypical feminine behavior, thereby allowing Bill to play on their culturally learned gentility and passivity, which, in turn, led to their deaths. In fact, the only reason Catherine Martin is not killed is due to the masculine strength that Clarice demonstrates. Not only does Clarice's masculinity save Catherine, it destroys the perversely feminine Bill, who, in his struggle to become feminine, has lost some measure of the masculine strength he once possessed.

Contrary to the threat Bill's feminine transformation poses for women, Clarice's masculine transformation is viewed as non-threatening. The men who encounter Clarice and who maintain their masculinity continue to be successful in their careers, with the only short-term damage being to their pride, after Clarice's rejection of their sexual advances. Thus, Demme's film supports masculine achievement, while condemning feminine behavior, in both the male and female sexes, demonstrating the rewards of masculinity and the fatal consequences of femininity.
WORKS CITED


