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RICE UNIVERSITY

POET IN A HARD HAT: STEVIE SMITH AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Poet in a Hard Hat: Stevie Smith and Gender Construction
by Julie Ann Sims

Stevie Smith's work not only prefigures a key debate in contemporary feminism between essentialists and social constructionists, but also the more current debates that have developed as the constructionist position continues to be explored. She takes an anti-essentialist position as her inaugural point and explores the limits of agency in redefining gender identities against established cultural signification.

Novel on Yellow Paper is best understood in the context of autobiographical fiction, a genre which maintains that identities are always to some extent fictional and, therefore, subject to self-invention. Smith challenges the notion of a fixed, female essence by utilizing a strategy of multivocality. Pompey, the protagonist, adopts a variety of voices which situate her as a product of literary and social discourses and prevent her cooption into a stable subject suitable for matrimony. In Over the Frontier, however, self-construction seems less ideal. It carries the potential for self-destruction. Smith reveals the failure of androgyny as a solution to the woes of femininity and shows that a woman impersonating a man exposes the category "man" as a subject-position inhabitable by either sex.

Smith's hat poems serve as clear examples of the risks and possibilities involved in refashioning gender. Hats serve as vestimentary signs that either reify or reformulate traditional gender identities. Beneath Smith's hats are bodies, not The Body, capitalized, abstracted, and
theorized solely as a text inscribed by history and culture, but particular bodies which, in their differences, bear the marks of socialization. In her poetry, she most often tropes female bodies as prisons; in order to escape essentialist definitions associated with those bodies, she revises fairy tales to imagine physical transformations that transport women into other bodies and alternative sexualities. Similarly, the drawings that accompany her poems subvert poetic statements which appear to endorse "proper" feminine concerns and traditional, masculine literary values.
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To my mother and the white table.
Introduction

My interest in Stevie Smith and gender construction developed after I auditioned for the role of a "blonde bombshell" and lost the part to a man. The role clearly called for an excess of femininity. The character, Lisa, stuffs her bra, girdles her waist, and bleaches her hair to a whiter shade of pale in order to look more like her idol, Marilyn Monroe. Armed with pink lipstick and Aqua-Net, I primped and then scoped the competition in the green room. In the corner stood Kelly, a tall blonde with Miss Universe-length legs, pouty lips, and big Texas hair. My friend Stephen, who one year later would ruin The Crying Game for a group of theater-goers by shouting out "That's a man!" long before Jaye Davidson's penis made its screen debut, whispered, "Kelly's not the woman you are." I took his observation as a form of encouragement and reviewed my script.

"No. Kelly's a man."

In retrospect I am embarrassed to say that my reaction to the situation changed instantly. Stephen proved the better "reader" though I was the degree candidate in English, but this was not the perceived threat. What if I wasn't "woman" enough to get the part? Suddenly I wasn't just competing for a role; I was defending my "natural womanhood" as a kind of entitlement. My insecurity in the audition reared its ugly, highlighted head in a knee-jerk, essentialist attitude. I matched Kelly strut for strut and pose for pose, drawing on years of adolescent practice "naturalized" into my adult state. Of course, I lost.

I say "of course" because the years of hip swinging and eye-lash blinking a woman learns through careful study of Teen and Cosmo do not insure or invest gender authenticity in her body anymore than they do in a
man's. Kelly, cross-dressed, understood what I, also in drag, did not. As Marilyn Monroe was constructed and put-on by the "wanna-be" character, Lisa, whom we both wished to play, so the gender of that character herself was also largely a construct. Lisa admired in Monroe her status as pop icon, but that status was based, in part, on its codification of traditional gender signs and their subsequent replication. Monroe, like Elvis and James Dean, is an enduring object of imitation, repetition, and re-gendering (Garber 369). As such, Kelly's re-gendered imitation of imitation multiplies Monroe's effect. A cross-dressed, aspiring Monroe underscores with more complexity and visual interest the femme-drag Monroe herself embodied. My ontological gender claims to nearness, my alleged proximity to femaleness, failed to call into question the limits of representation and lost the theatricality that the performance of gender always involves. Notably, casting Kelly in the role did not render Lisa's quest parodic or humorous. Most of the audience thought Kelly was "born a woman," and for those who knew otherwise, his/her portrayal of Lisa's attempts to be Marilyn Monroe did not leave room for a reactionary reading that would pity or condemn the play of transvestism. Instead, Kelly's performance in Kennedy's Children, a drama about the failed illusions of the 1960s, destabilized and defamiliarized Monroe's gender codification, dramatizing gender as yet another shifting ground.

The story concludes with opening night. I was still a little miffed about losing the part even if the director's choice was more theoretically compelling. Mostly, I was jealous that he could be a she while I felt stuck in my same old gender role, tottering in the same high heels, unrequited. Then it occurred to me, and I blurted out: "If Kelly can be a woman, I can
be a man. Call me Dave Fox." I don't know where I got the name, but it has stuck ever since, and a group of friends in Houston still refers to me as such; to their children I am "Aunt Dave." The move to appropriate maleness is not, for me, a drive to claim or reaffirm masculinity as a superior cultural power or subjectivity. Nor would I say I prefer the "power of being a woman." The more time I've spent as Dave, the more I have called "man" and "woman", "masculinity" and "femininity" into question. I go by Dave regardless of my dress, mannerisms, or the occasion. It is simply a change in name, but the act denaturalizes the attending masculine qualities that follow the name. How does one reconcile a heterosexual woman with all outward signs of normalized femininity going by a man's name at whim? I recognize that this kind of gender license is, unfortunately, still more sanctioned for women than men. A heterosexual man can not call himself by a woman's name with the same degree of acceptance, unless the move is mockingly misogynistic. To that degree being Dave exploits a kind of sexism and homophobia --women can still hold hands, dance together, or kiss in a way men cannot without disapproval, scorn, or worse. Nevertheless, being Dave allows me to mix and interchange gender signs and roles, picking and choosing them for the moment with the ease of, say, changing clothes or donning a new hat.

* * *

I am acutely aware that the obligatory personal narrative has become a cliché in feminist criticism, but as Terrence Doody observes in his study of the novel, "literary criticism in an autobiographical mode. . . has become a way not so much of 'situating the subject' as of escaping the subject's essentialization and the limits this essentialization has imposed."
My own attempts to escape gender essentialization introduce the more poetic and wide-ranging efforts in the work of Stevie Smith and underscore the fact that the problems attending gender distinctions are as contemporary and pressing today as they were sixty years ago when Smith wrote her first novel. Born in the Edwardian era, in 1902, she grew up in a society which discouraged women's ambition with the threat of the label "unfeminine." Her mother, a frail "romantic girl" as she described her, was abandoned by Smith's father and died when Smith was seventeen. The loss of her mother left the "Lion Aunt," Margaret Spear, with whom she lived for forty-four years, as a role model. In her aunt Stevie found a reflection of the stubborn individualism she could not identify in her mother. Their relationship functioned in many ways like a marriage for Smith; she assumed the "manly" work of bill paying and decision making around the house while the Lion Aunt took up domestic chores. By never choosing to wed, Smith avoided the trap of marriage, for she saw it as a "witch-craft spiderweb of love and affection that seems such a fair house of security" (qtd. in Barbera and McBrien, emphasis added). Smith viewed marriage as an impediment to her own security, to making her own way in the world. Though she took a traditional job for women, working as a secretary for the publishing firm C. Arthur Pearson, Ltd., she appropriated as much time as possible on the job to write her novels and poems.

Throughout her career, Smith strove to break free from the limitations her position as a woman most often assigned her. Nowhere is this more evident than in her name change. Born Florence Margaret
Smith, she chose a masculine name, Stevie, which she went by almost exclusively for most of her life. As she told Kay Dick:

> I was riding on a sort of dull horse you get, one of those hires, poor old thing. It wasn't fed properly; it wouldn't move, so I stood up and kicked it, I'm afraid—not very hard. I was riding in a shirt, which annoyed Arnold very much. He thought it was most improper. And then all the little boys shouted "Come on Steve!" He was the favourite jockey at the time, Steve Donaghue. So Arnold said, "It suits you very well, you look like a jockey, you ride like a jockey, I shall call you Steve." (qtd. in Dick 69)

Although the name was given to her by a man, it was, significantly, not given through marriage. She gradually chose to adopt it on her own, appropriating what she perceived as accompanying masculine prerogatives. In the books she bought in the 1920s, she would alternate inscribing herself as "Florence Margaret," "Peggy," or "Stevie," but by the mid-1930s she used "Stevie" almost exclusively, which suggests to her biographers Jack Barbera and William McBrien that, "in the manner of most writers she began to lead a double life" (41). Significantly, this "double life" was not gendered in Smith's mind so that only the masculinized Stevie could publish, but the feminized Peggy remained at home with her aunt in Palmers Green. Instead, the names embody gender incongruity and signify the importance of choice and agency. As she insisted in an interview with Peter Orr: "[People] are free agents. . . . I think choosing is using human freedom. You know Morgan Forster always said, 'Connect, only connect.' Well, I should say, 'Select, only select.'" (Stenlicht, In Search 34). In most of her work, she directs this imperative to women directly because their choices are most often inhibited or proscribed.
Smith's personal choices and her eccentric self-invention translates in her work as comic incongruity, juxtaposition, allusiveness and multivocality. Most critics, as Romana Huk observes, resort to biographical moves, reading backwards through her speakers' contradictory statements to the writer herself in an effort to apprehend the "real" Stevie Smith. Recent criticism like Huk's, however, rereads Smith's "shifty, polyvocal works precisely as prescient critiques of such conceptions of unmediated subjectivity" (241). This critical strategy foregrounds the construction of selfhood and points to the method with which my dissertation treats Smith. As Huk argues:

Such a rereading involves reidentifying her poems' traditional forms, hymn tunes, reconstructions of fairy tales, and social conversations as problematized representations of, and negotiations with, the competing/collusive languages/voices that construct Smith's English selfhood and womanhood. . . . She was, as her personae often call themselves, "a desperate character" (emphasis added)--a product-of-become-informant-on the influences that "write her". . . . (242)

My theoretical approach to Smith is grounded specifically in the question about the construction of "womanhood." Smith's work, published from 1936 to 1975, not only prefigures contemporary debates in feminism between essentialists and social constructionists, but also the more current debates that have developed as the constructionist position continues to be explored.¹ She takes an anti-essentialist position as her inaugural point and

¹Of course, as Diana Fuss demonstrates, these terms are not mutually exclusive, nor do they remain neatly polarized. See Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference (New York: Routledge, 1989). The debate between biological determinism and social construction is far-reaching in feminist theory. A useful "guidebook" which surveys the debate across a range of disciplines is Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, eds., the essential difference (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994). See also Tania Modleski, Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Post-feminist" Age (New York and London: Routledge, 1991) for a useful critique of the constructionist position.
explores the performativity of gender as a situational construct. Her work scrutinizes the divide between gender as a "repeated stylization of the body" and gender as site of externally prescribed regulations, and much of what is at stake in her work involves exploring the limits of agency in redefining gender identities against established cultural signification.

Regardless of the agency self-construction affords Smith in her efforts to renegotiate her "English selfhood and womanhood," these efforts, as Smith was painfully aware, are always circumscribed within the category "woman," a group underrepresented in positions of political, social, cultural and artistic power. Feminist responses to this dilemma form around what Ann Snitow calls a "common divide": "the need to build the identity 'woman' and give it solid political meaning and the need to tear down the very category 'woman' and dismantle its all-too-solid history" (10). This divide forms fault lines in the grounds of feminist identity and identity politics--"Now I can be a woman" vs. "Finally, I don't have to be a woman anymore"--but Snitow points to a more secure location on this shaky ground: "From moment to moment we perform subtle psychological and social negotiations about just how gendered we choose to be" (9). The operative term here, as in Smith's work, is "choose." To perform or to negotiate gender is not to accept passively the gender identity one is assigned. Admittedly, "choice" is not always a secure position; it can be revoked as the current political struggles around abortion all too clearly demonstrate. Further, although women can be yoked back into the category "woman" anytime through acts like rape or a degrading shout in

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2Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) elaborates on the tension between the ability to perform or construct one's gender and having it constructed and imposed externally. I will limit my discussion of the text here in favor of examining it more fully in relation to Smith's work in the chapters that follow.
the street, as Snitow notes, nevertheless "one can never stay inside 'woman' because it keeps moving. We constantly find ourselves beyond its familiar cover" (36) and in new positions or territories, ones that resonate with all the freedom, fear, and possibility connoted in the title of Smith's second novel, Over the Frontier. The deconstruction of the singular, often metaphorical and essentialist concept "Woman" into multiple, heterogeneous women marks a kind of crossing over a frontier from a static conception of sexual difference, "Woman" vs. "Man," to a mobile and plural conception of the differences within and between women. For Smith it is precisely the tension and differences inherent in the category "woman" that allow women agency in negotiating how gendered they choose to be.

Smith did not identify herself as a feminist, nor would she subscribe to a kind of cultural feminist surge to rehabilitate and celebrate femininity. She certainly experienced firsthand, in her years of secretarial work, in her efforts to get published, and in her personal relationships with men, casual and common forms of patriarchal oppression. As a result, an attitude emerges in her work such as the one the poem "Girls!" articulates: "although I am a woman / I always try to appear human" (CP 167). A typical move in Smith is to disaffiliate herself from women as a category, but to do so necessitates a definition of the term first, and then a redefinition of the self apart from that term, to whatever degree possible. Her desire to "appear human" is not an idealization of androgyny, but rather an effort to destabilize and denaturalize the essential distinctions that limit the variations and possibilities of change for either sex. Smith does not maintain a theoretical purity that deconstructs the terms "man" and "woman" to the degree that she cannot address the sexes or inspire them
into political action. In fact, she often directly addresses women, writing as a woman to women, but her emphasis is always on the "as." To write as a woman is to formulate a provisional definition of the term, and one that can be changed. Her poetic constructions of women correspond most closely to the "positional" definition of "woman" that Linda Alcoff proposes:

When the concept "woman" is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. . . . The positional definition . . . makes her identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on. (433-34)

Alcoff's positional definition of "woman" emphasizes the local and particular over and against the general and totalizing in much the same way that Smith, for instance, makes crucial distinctions between Englishwomen in general and "This Englishwoman" in particular, as one poem specifies her. Further, her persistent attention to individuality and difference prefigures the shift in feminist understanding of female subjectivity that Teresa de Lauretis sees as such: "the more difficult and complex notion that the female subject is a site of differences. . . . These differences . . . coexist concurrently with (though perhaps no longer in spite of) the provisional unity of any concerted political action or coalition" (14). This shift allows for the irreconcilable contradiction of writing about women even as one dismantles the term. It also allows Smith to investigate the ways in which these differences are embedded in and inflected by social relations.
Thus, in the first chapter I argue that *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) presents female subjectivity as a site of competing literary and cultural discourses. Smith's first novel can best be understood in the context of autobiographical fiction, a genre which maintains that identities are always to some extent fictional and, therefore, subject to self-invention. Smith challenges the notion of a fixed, female essence by utilizing a strategy of multivocality. Pompey, her protagonist, adopts a variety of voices which prevent her cooption into a stable subject suitable for matrimony and thus enable her to resist the marriage plot.

The second chapter examines the sequel, *Over the Frontier* (1938), in which Pompey enters an allegorical battle of the sexes in order to deconstruct the putative stability and exclusivity of the combatants' genders. Smith complicates Pompey's mercurial ability to reconfigure her identity in the first novel by disclosing in the second an attending guilt for resisting traditional feminine roles. Self-construction carries the potential for self-destruction. Cast as an exile, Pompey crosses the frontier, a trope for the outer limits of traditional gender roles, into the warfront, a space gendered male, but provisionally so. As Pompey is forced to don a male soldier's uniform, Smith reveals the failure of androgyne as a solution to the woes of femininity and shows that a woman impersonating a man exposes the category "man" as a subject-position inhabitable by either sex.

Although more critics read Smith's poetry than her novels, I give the novels equal consideration in the dissertation because they set up the gender issues that the poetry elaborates more thoroughly. Smith never considered herself a novelist, but it was through them that she first achieved the literary fame that enabled her to publish her poems. Likewise, the
reissuing of the novels in the 1980s renewed critical interest in her work and led to a reprinting of Novel on Yellow Paper by New Directions in 1994, printed on yellow paper! The novels read like extended monologues and establish the brassy, witty voice that Smith would continue to develop in her essays, reviews, and BBC talks. They are, as Joyce Carol Oates describes them, "very much an acquired taste"; their flippancy and insouciance may explain the smaller proportion of the critical attention paid to them. They are limited to the degree that they explore the situation of only one character, Pompey, in comparison to the numerous women the poems treat. Yet Pompey's reflections on sex stereotyping, the constraints of marriage, and the limited opportunities available to women set the stage for my discussion of the poems in a way that Smith's third novel does not. The Holiday, published in 1949, documents the despair of its protagonist, Celia, in the wake of World War II. Most critics find it the weakest of the three novels because it lacks almost any plot at all and is poorly structured around poems and short stories. It is interesting for its political conversations about India and the effects of German propaganda, but Over the Frontier complicates these issues, in addition to gender issues, with more subtlety and intricacy, and for this reason I do not include The Holiday in this study.

Chapter two examines various boundaries such as rationality, heterosexuality, and traditional representations of femininity which the image of the frontier exceeds in Smith's second novel. Yet the "frontier" serves as a useful location and location in considering Smith's poetry as well in that it underscores the importance of position, the unknown, and undecidability in terms of her thinking about gender. The poems
reinscribe her assertion from *Novel on Yellow Paper* --"the thing that really counts"--is agency, one's ability to reconstruct gender through selecting and discarding, so that gender identity rarely remains fixed, but is always in flux, mobile, and subject to change.

And what does Smith suggest we select and discard? In the novels, Pompey selects gender identities that run counter to what her culture prescribes for women in the 1930's. She chooses to remain single in the first novel, to go to war in the second, and to discard what she calls the fictions for married and unmarried women that would restrict her opportunities on the homefront or on the warfront. Likewise, in her poetry Smith continues to investigate selection, agency, and the ability and right to discard along the way anything that impedes gender reformulation. My third chapter segues into the poetry by singling out her hat poems as clear examples of the risks and possibilities involved in refashioning gender identities. For Smith, hats serve as vestimentary signs that either reify or reformulate traditional identities. Her characters "wear different hats," as it were, to emphasize the importance for women to be able to occupy different subject positions. Whereas hats in the novels recuperate the wearer into an identity that culture deems intelligible and normative, in the poems women most often use hats as masquerade to redefine the terms within which culture confines them.

Beneath Smith's hats are bodies, not The Body, capitalized and essentialized, but particular, individual bodies which, in their differences, bear the marks of socialization. Chapter four begins with Smith's own body and argues that her stylized performances at poetry readings--her childish dress and her off-key singing of poems--embody the contradictions
she maintains as significant and reactionary in the formation of identity. In her poetry, she tropes the female body as a prison; in order to escape essentialist definitions associated with those bodies, she revises fairy tales to imagine physical transformations that transport women out of inevitable acculturation to social roles.

Her interest in the fantastic is exemplified as well in the drawings that accompany her poems. I conclude my study by examining these and her published sketchbook, Some are More Human Than Others, to argue that the drawings subvert poetic statements which appear to endorse "proper" feminine concerns and traditional, masculine literary values. The drawings' marginality, a term referring to their placement on the margins of the text as well as to their status as "other" to the text, vies for centrality with the poems' content and encourages the reader always to look at the margins where women, too, are commonly relegated. They work in tandem with the multivocality in Smith's work, but on the visual register, in order to destabilize any identity a poem may claim as stable or essential.

The drawings provide an appropriate closure to a critical study of Smith because they most clearly mark her singularity and point to the excesses that permeate her writing. My project brings to Smith a focus on the contingent and problematic status of female identity and is framed as such, but I do not want to contain her too neatly or to appear to try to resolve the contradictions and conflicts that make up the strange body of her work. Indeed, with each effort to smooth out a rough edge or "get her" just right, she slips into arenas one could label bizarre or even Bacchic. She is, after all, a poet who thinks it would be "marvelous" to be dead, who just as easily writes about castration, masturbation, and the
devouring of Christians by lions as more traditional topics of poems, and who would sing these poems more often than read them to her audiences. Sanford Sternlicht explains her oddity as symptomatic of the frustration, cynicism, and iconoclasm of the 1960s. Mary Gordon compares her eccentricity with Kafka's "horror of the meaningless" and underscores the sheer control Smith exercises with every repetition, quotation, and seemingly throwaway line which create the illusion of an unserious spoken voice that is, in fact, determined to speak of the most serious topics it can muster (61). Terry Eagleton compares Smith to John Berryman. Both poets write primarily in a comic style which they use to approach topics as serious as death. Their work makes poetry look suspiciously easy and off-hand. Like Smith, Berryman uses a variety of poetic voices, but for different ends. Mr. Bones's black dialect reconstructs race; Smith's "girlish" voices parody femininity. According to Eagleton, "superfluity" characterizes both poets, but "whereas... Berryman's superfluity resides in an excess of form to content, Stevie Smith's is the precise reverse: an ironic excess of content to form, a comic disparity between simple recalcitrant facts and the poetic shapes which try vainly to subdue them to precise, sophisticated uniformity" (82). For Smith, "formal predictability is devastated by sheer truth" (82), and this "truth," as the novels and poems I examine show, comes in strange, indiscreet and irreverent guises.

A couple of cases in point. Although Pompey denounces the "riot of emotion" her teachers read into Greek tragedy, there is a frenetic strain in Smith's work that pushes against this limitation, that spends seven pages of Novel on Yellow Paper, for example, recounting the story of the Bacchae, which I will discuss more in the first chapter. A poem like "Appetite"
reveals the reins on emotion Smith clenches even as she tries to make room for female rage and passion beyond misogynist reinscriptions into "hysteria":

   Let me know
   Let me know
   Let me go
   Let me go
   Let me have him
   Let me have him
   How I love him
   How I love him. (CP 66)

We can read this as a parody of desire, or we can see in the poem an urgent need for love that is conventionally read as typifying "women's writing." Smith does not reject traditional topics for women poets, but neither will she inscribe them in a traditional form, unless, as Eagleton notes, she is holding that form, not the content of the poem, up for scrutiny. The negotiation between competing requirements for originality and conventional subject matter is one explanation for the decidedly weird turn many of the poems take. But a poem like "Oh grateful colours, bright looks!" which praises life as "The pink almond petals on the flower bed" finds a parallel in Philip Larkin's "million-petalled flower / of being here" ("The Old Fools") without his attending fear of growing old as an explanatory basis of the poem. Like many of the dancing figures in the margins, Smith's poems seem to revel in their composition itself; they test out the extremes of joy and melancholy outside the constraints of what a woman, a poet, or a woman poet should write.

In his review of Over the Frontier, Edwin Muir makes an observation about the strangeness of the novel which applies to much of Smith's work: "Once you put on a foolish mask you have no need to fear
seeming foolish. You can say what you like" (qtd. in Barbera and McBrien 115). I would not call Smith foolish, but I think her detours into the bizarre give her, in her mind, license to write about topics like sex without censure. The love scene between Pompey and Tom in Over the Frontier is especially difficult to picture. In what she calls a "curious and amusing inversion" (an apt phrase for much of Smith's work), Tom stands in the middle of their cold room and holds her high in his arms above his head, alternately beaming up at her and shaking her. Her thoughts turn to the recurring motif of crucifixion imagery: "I don't care for the crucified really you know, some people are born that way... born to be crucified" (229). Does she identify with those people? Does she construe heterosexuality as an oppressive martyrdom? It isn't clear in the text. I discuss the challenges and failures of her relationship with Tom in chapter two, but this sketch of the scene, as Pompey laughs and squirms in the air above Tom, reveals the crazy energy and self-destructive uncertainty that translates in this novel as an internalized monstrosity and informs the metaphors of escape elsewhere in her work.

The mysterious, even unreal, quality of much of Smith's writing calls to mind novels of the time like Djuna Barnes's Nightwood, which equally confounded its critics, and contemporary British texts like Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus which heralds for its reviewers a new, kinky feminism. In the end, Smith can be contextualized in reference to Romanticism, modernism's interior monologues, or the cultural revolution of the sixties, to name a few. The endless play of construction and deconstruction in the novels and poems asserts her difference from the literary tradition she inherits and extends. My project can only begin to
grasp her through a feminist reappraisal of her work. More importantly, it must also let her go back to her "larking." She is much further out than we think, and not drowning, but waving.
Chapter One

The Thing that Really Counts

In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Smith makes a claim that will function as the heart of all her subsequent writing: "The thing that really counts is what is making you all the time, and forming you into being the sort of definite person that, clear as if it was labelled, has its own place to go to" (183). Smith's interest in the ways in which identity, specifically gender identity, is constructed *for* women, not *by* them grew out of her own efforts to become a published poet. In 1935, a year before *Novel on Yellow Paper* was published, she lived in the suburbs with her aunt, working as a secretary for the magazine publishers, C. Arthur Pearson. Though she hated the drudgery of her job, she stole time at the office to write poems which she tried to publish in 1934. After an initial rejection, she sent more poems to Ian Parsons at Chatto and Windus in June 1935 and was told, "Go away and write a novel and we will then think about the poems" (qtd. in Spalding 111). It pleased her later to recall how "He also said (to himself, *sotto voce*, ho ho): 'I'm sure they'll never come back.' But I really did go away and write a novel" (qtd. in Barbera and McBrien 75).

Thus the poet was "made into" a novelist, typing her work in the office on the yellow paper used for carbon copies in order, ultimately, to get her poetry published. At the time, women's poetry was largely undervalued and neglected, so that Smith's attempted entry into the publishing world as a poet would have been viewed as transgressive; men were poets, women were muses. Despite Parson's initial efforts to dismiss Smith, she turned the obstacle into an opportunity to reinvent herself as a
novelist and then to reconstruct herself as a character in the novel. When inquiring about the initially slow progress of the work, Parsons wrote to her, "How sad about the novel--but of course I quite see your point and there's no earthly use in your sitting down, scratching your head and sucking your pen, if you don't really feel that you've got it in you" (Spalding 111). In fact, what she submitted to him was and was not what she had "in her"--when asked to prove herself, she constructed a version of herself in *Novel on Yellow Paper*.

The protagonist of the novel, Pompey, bears a strong resemblance to Smith. She, too, works as a secretary, lives with her aunt, falls in love, vacations in Germany, and writes poems on the side. Nevertheless, she is "by no means a copy of Stevie's personality," according to Smith's biographer, Frances Spalding.¹ In fact, critics struggle for the correct terminology to pinpoint the novel's genre. Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, warns the reader that if she is looking for "a self-portrait," she will be disappointed (68). Sanford Sternlicht calls *Novel on Yellow Paper* "heavily autobiographical...difficult to read and sometimes exasperating" (18). What is clear is that the novel is not a simple act of rubber stamping a pre-existing identity onto the page in a way that is easily accessible for the reader. Emerging in the space between "autobiography" and "heavily autobiographical" is a certain kind of fiction which invents the self as it writes. This self is not necessarily untrue, but it is unanticipated by any actual history. This point is crucial, for as Molly Hite observes, female autobiographers are often motivated to write by

¹To claim that any textual representation could be as seamless and mimetic as the term "copy" implies is, of course, problematic. Consider, for instance, Georges Gusdorf's assertion, in 1956, that "autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image" (Olney 33).
their awareness of the ways their identities have been constructed. . . . To be marginal to a dominant culture is also to have had little or no say in the construction of one's own socially acknowledged identity. All this suggests that for the marginal subject, the act of "writing oneself" is unlikely to be perceived as a process of simple transcription, the faithful replication of a "self" presumed to exist prior to all discourse.

. . .

The notion of fictional self-writing seems in ways even more congenial to the marginal subject, in that it implies an acknowledgment that the self is always to some extent (and in some senses) a fiction and a correlative freedom to engage in self-invention without regard for external standards of truth or authenticity. (Morgan and Hall xv)

Before she even began writing, however, Smith had already embraced the idea that the self can be reinvented through her name change from Florence to Stevie. Self-invention also figures prominently in the early years of her biography. Spalding devotes specific attention to Smith's interest in theater and to the many roles she performed in school plays ranging from a courtier in As You Like It to the wolf in Red Riding Hood. Notably, all of the roles she mentions are male parts. It would come as no surprise then that the central character of her first novel is a woman named after two men. She is christened Patience, a name traditionally associated with female qualities and rooted in the Latin verb "to suffer," but just as Florence Margaret became Stevie, so Patience moves to London and "got called Pompey. And it suits me" (NYP 24). The name "Pompey" alludes to Pompey the Great, a Roman general and "one of those old Roman boys that lost their investments and went round getting free meals on their dear old friends, that had them round to fill up the gaps, to keep things moving" (NYP 24).
If her first name, Pompey, signifies her as "one of the boys," her last name, Casmimus, afflicts her with the gods. It refers to Hermes, the messenger of the gods who could move freely in and out of hell. His ability to cross boundaries is likewise reflected in the word "hermaphrodite." The double-faced god, then, suggests the crossing of more than the line between heaven and hell; to be "one of the boys" is to cross the lines of gender.

Why might Smith embrace a masculine nickname and name her central character after men as well? What power does cross-naming afford? And, more problematically, at what cost does she give up feminine names? Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that nineteenth-century women writers often wrote under male names or used male narrators in order to "legitimize themselves within a literary patrilineage that denied women full creative authority." Male mimicry worked less to usurp male sexual privilege than to "signify their acquiescence in their own (female) inferiority: by mimicking male precursors, they sought an influx of patriarchal power" (185). In contrast, Gilbert and Gubar hold up twentieth-century lesbian writers like Gertrude Stein as models who usurp male authority "to fantasize detaching themselves from patriarchal rule" (186). For example, In The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, published only three years before Novel on Yellow Paper, Stein plays the "husband" to Toklas's "wife" and aligns herself with male genius: "The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and Alfred Whitehead" (5). Gilbert and Gubar assert that Stein constructed herself as "her own and everybody else's pseudomale precursor... in order to put all the men she knew in their properly dependent places" (188).
As a heterosexual woman, Smith's pseudonymous strategy may not fall into Gilbert and Gubar's category of lesbian role reversal, nor does she seem to be following in Victorian footsteps acquiescing to female inferiority to seek patriarchal legitimation. Instead, she chooses names that directly oppose not only her gender but, equally fundamentally, her humanness and mortality. By becoming, through her names, a man and a god, she casts into doubt as clearly as she can the idea of a fixed, identifiable self in favor of a self that can be invented and reinvented through writing. Her name offers a challenge to binary thinking by putting into question the categories of "male" and "female" as well as "mortal" and "immortal." Her naming strategy corroborates Hite's claim that for the marginal subject, self-writing is rarely an act of simple transcription, but rather it participates in multiple discourses that define and redefine a self. "It is by definition a revisionary activity, inasmuch as it reinscribes a prescribed subjectivity in another register, intervening in the social construction of identity to bring a somewhat different self into being" (Hite xv).

Smith claims the registers of history and mythology at her disposal. Pompey chooses Hermes or Mercury as her guide/god. The novel, in fact, begins with an epigraph addressed to Mercury:

Casmerus, whose great name I steal,  
Whose name a greater doth conceal,  
Indulgence, pray,  
And, if I may,  
The winged tuft from either heel. (9)

Significantly, she does not merely choose the name, she steals it. She begins the novel with a theft, an act that bespeaks the necessity of taking what has not been given and an act consistent with the fact that Mercury is
the god of thievery among other things. Ironically, he is also the patron
god of poets; by stealing his name she identifies herself as a poet even as
she writes a novel. Thus, by identifying with the multi-faced god of
thieves, eloquence, and commerce, Smith foregrounds the multiplicity of
her own protagonist's identity and the ability to change that identity at her
whim.

Then who is Pompey Casmilus? As the discussion of her name
implies, she is a mercurial woman who plays many roles and observes the
roles that others around her play. Smith often depicts a character's attempt
to change her identity in terms of a changing of clothes. For instance,
Pompey stands transfixed as she watches her aunt dress up as a fan for a
church bazaar. She notes in careful detail:

Into my bedroom came my Aunt the Lion of Hull. . . .
There was her face, and her eyes glaring like a lion that is
furious in the jungle of the night, and her hair that has
suffered so long the domination of the red hot curling tong,
but has never for pride come to terms with that curling tong,
this hair was rebelliously standing straight up on end, and
round her head was a little piece of green baby ribbon, and at
the back was this famous fan standing very stiffly on end, to
keep in step with the bouncing front hair of my aunt. There
were also three fans arranged spread-wise on each shoulder.
(241)

Pompey refers to her mother's sister as the Lion Aunt because of her
prominent facial features and strong character. Although she paints a vivid
picture of her aunt, what captures her attention most is that "Auntie Lion
was not at one with her fan" (241). The aunt costumes herself, but a
complete change in clothing does not necessarily effect a complete change
in person, and this is a crucial awareness for Pompey. Smith literalizes this
idea by having the aunt don a gender marked costume. A fan is a fashion
accessory for women's clothing and a sign in the semaphorics of courtship. That the aunt was "not at one with her fan" subverts a natural connection between the category woman and a traditional sign of femininity. Pompey's next description of her aunt underscores this subversion by taking on strange, almost archetypal undertones:

There was something of the fish about the effect, a mighty fish, very deep and dark and dangerous, with the temperament of a lion, and the dirty old-fashioned look coming out of the eyes... it was the crystallization of a very unusual idea. This fish-fan-fair-fair across in the church hall must have had a very frantic and esoteric appearance. (241-42)

Pompey has grafted onto her aunt the identity of a lion, but the aunt assumes another disguise, and the two almost blend together in the passage above. The fan evidently looks like a fin, and linguistically Pompey slides from fan to fin to a pun on fanfare, but ultimately she labels the result in an assonant pun as "frantic and esoteric." This passage exemplifies how characters can change identity by changing costume, but the transformation is never complete; they do not "become one." However, it is important to note that while the aunt costumes her body, other parts of her appearance simultaneously accept and resist cultural efforts to mark her femininity. Recall the description of her rebellious hair; it "suffers" the domination of a curling iron, but resists curling. Even as the aunt appears to assume the agency involved in masquerade, she curls her hair with a persistent vigilance that delineates the limits or boundaries of her masquerade. In other words, and this marks a difference between the aunt and Pompey, her hair must be done properly regardless of how improperly she chooses to dress. Her efforts to reconstruct herself are caged within a larger cultural
ideology that constructs the "foundations" of femininity, foundations which never allow for bad hair.

In a parallel passage earlier in the novel, Pompey's friends, wielding all but a curling iron, try to remake her into a more acceptable version of femininity through costume. Her friends, Rosa and Lottie, embody traditional female roles; both are married and Lottie is a ballerina who dotes on her dog named Fifi to the extent that she feeds her from a Jacobean goblet. Pompey tells the story:

And one day I remember Lottie said: Pompey you should dress with more chic. So. And she put on me her hat and a coat with hanging sequin sleeves, and round my neck a piece of fur. And Rosa was there, and Rosa was looking at me with a look in her eyes that was a little bit begging me to remember that Lottie was important to Rosa, because of something between Horace and Herman. (73)

Rosa and Lottie exert pressure on Pompey to conform to the normative standards they themselves have internalized. They heap on her exaggerated signs of femininity, glamour, and class which are supposed to position her clearly within the realm of the respectable woman. But the ties between the respectable women seem suspect as Smith dramatizes in this passage the investment the friends have in constructing Pompey "correctly." Rosa shoots Pompey a look that begs her to conform to her refashioning, not because she thinks it would benefit Pompey in some way, but because of a vague and unstated "something" between her husband and Lottie's. Rosa seems less invested in Pompey's refashioning than Lottie, but she urges her to go along with it for Lottie's sake. Her friendship with Lottie, as the last half of the passage reveals, seems grounded in the relationship between their husbands. Their friendship serves to cement the
bond between Horace and Herman, and Pompey merely gets caught in the middle.

Her response to the situation functions as a thematic center of the novel: "Isn't it fun dressing up, you never know quite how funny you look until you put somebody else's clothes on, and people who are full of wicked bounce should put somebody else's clothes on" (73). Now the imperative "should" is on the other foot. It is not that women "should dress with more chic" in order to accede to normative definitions of the term "woman," but that they should play dress up; they should feel free to costume themselves however they choose, to laugh the "subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices" as Judith Butler might describe it (146). Not all parody is subversive, but Butler points out that "there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (139). In the passage above, Pompey finds dressing up "fun" not because she is a willing recruit for her friends' desire to "make her a woman" but because she turns their efforts into parody by refusing to take them seriously, by labeling their efforts as mere costuming to reinforce the fact that there is no "respectable woman" beneath the sequins. She laughs even as "Lottie's face was calculating... and the eyes were dead. And Rosa was frightened" (74). She mocks their efforts to transform her in a final, blasphemous gesture:

So I threw [the gloves] down and took up the goblet, that was Fifi's drinking goblet, and there was a pot of stewed tea standing on the mantelpiece. So I poured some of that into the glass and... I let the tea fall on to careful Lottie's carpet. I let the tea fall drop by drop till there was not any left in the glass
at all, and I said: Blessed are they that shall not be offended. (74-75)

Although this passage is humorous, it bears significance in Pompey's resisting the regulatory efforts of her friends to signify her "appropriately" as "woman." Her actions run counter to the cultural and class codes that define "chic." Butler's remarks again are helpful:

The tacit constraints that produce culturally intelligible "sex" ought to be understood as generative political structures rather than naturalized foundations. Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of "agency" that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. (147, italics Butler's)

Pompey encounters what amounts to a political conflict as well as a personal one as her friends try to remake her into a culturally intelligible and acceptable version of "womanhood" whose destination, most likely, is matrimony. Lottie and Rosa are willing to reconceptualize an "incorrectly" formed identity only to the extent that theirs has been conceptualized in accordance with cultural and political standards, such as ones Horace and Herman may uphold, that keep women "chic," "fashionable," and "attractive" to raise their commodity value on the marriage market. Indeed, it is the very threat of marriage, or rather, compulsory matrimony that hangs like the blade of a guillotine over Pompey's neck and narrative.

She is engaged to her "dippy" suitor Freddy, but admits that "somehow marriage and being engaged to be married does not bite upon

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2Susan Faludi gives a cogent analysis of the socio-political strategies still at work today to get women married and keep them that way. Her description of media cures for "nuptialitis" is especially scary and interesting. See Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).
my consciousness at all, it is not right, perhaps it is not the right sort of acid, it has no bite" (234). In other words, the culturally produced fantasy of the altar, like the version of womanhood Lottie and Rosa try to enforce, does not interest Pompey. As a result, she reduces marriage to a game much like playing dress up:

And so when we are engaged I move my mother's engagement ring that I had from her when she died when I was sixteen, this ring I shift to my engagement finger, it is like a game that has no significance but to play we are engaged. But it galls and wounds us this marriage game, and in our hearts we are beginning to think: Never never can we marry. (234)

Disguise functions here as an oppositional strategy. Marriage in this passage is nothing more than a shifting of accessories, a change in costume; Pompey reduces it to a game of dress up, of moving rings, and implies that marriage is not necessarily a "natural" desire. When the ring shifts to the engagement finger, a woman is supposedly transformed in some significant and desirable way, but Pompey resists the transformation by reducing it to a game, admitting, however, that it "wounds." In other words, the fantasy is bankrupt; the only transformational effect in women according to this novel is one of conformity.

"The unmarried girls have an idea," she explains," that if only they were married it would be all right, and the married women think, well now I'm married, so it is all right." However, the truth behind the marriage fantasy is harsh: "Sometimes too of course it is all right, but sometimes they have to work very hard saying all the time: So now I'm married, so now it is all right, so Miss So-and-So is not married, so that is not all right." Pompey has no patience with women who buy into the
ideology endorsing marriage. Marriage "is like the refrain in The Three Sisters. It is like the *leitmotiv* of all their lives. It is their *Moscow*. Marriage is to them: Oh if we could only get to Moscow. Oh if we could only have got to *Moscow.* " (167). The women who arrive in what she calls "the Russia of their matrimonial ambition" achieve no higher ambition, in fact, than becoming "Good Listeners, they are Good Pals, they are Feminine, the Let him Know they Sew their own Frocks, they sometimes even go so far as to Pay Attention to Personal Hygiene" (169).

Clearly marriage threatens Pompey's own ambitions to construct an identity for herself beyond the dangerous stereotypes around her. Yet the "blade of the guillotine" cuts both ways; it threatens her narrative as well. In his classic study of narrative, Erich Auerbach describes distinctive characteristics of novels written between the two world wars. He charts, in novels like *To the Lighthouse*, a shift in emphasis from what he calls "important exterior events" to "minor happenings which are insignificant as exterior factors in a person's destiny" (547). Gender does not come to the fore in his discussion, but it is clear from his choice of example with Woolf that exterior turning points in the narratives of women would have to include marriage, and if there is a shift to minor happenings like the mending of a stocking, then the way readers have been taught to read and understand women's experiences would have to change as well. If the "great turning points of destiny" have been traditionally defined for women as marriage and childbirth, then how can we come to know a woman who does not fit into this plot?

Sanford Sternlicht, one of the few critics to comment on Smith's novels, offers little assistance. He characterizes the plot of *Novel on*
Yellow Paper as "one that could have been found in a women's magazine like those Stevie's employers published. . . . The heart of the dramatic action is the question of Pompey's marrying or rejecting 'dippy' Freddy" (Stevie 18). Thus, on the surface, Pompey's story could easily be subsumed into the traditional marriage plot, as Sternlicht seems willing to do. But Smith was reading Virginia Woolf before she began the novel, and it is clear that writing a traditional love plot was the last thing she intended.

Smith filled four pages of her reading notebook with excerpts from The Common Reader, noting that the essays were "full of meat" (qtd. in Spalding 53). She was particularly influenced by "Modern Fiction" in which Woolf criticizes the traditional concepts of plot and character as a "tyrant" of convention. According to Spalding, one passage could stand as a manifesto for Novel on Yellow Paper and it is worth quoting in length:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions. . . . The moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style. . . . Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit. . . . We are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it. (150)

As Spalding argues, Woolf "enfranchised Stevie from the need for plot, chronological development and the more traditional play of character" (114). Smith divides the book into twenty-two unnumbered episodes which read less like a structured, sequential narrative than like someone speaking random thoughts as they occur to her. In fact, Pompey describes the novel as a "talking voice that runs on," and it is her voice that seems most
distinctive in the novel, and that which most distinguishes her from Woolf (46). The idea of an "uncircumscribed spirit" with the ability to reinvent itself is exemplified nowhere more clearly than in the variety of voices Smith adopts in her narrative. She has an "openness and immediacy that Virginia Woolf's prose does not allow," according to Spalding (115). Often the "talking voice" disguises itself through various accents ranging from a swaggering Texan to a childish voice. Likewise, portions of the novel are written in German and French, often untranslated. Smith as easily quotes Mrs. Humphrey Ward as she does a children's story to combine and appropriate the widest possible range of voices as possible for herself. She has, as she calls it, a "voracious consciousness," and as readers, we are forced to acknowledge the literary quality of the voice even as it shifts and changes at times into voices not traditionally read as literary.

Yet, sometimes Pompey slips out of the first person altogether as if to escape herself. The most telling example occurs toward the end of the novel when Freddy leaves her because she refuses to marry him. First she addresses Freddy directly as though he were reading the novel, "Oh my darling Freddy do not be so deeply dippy" (238). She urges him to ignore all of the people who pressure them to marry, but then she recalls his violent response to her: "Bring your ideas down to earth. You want sense knocked into you. Keep your feet on the ground. You want sense knocked into you. You should" (238). The phrase "you should" dangles incompletely in the text and unfinished in her memory, and it does not matter how Freddy might have completed it. His relationship to her is ultimately one of instruction, much like her relationship with Lottie and
Rosa. She should marry him. She should have children. She should quit her job. "How many ill-advising *confidantes* have not said to me: Marry, do not live alone. When you are old you will be sad, thinking you might have married, but now you are an old girl, unmarried, uncomforted, alone," Pompey recalls; the voices urging conformity to the marriage imperative swirl in her head (238). The pressure to conform to the marriage plot buckles her under the weight of their telling, and she slips into the third person:

Pompey was enamoured of a chimera. . . . There, under the full light of the moon, high riding in pride and integrity, Pompey's chimera seized her, and the *chimeraismus* departed, and there stood a little monster no bigger than her thumb, but she would not let him drum, and she fled. . . . She tore away the monster and left him with his feet firm upon the ground. But tearing away, she tore him too, and herself. (239-40)

Pompey escapes her autobiographical voice by disguising her story in a fairy tale of sorts in which the princess stands at "the margin of the treacherous lake" of marriage but avoids drowning, even at the cost of her own pain. It is as if leaving the first person frees her not only from herself but from the voices of culture and ideology which alienate her from her own desires. The brief respite from the first person gives her perspective and she returns to her usual voice: "I am thinking that it is a very good thing that Freddy and I, by drift or delirium, did not get ourselves into the matrimonial swamp" (240). She successfully avoids the plot of marriage, in both senses of the term "plot," by shifting voices as easily as she shifts her engagement ring. In so doing she refuses to play by those rules which would co-opt her into a stable subject suitable for matrimony.
The novel's narrative voice receives much attention from its critics as though Pompey's voice is the answer to the question "Who is Pompey?" Most generally, Sternlicht claims that Pompey's monologues "are seen as gender documents testifying to the discomfiture, disappointment, and discrimination experienced by Western women in the interbellum years" (In Search Of 51). Janet Watts, in her preface to the 1980 edition, hypostasizes the voice:

The talking voice of Pompey Casmilus flirts and fools with its reader and subject matter alike. It stops and starts, it dodges and teases. It picks up a person or an idea and drops them flat out of sudden boredom; it plays with words and speech-patterns. It speaks different languages, puts on foreign accents and funny disguises; it quotes from the literature of remote countries and centuries and the trash of contemporary England. (2-3)

Finally, Oates defines Pompey by her voice; she is "primarily her talk, exclusively her talk, all chatter, all opinions, betraying now and then beyond the Dorothy Parker influence a numbing Gertrude Stein rhythm" (67). I would not agree that her rhythm is "numbing," nor am I comfortable with Oates's choice of the term "chatter," for it diminishes the seriousness and the serious playfulness of the voice and leads to comments like Jonathan Williams's:

"[Smith's novels] seem like nothing but chatter, chatter, chatter. There is no relief, and the prose runs through the ears like the salts of Epsom.

Still, if you can stand being the thrall of an art deco chatterbox for some considerable number of hours on end, do be Stevie's guest. (48)

The slur "art deco chatterbox" is precisely the kind of characterization that Smith and other women writers work against. When Joyce's Molly Bloom speaks the last 36 pages of Ulysses, we "plunge into a flowing river" of
"refreshing, life-giving waters" (Blamires 225), but when Smith's voice dominates her own fictional autobiography, suddenly we are drowning in a babbling brook of Epsom salts.

That the voice takes on so many disguises is strategic for Smith as a means of resisting the traditional narrative woman's voice—the cry for a mate, for children—and the traditional plot for women, one in which marriage stands as the final closure, much like death. Smith "breaks the sentence" as Woolf defines the phrase; she rejects "the structuring of the female voice by the male voice, female tone and manner by male expectations, female writing by male emphasis, female writing by existing conventions of gender—in short, any way in which dominant structures shape muted ones" (DuPlessis 32). As a result, her voice stands to criticize the cultural and narrative forces that produce women. Most importantly, the disguises destabilize her identity. As she assumes various voices, she resists the narrative pattern of the romance plot that "muffles the main female character, represses quest... [and] incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal and narrative success" (DuPlessis 5). Refusing to be reduced to someone's "better half," Pompey "outnumbers" the opposition, as it were, by refashioning herself through her multivocality. There are, in a sense, several Pompeys and their voices work to speak out against the silence that renders the alternative voices and desires of women mute.

Furthermore, in her study of women's autobiography, Sidonie Smith observes that employing a variety of voices involves women writers

in a kind of masquerade, the autobiographer creates an iconic representation of continuous identity that stands for, or rather before, her subjectivity as she tells of this "I" rather
than of that "I." She may even create several, sometimes competing stories about or version of herself as her subjectivity is displaced by one or multiple textual representations. (47)

Pompey's strategy of disguise extends beyond adopting accents or speaking in foreign languages. Smith displaces subjectivity through multiple textual representations, which is to say, much of what we learn about Pompey comes from the many stories she tells. For instance, she paraphrases "Snow White" in order to take a satirical jab at parents who use fairy tales to soothe their spoiled children: "It ended up Der Wolf ist tot Der Wolf is Tot. Hurra, hurra, hurra, the blood lust and ferocity on the infant face of the infant neurotic was something more than I could stand" (115-16). Clearly the maternal instincts are lacking in Pompey.

Further, she devotes episodes nine and eleven to a list of her favorite quotations so that readers can "shoot them at [their] friends at . . . high class parties" (61). Some express her aversion to children: "Children are overbearing, supercilious, passionate, envious, inquisitive, idle, fickle, timid, intemperate, liars and dissemblers. . . they bear no pain but like to inflict it on others; already they are men" (63). Some spoof film romances by transforming them into precursors of 1950s B-movie horror films:

Trapped in the Hell of Modern Life they fight. . . as you do. . . for the right to love. Enthralled--you'll watch this blazing spectacle of to-day torture the beautiful and the damned. Thrill as you See--Ten million sinners writhing in eternal torment--cringing under the Rain of Fire--consumed in the Lake of Flames. . . Hardening into Lifelessness in the Forest of Horror! Plus the most spectacular climax ever conceived! Produced by Sol M. Wurzel. Directed by Harry Lachman. (64)

Some uncover racism in women's advice columns:
Should I Marry a Foreigner? . . . You do not say, dear, if he is a man of colour. Even if it is only a faint tea rose—don't. I know what it will mean to you to GIVE HIM UP but funny things happen with colour, it often slips over, and sometimes darkens from year to year and it is so difficult to match up. White always looks well at weddings. . . . (64)

The most important story Pompey retells, however, is Euripides' Bacchae. Smith places it directly in the middle of the novel to stress its centrality in her stance against the marriage plot and how it constructs women. She spends six pages paraphrasing the story, and three times she mentions that Dionysus was "always disguised" when he spoke with Pentheus. Pompey confesses, "I used to watch the scene in the palace where Dionysus is dressing up the King in women's clothes, and I used to laugh too, and laugh, and I used to think: Dionysus is wonderful" (151). She describes the king cross-dressing in particular detail:

So they laugh and laugh, and get women's clothes, and Dionysus drapes them round Pentheus: My dear, how do you like this peplum, do you think it goes? This fold looks better hanging so; don't you think? . . . My dear chap you look just like a rather serious-minded slightly pompous female, just like my old aunt I'll tell you about next time. My dear, nobody would think you weren't at least a woman and perhaps an aunt and mother. (149-50)

As Marjorie Garber explains, "The appeal of cross-dressing is clearly related to its status as a sign of the constructedness of gender categories" (9). Smith focuses her attention on Pentheus for similar purposes. The story of the Bacchae is a story about the importance of worshipping Dionysus, one of the most famous of cross-dressers. In his study, The God of Ecstasy: Sex-Roles and the Madness of Dionysus, Arthur Evans argues that the worship of Dionysus involved freeing women from imposed definitions of self, womanhood, and sanity (16). Smith
utilizes the _Bacchae_ similarly to offer a preferable construction of woman over and against the stereotypes she spends much of the novel resisting, ones like "the girl [who] turns up at last and doesn't want anything, no nothing but a home and a b-a-b-y" (138). Just as she dwells on the cross-dressing moment, so she paints a vivid picture of another type of woman altogether:

They were all driven mad, they ran to the mountains with the divine frenzy of madness upon them, leaving their husbands and their children. . . so strong in their madness they would pick up wolf cubs, and hold them up and give them the milk that their children should have had, and they would laugh and laugh and hunt the lion, and capture him, and with their naked hands pull him to pieces, tear him, tear his head off, pull him entirely to pieces, they were so mad and so powerful in their madness. (147)

Pompey identifies with these women later in the novel when she expresses her anger at a man who markets himself as a "Lady Novelist" writing articles, or what she calls "pseudomasculine buck" for women in emotional crises. She says, "When I am confronted with this certain type of vulgarity. . . I can feel I am a tiger, with claws on his feet that would go ripping and tearing flesh from off him" (200). As if she imagines a reader voicing disapproval about her decidedly unfeminine anger, she says, "No, I do not consider the tiger-clawing feeling to be cruelty" (201). Recounting the _Bacchae_ gives her license to unleash the crazy energy that fills much of the novel and fuels much of Pompey's rage.

To contextualize the story of the _Bacchae_ within the novel, it is important to note that it falls in the same episode in which Pompey, in another decidedly "inappropriate," unfeminine moment, proclaims, "Oh how I enjoy sex and oh how I enjoy it. There have been many funny things
about sex in my life that have made me laugh and so now I will tell you" (140). She wants to talk explicitly about sex but does so only through the Bacchae as a trope for sexuality. She adopts a humorous tone in talking about her own sexuality, which masks an anxiety about defining sexuality outside the frame of marriage. Sex, for Smith, is best when it is Bacchic and uncontained. "Legitimized" through the bonds of matrimony, sex loses its capacity for fun or humor and becomes a tool for seducing women into maternity.

The stories Pompey tells of herself liking sex do not fit into the "fictions for married and unmarried women" that the magazine she works for publishes. Although Smith's job, like Pompey's, gave her the opportunity to pursue her own writing at work, she was working within an industry dominated by patriarchal ideology that strove to define and confine women within the domestic sphere. Her job positions her, then, problematically against the version of herself she portrays in her novel, for even as she resists the marriage plot, she produces narratives for unmarried women to lure them into it.

Women's magazines proliferated in the early twentieth-century, and like today's Good Housekeeping or Family Circle they included advice columns, articles on fashion and housekeeping, and romantic fictions, which have been a staple of the industry since the eighteenth century. In her study, Women and Print Culture, Kathryn Shevelow argues that women's magazines construct a feminine ideal for women and, through

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their relationship with their readers, construct a collective social reality. "Though gender-specific, the women's magazine is a generalized publication directing itself by virtue of their gender to all women, who, defining themselves as readers, are also defining themselves as women" (195).

Pompey has little patience with the women who read her magazine and so willingly accept the versions of femininity it offers. She calls the readers "silly fatheads" (167) and "funny asses" (168). According to Pompey, "The only good thing these female half-wits ever did was to buy our publications and swell our dividends. God loves a cheerful buyer of twopenny weeklies, and so do we." She says that a reader's letter asked "Where can I get the china in your book?" to which she responds, "Where a magazine is a book, you can reckon that's the public Lord Victor has in mind" (80). Thus she underscores how publishers view women readers as a consuming public easy to prey upon with "fiction as well as instructive articles on erotics, oh yes, as well as hard hard lessons in sex appeal, they are allowed to fill their little permanently waved heads with lovely lovely dreams of the never was" (169).

In these passages Pompey seems firmly entrenched in the oppressive ideology she otherwise writes against. And yet, she makes clear the danger her job presents: "Writing to boring relations, writing speeches, writing writing writing; . . . Signing my letters: Private Secretary . . . Reader, for Editorial Manager . . . in slanting ruffling swashbuckling forgery. Forgery" (222-23). On the one hand, writing, a potential salvation for the autobiographer, here places its author under erasure. Her entry into public discourse is always masked under another sign than her own signature. On
the other hand, the act of forgery resonates with the "theft" of Casmilus's name at the beginning of the novel and arrogates the power of her boss, the editorial manager. Read in this way, writing recalls the kind of criminal act committed by characters like Nora of *A Doll's House* in which women appropriate male authority. However, as a close look at the "fictions for married and unmarried women" reveals, the power she appropriates in the act of writing is undercut by the texts she produces that uphold destructive definitions of "woman."

She begins the catalog of these fictions with the damning fact that she does not play tennis. "That is important. . . . That is where you meet people, as they say in our correspondence columns to all the girls who don't have young men, or can't meet young men" (164). One woman wrote in to the magazine's advice column asking how to get a man to propose: "The girl said she had seen a young man at the tennis club she had joined so as not to feel lonely, and so as to get fixed up with a young man, and a house or a flat and a baby." Smith communicates the speed with which women expect to move from romance to maternity in Pompey's voice as she paraphrases the letter in one quick sentence. The advice column recommends that in order to get the man to propose, the woman should arrange to play the last set of tennis with him and then "linger hopefully and perhaps he will see you home" (165). Pompey laughs at the advice and makes the connection between women all over the world lingering like the "White Girl that Whistler painted" and the connotation that lingering shares with the sick waiting to die: "And it is death that is going to come. . . . and I think we shall be glad too, when death comes. . . . so
that she does not have to linger any more" (166). For Pompey, both forms of lingering amount essentially to the same thing.

She realizes that women's magazines are greatly responsible for "where [women] get their funny thoughts on matrimony" (169), and then she explains the first way magazines keep women in thrall—the Fiction for the Married Woman:

This is how it goes. Sure enough Miss Snooks has got married to that nice solid young fellow. But somehow the gilt is off the gingerbread. It is all washing up and peeling potatoes, and there are several kiddies, and the furniture isn't paid for, and is already beginning to look like it was time for some more. And oh how dim drab and dreary is life in terms of squawling brats and cash installments. But publishers are a bit timid about that thought, because it's a bit dangerous to get in that idea about the installment system, because, well, advertisers are so. Well let's not dwell on that horrid horrid subject. There's just one word that covers that, and that is delete.

So, by and by an old office friend... Oh isn't this hateful? Oh already I am beginning to feel sick, but oh what a hateful stink. So the old friend that was there in that office, she is well dressed and has a permanent wave that looks. That looks. So this old friend she says. She says. And she sees. (169-70)

Notice how the narrative slides into ellipses. First she reduces married life to squawling brats and cash installments. Although the publishers would disapprove of the connection because the word "installment" brings to mind the money women pay to have false fantasies of marriage sold to them, she makes the statement fully any way, even using the image of the worn furniture to underscore her point. Only the adjective modifying advertisers is omitted; they are "so" what? The reader can easily fill in the blank, but the topic of economic exploitation remains unspoken.
However, as she introduces the successful office friend who visits the housewife, the contrast between the two women, between what happens to women when the buy into the ideology of domesticity and when they don't, sparks her anger and the narrative unravels. Ellipses follow the word "friend" and Pompey interjects her own revulsion at the story. She does not describe how the friend's hair looks or what she says. In fact, Smith often leaves phrases unfinished in the novel at points of anger as though "the talking voice that runs on" comes to a stuttering halt at its angriest or at its most transgressive. At these moments the narrative refuses to flow and gets harder to read. We have to pause over these passages and wonder what, for instance, the friend says. In the passage above, the information omitted after "She says. She says," stands in stark contrast to what she sees:

She sees every grease spot, every torn trashy curtain, every slobber on Tommy's face, everything that was cheap and brightly gimcrack to begin with, already now so cheap and dull and gimcrack... [This is] what Everygirl saw through this wedding ring, oh it is now all looking oh. (152)

Significantly, Smith relies on the visual, on what the friend sees, in order to make her point. Her strategy is in line with the women's magazine industry in the 1930s whose advertising was increasingly relying on visual images to promote models of femininity for female consumers. Under the scrutiny of the old friend, the tarnished reality beneath the glitz of the mass produced fantasy shows through. Note, too, that the gaze belongs to a woman. Readers identify with the old friend because they see what she sees as they read the description. In the position of mastery that the gaze affords, the domestic paradise loses its seductive force.

Furthermore, Smith uses the language of the domestic fantasy against the fantasy itself. Words like "bright" and "daylight" which are supposed
to connote the clean, cheerful house of the happy homemaker betray the ugly truths of the home and child; in the unforgiving daylight we see grease and slobber in detail. Pompey repeats the word "every" to prevent any detail of married life being recuperated for the ideal. She compares the house, perhaps Ibsen's crumbling dollhouse, to a "toy" to challenge its sanctity. Women, stripped of their particularity, are subsumed under the title "Everygirl" which diminishes woman to girl even as it totalizes her. Again, the passage concludes in incompleteness: "It is now all looking oh." Oh what? Oh so terrible? The interjection "oh" forces the reader to fill in the blank, thus stunting her out of her passive thralldom and into an active, critical stance.

But this is where the Fiction for the Married Woman takes an unfortunate turn. The friend, an unwelcome intrusion into what Pompey glosses as a "bright little tight little hell-box," tries to seduce the housewife back to work in the office. The (capitalized) "Boss" is willing to take her back and, more appealing, "There is Money there." Yet just as the wife decides to return,

just as she is trying to open the front door, that is in a jam, that is always in a tight set jam, Tommy knocks the stewpan over, the stewpan that had supper in it for the husband, the stewpan is very hot, and Tommy is very hurt, so the wife thinks: I very nearly left my lovely Home, my lovely Tommy, my lovely husband. But am I not married, and if you are married it must be all right. the friend from the office is not married, so of course she is jealous, but. (153)

By the end of the passage the wife's thinking returns to the backwash of ideology she has swallowed for years. Pompey concludes the train of thought with the dangling conjunction "but" to indicate that the wife is not
totally convinced that her decision is correct, but she stands by it. She refuses to pursue the possibilities on the other side of the conjunction.

In her revulsion, Pompey recants her earlier crack about readers being good for the dividends: "No, that is the end, that is absolutely already much too much. You can pay too much for a good dividend" (172). Admittedly, she does not quit her job, nor could she afford to really. What she quits instead is her narrative:

I cannot tell you about the stories for unmarried girls, the ones that are so cleverly and coyly oh. And they are so bright and smiling, and full of pretty ideas that are all the time leading up to washing-up. You will know how they go but I cannot tell you. I am already feeling: No, I should not have said all this. It is the ugliest thing that could ever have been conceived, because it is also so trivial, so full of the negation of human intelligence, that should be so quick and so swift and so glancing, and so proud. (172)

This is the heart of her outrage. Through media like women's magazines, as one of several examples, women are singled out because of their gender and "doled out" (Smith's term) ideologies that destroy "human intelligence" so that intelligence becomes a gendered term reserved for the male. Smith, on the other hand, wants to reclaim intelligence for women over and against the conventionally assigned value of feeling.

The pain of her profession comes clear at the end of the Fiction for Married and Unmarried Women sequence. The novel turns back to Pompey's life as she discusses what seems to her a logical conclusion to the pessimistic sequence of fictions:

So I will say at once, it is a wise thing that every intelligent, sensitive child should early be accustomed to the thought of death by suicide. This follows inevitably from what I have been saying. But do not strain or pull away,
because now we are coming to that rich and spacious thought where human pride is paramount. (172)

Note the roughness of the transition; she shocks on purpose, and yet death, either literal or translated into silence or cultural invisibility, is where the fictions for married and unmarried women lead.4

The option to die always attracted Smith to suicide. As Pompey says after the fictions sequence, "Death is my servant. So I think every sensitive young child should early learn this. It is a great source of strength and comfort" (176). The ability to choose to die is most important to Pompey. "There is a very deadly poison in the fear that things may become more than we can bear," she explains, "There is a very deadly sort of slave feeling in this thought" (176). The analogy to slavery applies as well to the state of thralldom in which domestic fictions keep women. Their ideologies, the very refusal to admit the fictionality behind the fictions of romantic love and marriage, enslave women even as it attempts to define them. If their own death is the only thing women can control, then according to Smith, they must embrace that right regardless of whether they actually attempt suicide or not. Certainly she is not waging a campaign to get women to kill themselves. Instead, she advocates agency, which recalls the themes of disguise in the novel. Women must seize the right and ability to choose as much for themselves as they can. By including suicide as a choice women can make, Smith reaches to the farthest extremes possible to underscore the importance of self-

4Much of Smith's work deals with her attraction to death, and this is one of the earliest instances of her writing about it. At the age of five she contracted tubercular peritonitis and was sent to a children's convalescent home where she remained for three years. Lonely and sick in the institution, she began contemplating suicide at the age of eight. Only then, paradoxically, did she regain the desire to live by realizing, as she explains, "It's the thought that it's in your own hands, that you can if you want to, make an end of it, but one never does" (qtd. in Dick 71). In fact she unsuccessfully attempted suicide in 1953, slashing her wrists at her office desk.
determination: "But that 'choose' is a grand old burn-your-boats phrase that will put beef into the little one, and you see if it doesn't bring him to a ripe old age," Pompey asserts (160). It is the right to choose, not the choices one makes, that she most clearly values even though she always advocates choices that run counter to tradition or convention.

In the novel's last paragraph Pompey commits what could be interpreted as literary suicide. She has been discussing why she did not marry Freddy and the profound feeling of alienation she is left with after not succumbing to the desires that her culture has tried to instill in her. She simply does not want to marry, and as she says in despair, "[There are] so many charges that I cannot answer" (250). Guilt leaves her with the thought, "How profoundly impersonal is nature and how horrifying to the mind that is too little aloof, and yet upon no centre placed."

Juxtaposed against her musing comes one final story, the last in the book:

There was pity and incongruity in the death of the tigress Flo. Falling backwards into her pool at Whipsnade she lay there in a fit. The pool was drained and Flo, that might and unhappy creature, captured in what jungle darkness for what dishonourable destiny, was subjected to the indignity of artificial respiration. Yes, chaps, they worked Flo's legs backwards and forwards and sat on Flo's chest, and sooner them than me, you'll say, and sooner me than Flo, that couldn't understand and wasn't raised for these high jinks. Back came Flo's fled spirit and set her on uncertain pads. She looked, she lurched, and sensing some last, unnameable, not wholly apprehended, final outrage, she fell, she whimpered, clawed in vain, and died. (251-52)

The tiger with which Pompey identifies herself earlier reappears here to end the novel in the way many traditional narratives end--with the death of the protagonist. Of course Pompey does not literally die, but the novel
ends on this note; the "talking voice that runs on" comes to a silent halt. Recall that Stevie's first given name is Florence; under her new name she can both hide her old name from the readers, effectively killing herself in disguise, and claim the power of resurrection in her incarnation as Stevie. She has resisted the marriage plot throughout the novel and chosen, instead, a death plot.

According to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Death comes for a female character when she has a jumbled, distorted, inappropriate relation to the 'social script' or plot designed to contain her legally, economically, and sexually." She adds that, "Sometimes death comes to a female character who cannot properly negotiate an entrance into teleological love relations, ones with appropriate ends..." (15). Certainly Pompey qualifies as this kind of subject, but we do not have to assume that her fictional death is necessarily a type of punishment. DuPlessis reminds us that death is often a triumph for the female character. The narrative gives her a moment of final protest "against the production of a respectable female and the connivances of a respectable community" (16). Smith's version of this protest comes when the tigress Flo lurches against the efforts to revive her. The story allegorically argues the same point she made earlier about the value of suicide. Thus Pompey has claimed the death plot for herself, a script usually reserved to punish the erring female.

The passage could also be read as a humorous commentary on the post-structuralist idea of the death of the author. Barthes and Foucault have done much to debunk the romantic deification of Author, a position traditionally entrenched in the center, in the dominant position of
discourse. This move might open the door for marginal subjects to speak, but Foucault's description of the reduction of "all discourses" to "the anonymity of a murmur" is hardly enfranchising for women like Smith who are finally receiving critical attention. Feminists have criticized the deconstructionist death wish as a means of silencing the still important question "Who is speaking?" but we find an answer in Novel on Yellow Paper. If the talking voice can speak its own death, then it can resuscitate itself, be re-inspired, when it chooses and not rely on others, as Flo does not, to grant it the authority to do so. Even death cannot contain the relentless voice of Pompey. She reappears two years later in Over the Frontier, laughing in the first line, as usual.

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Chapter Two:

Gender Borders and the Limits of Agency in Over the Frontier

They speak of things done on the frontier we were never told... 
--W. H. Auden

With the publication of Novel on Yellow Paper, Smith achieved instant celebrity. The secretary had so successfully reinvented herself as a novelist that she received fan mail addressed to Pompey from women claiming to be equally tortured by their own Freddies. To borrow a phrase from Nancy K. Miller, Smith's added "emphasis," that is, her peculiar quality of voice and inclusion of women's experiences in a non-traditional plot, struck a chord with many of her female readers.\footnote{See Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 339-360. Smith wrote to Naomi Mitchison, "If you knew the letters I still get. The ones from the women--all so hungry & worrying. Hungry for a nostrum, a Saviour, a Leader, anything but to face up to themselves & a suspension of disbelief" (qtd. in Spalding 139).}

Although reviewers thought the novel "Reminiscent of Tristram Shandy, Virginia Woolf, Clarence Day, Anita Loos and the Joyce of the last chapter of Ulysses," Marie Scott-James's review in New Literature points to another explanation for her sudden success: "In these days of Fascism and Communism, revolution and threats of war how delicious it is to be amused" (qtd. in Barbera and McBrien 79, 89). Undoubtedly Novel on Yellow Paper is "amusing" though it also addresses loss, suffering, and the difficulty of negotiating between public and private worlds for women, and it these more pressing concerns that carry over into her next novel.

Smith published her sequel, Over the Frontier, in 1938, the same year that a fellow poet, W. H. Auden, had this to say:

But ideas can be true although men die, 
And we can watch a thousand faces
Made active by one lie:
And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now:
Nanking; Dachau

As these lines from "In Time of War" indicate, the threat of war hung once again over Europe. Smith wrote much of *Over the Frontier* in the fall of 1936 after Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, the German troops' reoccupation of the Rhineland, and the onset of the Spanish Civil War (Spalding 135). The image of the frontier was increasingly present in the political milieu as well as in the literary imagination of the 1930's. Yet Smith's title invites the question "which frontier?" It seems that several are crossed in the course of the novel.

Smith's critics hesitate to answer this question in part because the crossing of the frontier marks a crossing in the novel from a realistic depiction of post-World War I England to a dream or fantasy sequence in which the main character, Pompey, goes to war. Barbera and McBrien evaluate the novel as "not finally a success, in part because of the jarring shift mid-book from realism to surrealism." Tangye Lean damned it with faint praise as merely a "considerable" advance over the first novel, though "not always rationally comprehensible" in her 1938 review for the *News Chronicle* which she titled, as if by comparison, "H. G. Wells As Good As Ever." Perhaps the critic who betrays the most interesting resistance, though, is Frank Swinnerton who confessed that he "did not understand what 'frontier' it was that Pompey crossed in the book, and I shall not here grope after hidden meanings" (qtd. in Barbera and McBrien 112).

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2 Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden are two of several writers whose works prominently feature the frontier image. In 1937, for instance, the Group Theatre, based in Cambridge, produced the last Auden-Isherwood play, entitled *On the Frontier* (Barbera and McBrien 111).
Why not? Why do Smith's readers seem willfully ignorant when they run headfirst into the frontier? Admittedly, the second half of the novel is strange and challenging, but what critics resist most on the "frontier" is precisely the issue that should have stayed at home, should have known its place--gender. Spalding alludes to the connection between gender and frontiers in Smith's biography:

There is an actual frontier which Pompey crosses in the course of her night riding and which separates her from her former life. But her soliloquy constantly strains against other frontiers, giving the reader the sensation that in her actions and behaviour she is about to step beyond the bounds of reason, logic and honour into a world where conventional goals and values have no meaning. (138)

She uses as an example a homoerotic moment between Pompey and her friend Josephine and concludes that "In this and other ways the book suggests a world on the edge of dissolution, of frontiers under threat." For Spalding, then, the frontier seems to signify the far reaches of heterosexuality; to cross the frontier is to challenge gender and sex roles.

Sanford Sternlicht, on the other hand, names the "frontier under threat" specifically and without judgment: "Thus the frontier crossed over again and again is the sexual border between the traditional male and female roles and sexual positions" (Stevie 22). He calls the novel "a quest for gender identification and role clarification by a female protagonist fleeing the dull, safe, stale, deadly boring world of peaceful suburbia..." (23). We can delineate, therefore, a kind of frontier between Novel on Yellow Paper and its sequel. In the former, gender construction occurs on a suburban site, in a world not just "deadly boring" but deadly, whose values Pompey resists through strategies of multivocality, disguise and an
appropriation of the death plot. In *Over the Frontier*, by way of contrast, gender construction comes to the forefront through a tension between the homefront and warfront as Smith illustrates that the battle of the sexes looms as large as the political stormclouds on the horizon. Pompey's story does not correspond to Smith's biography nearly as closely as it did in the first novel. We hear the narrator's voice alone, not foreign accents, humorous quotations, or the bass tones of ideology urging her to conform. In this novel, Pompey takes action by going to war as a combatant in an allegorical battle that asks the question: What happens when women refuse domesticity and assume one of the most hyperbolic postures of masculinity --the soldier?

Before examining the second half of the novel, I will discuss a few key moments in the first half, in the world that Sternlicht calls dull and safe. We discover quickly that the homefront is, in fact, neither. It is a world haunted by monsters, witches and vampires. The novel opens in an art gallery, an aesthetic space conventionally separate from politics, but Smith emphasizes that it is no less vulnerable to the trappings of ideology than the fictions for married and unmarried women that she exposed in her first novel. Pompey goes to the gallery with "a nostalgie (sic) to be looking at these high-up and elevating canvases" (10), but she discovers instead a collection of paintings that depict degrading representations of women. One painting entitled "The Assignation" portrays what Pompey calls a "girlie," using the term ironically for the erotic, satiric type of woman the artist wants to convey. She is "rather fat... and so looking like a bolster that has short fat legs that go bulging over the cheap thin shoes." The other figure on the canvas is a "sugar daddy that is looking at the girlie
he is thinking he is thinking Well is she worth it, chaps, is she worth this famous RM 20 note...?" (13). Pompey guesses that he would knock down the price to ten and moves on to the next canvas which again portrays fat women: "The curve of their plump thighs comes out of the too tight elastic band of their directoire knickers" (14). One of the women, however, is also coded as vampiric; she has teeth that are "too sharp and too white. There is something vicious about these sharp small white teeth" (14). In both examples the women's bodies, far from achieving a Rubenesque ideal, appear constricted by their adherence to fashion and monstrous.

These representations of femininity and sexuality lead Pompey to thoughts about war, as if to underscore the fact that the aesthetic realm is not a privileged or sanctified space. She looks at one more painting called "On the Beach" in which "an old girl who is really so extremely ugly and so extremely amorous" looks longingly at a "fine nordic specimen that is full to the brim with masculine buck" (15). The woman is pathetically ugly, the man is a parody of masculinity, and the two play out what Laura Mulvey describes as a typical scene of male scopophilic pleasure: "The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (Erens 33). Pompey says that the woman in the painting poses desperately before the man with her "little eager pig eyes," because she "must have... love and affection... Oh scintillating vanity of unsatisfied desire" (15). She does not specify whose desire is unsatisfied, the woman's because he finds no pleasure in looking or the man's because she is an unworthy subject of his gaze.

The painting portrays a failing version of heterosexuality and reminds her of an anonymous painting of a "shamefully broken body of a
shattered soldier drawn up lifted up crucified upon his crutches" (16). The latter part of her description, the "shame and loss and flight into darkness," applies equally to her own situation as she internalizes the monstrosities of the art gallery. And, several chapters later, she will identify with the shattered soldier as she, too, is "lifted up" like a crucified woman by her lover, Tom. In the next episode, however, Pompey informs the reader that she is still suffering over Freddy and has therefore accepted her friend Josephine's offer to escape to Schloss Tilssen for a vacation. Josephine tells Pompey, "When I think of you now Pompey I see something that is sad and stormy and I am very anxious for you" (25). Recall Pompey's assertion in *Novel on Yellow Paper* that "the thing that really counts is what is making you all the time" (183). The scene with Josephine enacts this assertion and functions like a counterpoint to the scene from the first novel in which Rosa and Lottie try to remake Pompey. Pompey says:

> How sweet Josephine is, and now in a moment she has said this and I feel that indeed my life is very sad. . . . It is as if together we were looking at something from the outside. It is not my life at all from the inside, but a Life of Pompey that we are for the moment looking at together. . . .

> But also it is rather funny in this way. Because this strong and forceful Josephine has created her picture of Pompey, and has for the moment projected it upon my vision, so that I forget the gay light moments, and the raffish black and hateful demon that runs alongside, and think only of this pure element of sadness that is quiet and touching and in its quality eternal. (27-28)

Now it seems that Pompey is the artifact or the aesthetic object held up for study. At the beginning of this passage there is no essential Pompey, only a constructible one. Like Rosa and Lottie in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Josephine projects a "picture of Pompey" onto her. The "Life of Pompey"
seems malleable before the two women, open for inspection and reconfiguration. Pompey can choose to accept it or reject it. This freedom to engage in self-invention seems liberatory, but notice that she also accepts another image as well, the monster. Who is the "black and hateful demon" Pompey temporarily forgets? We have seen it before in *Novel on Yellow Paper*. Explaining to her friend William that she could not marry Freddy, Pompey confesses, "In the heart of the proud and satanic Pompey is such a white flame of antagonism that no, there was no longer any sweetie-pie, but a monster..." (207-08). Pompey's guilt over not acquiescing to the marriage imperative seems to me the real "pure element of sadness" that she describes, and that same guilt carries over into the second novel.

In a passage that bears relevance to this moment in the text, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, quoting Virginia Woolf, argue early on in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her" (17). Although critiquing the representations of women in the art gallery is a step forward for Pompey towards what Woolf would call killing the "angel in the house," and a step following the ones she has already taken by refusing traditional constructions of woman, the monster still remains. Pompey cannot escape the perception that because she rejects traditional femininity, there is something inherently wrong with her. That she can forget the demon does not mean that it is gone or that she has a choice of abandoning it. In the first novel the monster resided in her heart; now it runs "alongside," but it is present nevertheless. The demon seems essential, and for that reason her confession is particularly disturbing. Most of the time Pompey defies
cultural imperatives that narrowly and prescriptively define femininity and womanhood. Yet in a moment she calls "rather funny," even though it is marked by the sadness of her breakup, what emerges is an essential definition of Pompey as demonic. She does not recuperate "demonism," "monstrosity," or "the grotesque" as oppositional play, as a way of "refusing to surrender to the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class" (Russo 213). Her demonism does not mark a site of insurgency in the text. It is a site of surrender. In despair, at the point of a mental breakdown, she waves the white flag to patriarchal definitions of women that intervene in her own writing and in her own self-invention.

Two pages later she involves the reader in her wayward turn from self-construction to self-destruction. She says that she will explain "why this book is set to anger and disturbance, and [you] need not pity me" (29). Presumably we already know. The first episode of the novel sets up the answer; battles are being waged between nations overtly and the sexes covertly. She identifies these tensions in the art gallery, and yet she relocates "the anger and disturbance" onto herself and her own failed relationship by, in fact, not explaining why the book is set to anger. Instead she imposes the reader's voice into the text: "Oh Pompey, I am so sick of bloody Freddy." Proportionately, Freddy gets very little mention in the scope of the novels, and, as one reader, I am not sick of "bloody Freddy" at all. Pompey briefly explains that they have reconciled and then cuts herself off again as she interjects the voice of a castigating reader who speaks her own negative thoughts:

Oh quiet now, quiet. Oh how I detest you Pompey, oh how detestable you are, I am sick to death of you, you abominable Pompey. . . . that must torment this poor Freddy,
this darling and affectionate and once so happy Freddy, your love, your darling, your sweetie-pie; that only must love you, and for this be torn to pieces. . . . Oh how abominable you are Pompey, how I hate you. Oh to the stake and faggots with you, you abominable witch. . . . (30)

A man who would tell a woman that "you want some sense knocked into you" (NYP 238) hardly deserves the appellations "your love, your darling, your sweetie-pie," and yet Pompey assumes that her readers would scorn her poor judgment and bad behavior. For as she has disclosed in Novel on Yellow Paper, women like Rosa and Lottie, and the ones who subscribe to the bad advice in women's magazines, are powerfully invested in coercing women to conform to cultural norms that demand "compulsory heterosexuality" and proper feminine behavior. Hélène Cixous describes the dynamic of introjected monstrosity as one common in women who have been "led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism." She asks the pointed question, "Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a . . . divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?" (335).

Emile Benveniste provides an equally rich perspective on Pompey as she imposes self-hatred through an assumed reader's voice. He writes:

All through Freudian analysis it can be seen that the subject makes use of the act of speech and discourse in order to "represent himself" to himself as he wishes to see himself and as he calls upon the "other" to observe him. His discourse is appeal and recourse: a sometimes vehement solicitation of the other through the discourse in which he figures himself desperately, and an often mendacious recourse.

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to the other in order to individualize himself in his own eyes. Through the sole fact of addressing another, the one who is speaking of himself installs the other in himself, and thereby apprehends himself, confronts himself, and establishes himself as he aspires to be, and finally historicizes himself in this incomplete or falsified history. . . . The subject's language [langue] provides the instrument of discourse in which his personality is released and creates itself, reaches out to the other and makes itself be recognized by him. (67)

Although Pompey is not in a psychoanalytic situation, her voicing of the reader's thoughts corresponds to Benveniste's description of the analysand who calls upon the other to observe her. Pompey wants to reconstruct herself, to make herself recognizable by assuming what an antagonistic reader might think and internalizing that assessment. Though including the reader's voice could neutralize its hostility by anticipating objections and responding accordingly, Pompey's gender identity is not consonant with dominant values and therefore resists recognition. If culture sees her, it sees her as "perverse," as one who "twist[s] everything the wrong way." And the woman who does so is a "witch" whose power must be deflected and contained in the mythology of the occult.

At this moment in the text, therefore, Pompey reconstructs her identity in the terms that culture uses to construct it for her. She constitutes herself through language, as Benveniste argues that all subjects do. She "installs the other" and the "other's" voice in herself as if to

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4Judith Butler describes the mechanisms by which the "cultural matrix" decides gender intelligibility: "The notion that there might be a "truth" of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms. The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female." The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of identities cannot "exist"--that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender. 'Follow' in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality" (17).
"apprehend" and "confront" a true and terrible self, but to read this passage is not to have, finally, some confirmation that Pompey deserves our hate. It does not work. But neither is this passage one in which she mocks the reader who would detest her for not marrying Freddy. Hers is a divided gender identity here, one that unMASKs a latent fear and self-hatred that the braver tone of resistance in Novel on Yellow Paper tried to keep at bay.

Thus, in an effort to purge herself of her internalized monstrosity, Pompey tries to conform to the definition of women that she mocked as "Good Listeners... Good Pals... they sometimes even go so far as to Pay Attention to Personal Hygiene" (NYP 169). Her attempt to be the woman Freddy wants wins him back, but more importantly, it also denaturalizes gender identity by dramatizing that "woman" is a role she plays, a "normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience" (Butler 16). As Butler explains, the "substantive 'I'," the gender identity that is culturally recognized and accepted, "only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalize its effects" (144). For Pompey to take part in this signifying practice as a practice which she can adopt or dismantle is for her to uncover the very workings of prescriptive gender norms and their failures. "The injunction to be a given gender," Butler notes "produces necessary failures" (145), and Smith illustrates these clearly in Pompey's attempts to reconcile with Freddy and, by association, their middle class culture that squelches women's creativity and self-fashioning.

Pompey explains to the reader that her reconciliation required her to relinquish her will and desires. As with the title of the novel and its two-part structure of home and frontier, Smith figures Pompey and Freddy's
conflict in terms of location. She wants to take walks in Hertfordshire, but Freddy prefers the suburbs, a prime location for domestic entrapment. "But I am so meek and docile now," Pompey confesses, "I do not suggest anything, I do not speak, I am so interested now to follow, follow, follow" (34). Yet she cannot play the role for long. She compares their relationship to another location, one that betrays her discomfort: "It is like, it is perhaps just rather like this. Well, imagine that it is a sunk submarine from which you will escape" (35). This image of entrapment represents Smith's damning indictment of the normative injunctions that prescribe femininity at the cost of a woman's own space. Pompey asks Freddy, "You see, darling Freddy, what your little lambie-pie is up to? She is up to no good, not one good thing at all" (36). Pompey knows she has been playing "lambie-pie" to Freddy's desires. By the end of the episode, Smith figures Pompey's rejection of "proper womanhood" once again in terms of place. Pompey says, "But the rhythm of good-bye is in my blood and I am set again for foreign parts" (42). She is not leaving for Schloss Tilssen yet; in this case "foreign" means "not Freddy," in other words, a place other than the literal and metaphorical spaces which trap women in domesticity and prescribed identities.

Pompey finds herself in such a place a few episodes later on a boat with Josephine and her daughter en route to Schloss Tilssen. This episode marks a liminal space between England and the castle that is supposed to function as a healing spa but will become a type of headquarters for Pompey's future espionage. She cannot escape the lingering sadness attached to her failed relationship with Freddy, the drudgery of her secretarial position, and the impending sense of another war which she
describes again in terms of place, "Ah pain, ah wilderness of pain and war and death. . . . For we have in us the pulse of history and our times have been upon the rack of war" (63, 94). Furthermore, she has contracted an unnamed illness induced, presumably, by her break-up with Freddy as if the internalized demons have materialized into physical pain. Her doctor prescribes sleeping pills and something called "Glaxo-Glucose D" (19) which sounds more like a placebo or snake oil than a legitimate drug. In an allusion to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" she tells herself, "Oh Pompey, think and count the flowers on your wallpaper, and remember to be sad, and remember and remember" (18). This comparison underscores the fact that the battles Pompey wages in the first half of the novel point to a diagnosis beyond a flu or a depression induced simply by Freddy. The illness and sadness that lead her to the boat and away from "this world of stormy seas" (120) betray a disease with patriarchal socialization forced down her throat much like the large pills her doctor prescribes. Women are socially conditioned to illness and fragility as part of their training in femininity. As Gilbert and Gubar assert, for women to be trained in renunciation, that is, in docility, submissiveness, and selflessness, "is almost necessarily to be trained to ill health" (Madwoman 54). Pompey, on the other hand, resists her training in renunciation and instead renounces socialization, but the results are the

5Barbara and McBrien make this diagnosis: "[Pompey convalesces] at a Schloss on the Baltic (from flu induced by her bust-up with Freddy)" (111).

6Gilbert and Gubar provide a useful gloss on women and disease noting that such diseases as "hysteria," anorexia and agoraphobia are products of patriarchal socialization. They point to social scientists and historians who study the ways that patriarchal socialization literally induce illness in women. See, for example, Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, ed., Woman in Sexist Society (New York: Basic Books, 1971); Phyllis Chesler, Women and Madness (New York: Doubleday, 1972); and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1973).
same; she suffers dis-ease. That her doctor prescribes sleeping pills points to the medical field's complicity in keeping Pompey's strain of "dis-ease" controlled and sedated so it doesn't threaten to "infect" other women who might resist socialization as well. Smith adds the doctor and the medical field, therefore, to her list of those forces ranging from Freddy's compulsory heterosexuality embodied in his fantasy of the suburbs to the art world's femicidal aestheticism that all work to construct their preferred version of Pompey.

Her separation from Freddy, her doctor, Rosa, Lottie, and the cast of characters working to squeeze Pompey into conformity does not, however, transport her to an "America, my New-found-land, my sanctuary, my salvation and escape" as she wishes it would (19). Instead, she finds herself in a parallel position to a messenger in her office who often repeats the phrase "I don't know if I'm coming or going." She responds,

Oh how essential for all comfort of body and soul to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that one is coming or that one is going. . . . This poor distracted messenger is deprived of this certainty, and with it there is made upon the essential dignity and privilege of his humanity a most perilous attack. (41)

In a sense Pompey is in exile at this point, fleeing her homeland where she is diagnosed as needing sedation. She occupies the cultural margins, the liminal space of not knowing whether she "is coming or going" and the self-doubt this instills in her seems to threaten not just her gender identity but her "humanity" which seems, like the messenger's, under "perilous

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7As Paula A. Treichler observes, "Medical diagnosis stands as a prime example of an authorized linguistic process (distilled, respected, high-paying) whose representational claims are strongly supported by social, cultural, and economic practices" (70).
attack." Whereas in the first novel Pompey appropriates the name of a god to cast into doubt the idea of a fixed, identifiable self, in *Over the Frontier* this sense of rebellious thievery and play falls by the wayside as Smith depicts Pompey suffering for her choices. Reading a text like *Gender Trouble*, for instance, one is inspired to challenge identity categories, to parody, to play with, to imitate gender configurations; it is always easier on paper. Certainly many of Butler's ideas should be put into action, but it is equally important to avoid a utopian feminist vision in which women can challenge gender norms at no cost. The first half of *Over the Frontier* lays out that cost as plainly and dreadfully as any bill one has to pay.

No longer sedated, Pompey reflects on her mental condition: "Here is but a wildernesse (sic). Oh death could not be more cold. . . . So that even the relief of death appears a vain thing and life-in-death our sole whole scope and penalty" (121). Recall that in *Novel on Yellow Paper* Smith uses death as an escape from the marriage plot and as a reappropriation of the death plot typically assigned to the erring female who cannot or will not enter into teleological, heterosexual love relations. On the boat, conversely, death seems remote and unattainable to Pompey who feels consigned to live a "life-in-death," the fate, perhaps, of the figure on the margins. Yet the phrase "life-in-death" is overdetermined in this novel; it resonates not only with the condition of marginality and exile but with a trope we have already seen thus far, that of the vampiric woman. Vampires, by definition, are reanimated corpses who live a life-in-death. In the boat episode, Pompey compares herself to a vampire: "Like a vampire that has learned the secrets of the grave. . . . I shall batten upon the stream of [Josephine's] confidences, for there never was anything so full of
the life of everyday, of the warmth and cosiness and smell of homo sapiens as these confidences of chère Josephine" (123). Pompey distinguishes herself here from homo sapien warmth, cosiness, and smell which indicates her identification with something other than human, perhaps other than female.

Smith plants the seeds of this identification in her first novel. Pompey admits, "And all the time I so much like to taste [Josephine's] life, to sample it and consider it. . . . Oh to taste, sample, flavour. . . " (NYP 196). Her language suggests that she feeds off of Josephine, a consumptive act similar to that of the vampire. Paralleling the vampire's life in a coffin, she admits to dwelling in a "grave-gravy of sadness" and that "in these sad moments into the grave we go" (OTF 132, 121). Although with subtlety, what comes to the fore on the boat is a monstrous manifestation of the "proud and satanic Pompey" who begs Freddy in Novel on Yellow Paper to "Peel off my wings and pare my claws" (226). Freddy does not "pare" or tame her and now she calls herself a "vampire" on the boat, a kind of "no man's land,"8 with the woman she calls "my very intimate friend" (NYP 190).

I stress the vampiric connection because it illustrates that Pompey's internalized monstrosity still remains but that she has transformed it into a power imbued with the vampire's polymorphous sexuality. In his study of Bram Stoker's Dracula, Christopher Craft asserts that "vampirism both expresses and distorts an originally sexual energy." He calls this

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8 Gilbert and Gubar use this phrase as a title to their three volume study of women writers in the twentieth century. In sum, the phrase alludes to a crisis of masculinity and male fears of a no man's land in which a strong New Woman seizes authorial control and autonomy. In Over the Frontier the same resonances apply; Pompey makes no mention of men other than one she has left (Freddy) and Josephine's husband, who is dead. What emerges on the boat, as I will point out, is a bond between women.
"distortion" a "representation of desire under the defensive mask of monstrosity" (216). Pompey has donned the mask of monstrosity already in a defensive stance against the cultural construction of femininity. Now she plays the monster again, aligning herself not with a demon but with a vampire, a monster originally scripted as lesbian.9 She rejects the typical monsters ascribed to women, such as the pervasive witch, in favor of a fanged femme fatale who "tastes" Josephine's life.

Smith illustrates in her choice of monsters for Pompey a power in monstrosity, even vampirism, and Nina Auerbach underscores this idea in her study Woman and the Demon. Writing about Dracula, she argues that the vampire instigates his victims' "capacity for perpetual self-incarnation. . . . [Dracula's] greatest power lies in his ability to catalyze the awesome changes dormant in womanhood. . . ." (23, 24). The ability to catalyze change in women would likely be characterized as monstrous by those seated in positions of power whose dominance relies on the suppression of women. For Pompey to align herself with vampires, therefore, suggests not only a sexual attraction to Josephine, which I will discuss, but a potentially subversive power to instigate change in other women as Pompey herself engages in reconfiguring her own gender identity.

This dynamic gets played out on the boat as Pompey encourages Josephine to discuss lesbianism in an open and positive way. Josephine tells Pompey about two women lovers at her office with the hope of arousing shock in her. She criticizes the relationship because the unnamed lesbian, Y, "got a poor deal, doing all the hard work with the lovey-dovey

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9Craft notes that Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's novella, Carmilla, about lesbian vampirism predates Dracula by twenty-five years (238).
insistence of the too-devoted." Their relationship replicates what could have become of Pompey and Freddy, but Josephine spares this observation in a sudden turn of false naïveté: "Of course I am not saying Pompey for one moment that there were actually any vicious practices." Pompey, unwilling to deny their sexual relationship, corrects Josephine, "No vicious practices, no my grandmother. Josephine, you are off your head" (130). At this point Smith writes that Pompey had "rent" Josephine's "veil of imaginative fiction," a tear that connotes a vampiric tearing of flesh. Paralleling the structure of vampire narratives in which the monster is entertained and then expelled (Craft 216), this scene on the boat concludes with Pompey rushing out of Josephine's cabin into the night. She tells the reader, in a phallic trope, that she cannot "offer to Josephine any drawn sword of hostility" against the lesbian women (131). That is, she refuses to participate in Josephine's policing of sexual discourse, what Foucault describes as "subjugat[ing] sex at the level of language, control[ling] its free circulation in speech, expung[ing] it from the things that were said, and extinguish[ing] the words that rendered it too visibly present" (17). Instead, she seems to identify with the women, calling them "harmless ladies, kind to each other, united in the care of unresponsive cats, united in their love of families and the promotion of their at least material well being" (131). The same description could apply to her and Josephine as well.

The "monster" does not remain expelled, however. Pompey returns to Josephine to apologize for hurting her, and although she may not have successfully effected a change in Josephine's repressed and repressive reticence, she does admit, "Affectionate practical intelligent Josephine, how
much I count on you, my pet, if you only knew it" (133), for it is Josephine who lures Pompey away from the strictures of British society and into a world Spalding describes a lacking "conventional goals and values."

Embedded in their flight, then, is the potential for a subversive bond, possibly sexual, between two women who care more for each other than they do for the heterosexual unions they are supposed to be seeking, unions founded on conventional gender identities that Pompey cannot accept.\textsuperscript{10}

Likewise, Josephine is the only character who could save Pompey from Tom, the man she falls in love with at the Schloss, but Smith does not allow it. As Pompey and Josephine dance together a few episodes later, Tom's ally, Mrs. Pouncer, literally tears them apart from one another, expelling Josephine as a threat and forcing Pompey to submit to Tom's will.

At stake for Smith, then, is a potentially lesbian relationship in a novel that hints at homosexuality without explicitly denoting it. Were Smith to have Pompey leave Freddy for Josephine, she would risk the reductive characterization of Pompey as a "latent homosexual" and would force the reader to reevaluate her problems with Freddy in different terms entirely. This choice would propel the novel into what Adrienne Rich calls the lie of compulsory heterosexuality: "the frequently encountered implication that women turn to women out of hatred for men" ("Compulsory Heterosexuality" 65). For Pompey to cross the frontier between hetero and homosexuality seems too simple and too inaccurate a solution to the gender issues set up in both novels. Furthermore, the

\textsuperscript{10}In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich remarks that lesbianism is subversive if "we think of heterosexuality as the natural emotion and sensual inclination of women" (56). She prefers the terms lesbian existence or lesbian continuum because they include a wide range of female identified experiences, all of which could be considered subversive according to the heterosexual norm. She adds that "By the same token, we can say that there is a nascent feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality" (66).
decision not to pursue homosexuality between Pompey and Josephine might owe in part to Smith's own conflicted relationship to lesbianism. Spalding says that Smith had a brief affair with a woman, but in a statement that sounds more like a disclaimer she warns, "any attempt to pin down Stevie's attitude to homosexuality runs the risk of caricature" (184). This affair happened after World War II; when she was writing Over the Frontier perhaps she was only speculating about same sex desire, but I can only speculate myself since her biographers are unwilling to discuss the matter at much length. Regardless, instead of allowing Pompey to find recourse in a homosexual relationship, Smith investigates what options remain for the heterosexual woman.

She gives an indication of the forces luring Pompey away from Josephine in a nightmare Pompey has her first night in the Schloss. The nightmare marks the transition from the first to the second half of the novel. Notably, Smith signals this shift with a change in clothing. Pompey says,

I dream, it is about Freddy. It is like this. . . .
I have a shade over my eyes and I am in uniform. But it is a secret, this uniform, it must not for a moment appear that I am in uniform, it is an official secret of some higher command, it is a sealed order, and to me something that is not perfectly assimilated, why I am here, why I am in uniform. So to me comes across the room this dream Freddy. . . . He stands above me at the table and looks down upon me. Why Pompey, you are in uniform. No, Freddy, my sweet darling Freddy why you are raving, Uniform? Why certainly you are dotty. This is not uniform, why these for instance are my riding clothes. What are the stars on your collar? Why these are not stars, these are the pin heads of the pin that keeps my tie in place. From whom is your commission? Why I hold no commission, why surely you could not be so dippy, to think
that I am sitting here under orders from an authority I do not know I do not recognize to exist? . . .

But he shakes his head, he looks so sad, he is so sweet, and already he is fading away from my dream-sight, and the stars on my collar are burning bright, fire-bright white light of fire heat, burning, piercing, tearing to burn the flesh from the bones, and burn and burn. (134-35).

The dream suggests a number of things. Pompey has been unwillingly conscripted into some sort of espionage. She occupies a world about which Freddy must know nothing, and she is something other than Freddy would recognize (which can't be all bad); nevertheless, this position and its attendant new uniform causes her pain which signals to the reader that something is wrong. Her change in clothing signals a change of worlds, a change in her, and a shift in the novel itself. Whereas in Novel on Yellow Paper disguise proved an oppositional strategy--it was "fun" dressing up and Pompey advised women "to put somebody else's clothes on"-- in Over the Frontier Pompey does not choose a costume; a uniform chooses her.

Thus Smith continues to investigate how vestimentary difference can serve vested interests, only those interests have shifted in the novels from fashion to fascism.

In order to introduce my discussion of the second half of the novel, I want to turn to one of Marjorie Garber's central arguments in Vested Interests. According to her, the figure of the transvestite calls into question binarisms such as male/female that culture has a "vested interest" in maintaining, thus challenging notions of fixed, essential gender identities. Although Pompey is not a transvestite, the dynamic Garber describes applies as well to her position as a woman in a man's military uniform, and it sheds light on how sexual/sartorial borderlines get crossed
and blurred and on how sex and gender distinctions become denaturalized and destabilized in the process. Garber asserts that "one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of what I call 'category crisis,' disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances." She defines the term "category crisis" as "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another. . . . The binarism male/female. . . is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism" (16). In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Smith introduces the category crisis that most preoccupies her novels—how does one define the category "woman"? As my first chapter argues, Pompey resists normative definitions in favor of reconfiguring her own gender identity. *Over the Frontier* raises a category crisis again as Pompey crosses the apparently distinct border that divides the homefront from the warfront, domesticity from battle, her life in the suburbs from a life of war. Thus the category crises grow more complex as Smith grafts the battle of the sexes onto political and social upheaval.  

Pompey's dream about cross-dressing in military uniform becomes a reality as she gets drafted, a conscription which immediately raises the question of why a woman would be enlisted to battle. If war is one of the last bastions of masculine control, then Pompey's entry into combat potentially opens a new frontier for women. Yet, as Woolf admonished in

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11The back cover of the Virago edition of *Over the Frontier* exemplifies this move. It says, "How Pompey gets into uniform and becomes a spy is only one of the astounding events in this extraordinary novel which, on a serious level, is also a powerful investigation of power and cruelty in a world preparing for war." This description is guilty of what Garber calls "regard[ing] transvestism as its vehicle rather than its tenor, as, once again, something to be looked through on the way to a story about men or women. . . . " (17). Garber insists that we look at the transvestite on the same "serious level" as we look at what crisis of category he/she displaces.
Three Guineas, another book about war published in the same year as Over the Frontier, women should not wish to cross into that frontier. She urges women to position themselves as "outsiders," and not to participate in any act that would facilitate fighting. Smith takes the opposite approach by considering and ultimately debunking the argument that women could recuperate war in some way or offer "salvation" to men whose "natural instincts" are to fight. If men could just tap into their feminine sides, so the argument goes, war would end. The logic behind such thinking bears close resemblance to the idea/ideology of androgyny, a solution Smith ultimately critiques. From from being an outsider, Pompey gets on the "inside" by fighting, and yet she is not drafted as a woman in order to help end war, but to further it.

In her study of Romantic poets, Diane Long Hoeveler offers a description of androgyny that corresponds to the critique of androgyny Smith mounts. She says that "the Romantics wanted to create female characters with whom their male heroes. . . could merge in a sort of apocalyptic union that would transform both the political and psychic realms" (6). Similarly, Smith creates a male character, Tom, with whom her female hero merges sexually and in combat, fighting side by side. Pompey's entry into battle overtly rejects traditional sex roles, but the resulting transformation in the political realm and in her psyche is not one that androgyny is ideally supposed to produce. She derives no strength or benefit from tapping into a male realm. Nor does she reconfigure her identity in a successful subversion of femininity. Androgyny amounts to

12 See Virginia Woolf, Three Guineas (1938; New York: Harcourt, 1966). See especially p. 108 in which she calls the will to fight and the rationalization that fighting protects women a "sex instinct which I cannot share."
no more than a seduction to lure Pompey into the battle plans of Tom, the
Archbishop, and the Generalissimo.

Initially, Pompey feels alienated because of her gender as Tom tells
her about commanding valleys and gun emplacements: "This sort of thing
is rather Greek to me, and rather sad too in its unpleasant associations and
the way it is so often driving a wedge between the sort of work that is
men's work and the sort of work that is women's work, and all of that line
of reasoning that is so part of unhappy fighting times . . . . Phew, how I
do detest this" (149). As if to escape "that line of reasoning" and to
further her relationship with Tom, therefore, she buys into an androgynous
ideal: "Never again in England I think shall we breed exclusively
masculine and exclusively feminine types at any high level of intelligence,
but always there will be much of the one in the other" (149). Her claim
assumes that enforced divisions between the genders will collapse as each
sex discovers the other within itself. Pompey's investment in androgyny
stems from her experience as one who has had to resist relegation into an
"exclusively feminine type," but the frontier offers no freedom from that
kind of confinement; instead, she becomes subsumed into a conventionally
masculine ideal. Feminist critics find the same fault with androgyny.
Invariably it reinforces gender polarities; although androgyny claims to
"blend" genders, the bipolar construct on which it is based remains intact.
In fact, as Smith illustrates in Pompey's relationship with Tom, most of the
time the feminine is subsumed by the masculine.$^{13}$

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$^{13}$For an overview of the criticism of androgyny, see Joanne Blum, Transcending Gender: The
Male/Female Double in Women's Fiction (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988); Barbara Charlesworth
Pompey does not realize this at first. She praises women who appropriate masculine privilege for their own gain, women who "are very cunning... that so well contrive to make the best of both worlds, concealing a masculine intention in a feminine phrase..." (150). These are the women who act like men, who don a kind of masculine attire or attitude to advance themselves in patriarchal society. Pompey commends their strategy in one of her familiar moves—she reduces their actions to a game much as she reduced marriage to a game in the first novel: "If the women are clever in the way I have said to make the best of both worlds, the men see the point well enough and can afford to laugh. They can laugh. It is a game" (151).

However, her strategy does not work as effectively this time. Even if these women are playing a "game," it is a game structured by patriarchal rules within culturally prescribed limits. They are not so much finding "much of one within the other" as appropriating much of one (the male) for themselves as Other, as the marginalized gender who must strive to be "clever," whose efforts are gauged as successful depending if the men "can afford to laugh." The androgynous ideal, therefore, slips into a power struggle imbalanced by the fact that men do not need to conceal feminine intention in a masculine phrase, do not need to be "cunning," and do not need to win the laughter of women.

The same can be said about Pompey's entry into battle. She no longer feels alienated from discussions of war after Tom cryptically asks her, "Do you hear it?" referring to the sounds of an approaching battle. Pompey responds "I am thinking now that I have always heard it" (165). Certainly she is no stranger to conflict, but suddenly she charts the
enemies' approach with ease and she somehow knows the name of the arms manufacturers Birdie, Strand and Dollard. Tom attributes her knowledge to an awakening as though she has had her consciousness raised (at his urging, of course), but Pompey attributes it, again, to a game: "It's a blind man's bluff we have been playing" (169-70). In blind man's bluff, one player is blindfolded and tries to catch and identify one of the other players. If anyone has been blind, it is Tom; she has been "one of the boys" all along. She discloses that her "little journeys into Ool" were not "all sweet feminine companionship"; the teas, luncheons, and day trips, activities sanctioned by the Schloss because they involve conformity to proper gender roles, were a bluff to disguise what she called earlier "a masculine intention." Thus, she has been involved in the same game she praised women for, "making the best of both worlds," but her successes in the "male" world--her visits with Aaronsen and her negotiations over nitrate prices--have earned her more than laughter from men; now she is enlisted for their cause.

I use the passive voice intentionally here. Despite her efforts to enlist herself by the work she has already done, it is Tom who initiates her into war. They act out less an androgynous blending than a dynamic of dominance and submission. In fact, she calls herself a "willing captive to all that he is saying... I am really very contained" (167). He drafts her by appearing to take her side, discounting, as he knows she would, the activities of her assigned gender role: "to hell with tea parties and the tea-tattle." His next step is to appeal to the abiding sense of guilt she carries from not conforming to this gender role: ""You will for once be a good girl" (170). When Freddy implored her to be a good girl, it meant getting
married. Now she has the opportunity to be a "good girl" by proving her skills in code deciphering, negotiating, and fighting, skills traditionally assigned to men in war. The seduction proves irresistible, but its persuasion is still couched in the same terms as Freddy's. Pompey admits to feeling "tired and disembodied" but not infantalized as Tom's injunction renders her (179). Yet to feel disembodied is to feel wrenched from the constraints of one's (female) body and the attendant, unavoidable cultural constraints attached to that body. Gaining access to the male world and losing a sense of her body are the first steps of Pompey's seduction, making her feel as though she has successfully shed her status as "feminine type" and acceded to an androgynous ideal, the "much of the one within the other." What we come to discover, however, is that Tom's plans for her are not based on androgynous principles. His thinking and plans are trapped in binary thinking; he can only offer her the opposite of "the exclusively feminine type"--the exclusively masculine.

Perhaps Pompey suspects this because she finds temptation away from Tom, not surprisingly, in Josephine who encourages her to help her plan a party, "a very slap-up and un-invalidish and very contra-Schloss late dinner" (185). Pompey agrees; she is always willing to do what is forbidden, but Tom's ally, Mrs. Pouncer, intervenes. We meet her after Pompey arrives at the Schloss, and Smith signals early on that something is wrong with her. She appears to fit in, exhibiting "great care for her dress and appearance" (143), and yet Pompey stumbles across her writing in code one night, issuing blankets to troops. When Pompey announces to her that she is planning a party the night before she and Tom are to cross the frontier into battle, Mrs. Pouncer reveals her complicity with Tom: "Why
does the American Count drink so much?" (190). The cryptic question, in reference to the brand of blotting paper on which she was writing in code, drives Josephine out of the room; she has no place in the world Pompey is being driven toward, but Mrs. Pouncer apparently does. Pompey calls her a witch, a term she had previously reserved for herself. That they share the same monstrosity aligns the two women in a way different than the bond between Josephine and Pompey. Pompey fears Mrs. Pouncer, but is drawn to her as another woman who possesses a potentially subversive power. Josephine recognizes this: "Why Pompey I believe you have a really vicious passion for this old girl" (189). As a fellow "witch," Mrs. Pouncer's version of casting a spell comes in the form of another seduction Pompey cannot resist. To encourage her to go to war with Tom, she appeals to the forces that drove Pompey from England and Freddy: "If you have anything in you of pride and ambition..." (192, ellipses Smith's). Pompey cannot resist her persuasion: "I am completely fascinated and held, there is a spell in this fine voice. . . . I am enchanted and ravished out of myself by this sweet voice that has made me this time" (193). Note Smith's use of the passive voice which indicates Pompey's malleability. Mrs. Pouncer, like Josephine, has taken her turn in refashioning Pompey.

She attends the party nevertheless. The episode functions as a kind of last stand, a last and lost opportunity to resist the frontier towards which Tom and Mrs. Pouncer draw her. Pompey's excitement about going to war has begun to wane in proportion to her continued attraction to Josephine. Tom and his allegedly androgynous frontier are mutually exclusive of Josephine, who likewise represents a sexual possibility, and one more subversive than Tom's. As Mrs. Pouncer sleeps and Tom is
noticeably absent, Josephine and Pompey start to dance together. As if she
has snapped out of her spell, Pompey asks, "And where are the spells and
the enchantments, where have they flown away to now, dear Mrs. Witch?"
(209). She has freed herself from Tom and Mrs. Pouncer's machinations
in Josephine's arms: "free of you both, in a happy pause to laugh and
scandalize with my dear Josephine." Making a spectacle of themselves,
they draw the attention of the crowd, and Pompey admits, "This is not
conforme. . . . Josephine and I are suddenly so sick to death of old Schloss
and its silent constraints. . . . the electric light chandeliers burn down upon
us to thrust with disapproval. . . upon our moment of laughter and release"
(210).¹⁴ Smith uses sexual language to connote the attraction between the
two women as they each resist the roles the Schloss promotes. Notice how
her description progresses to inscribe a discourse of war, to suggest that
sexuality is always tainted by politics: "We have a reinforcement that we
had not thought, a pair of allies. . . . Miss Hatt has pulled Lady Pym to her
feet, and the grotesque friends are dancing together. . . . Brave old ladies,
stalwart allies upon the turn of battle" (211). The battle that has erupted is
a sexual one--not just the proverbial "battle of the sexes" but a battle of
sexualities. Tom stands in the doorway watching with disapproval as
Pompey taunts, "I shall escape you Tom, my darling Josephine and I will
escape you and run quite away from all your commanding thoughts, your
secret commands and insistencies." But they do not. This point is crucial
in the novel because their dance represents Pompey's last chance at
resisting culture's efforts, embodied in Tom, to reconstruct her. She and

¹⁴ In her article, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," Mary Russo offers a compelling
argument for making a spectacle of oneself, for appropriating the danger of exposure and loss of boundaries
for political ends. See Teresa de Lauretis, ed., Feminist Studies: Critical Studies, (Bloomington: Indiana
Josephine are equal partners not coercing each other but dancing together. However, with "unholy witch strength" Mrs. Pouncer tears them apart, forcing "compulsory heterosexuality" on the pair by leading Josephine away and leaving Pompey with Tom.

In the same way that the receiving of a uniform marks a rite of passage from civilian to soldier, so Smith expresses Pompey's passage toward the frontier in terms of clothing. Feminine attire marks her vulnerability: "I have no cape, my fur cape is inside the dancing room, and my dress is cut low to the waist at the back; it is so cold and so disappointing and severe" (213). Continuing to patronize her as a "good girl," Tom draws Pompey a bath and dresses her. Notably she feels bound and alienated: "It is so tight and so constraining... but why it cannot be my coat, why my coat was never so tight as this coat is tight, to hold me tightly, to press upon me, and hold me in its tight harsh strength" (216). This is not an example of "cross-dressing" in the way Garber, for instance, discusses it; Pompey is not choosing her attire, and yet the figure of her in men's clothing signals a shift in gender identity, but one forced on her as opposed to the cross-dresser who wishes to have a new gender identity recognized. In order to mold her to his purposes, Tom needs to believe that a complete change in clothing effects a complete change in person although, as we saw with the Lion Aunt and her fan costume, Smith does not agree. Calling her a "fathead," Tom denies that her inner self is not now aligned with her outer wear: "Of course it's your coat" (216). It is hers because it is assigned, not chosen.
In the scene that follows, one cannot help but think of Lacan. Pompey wants to adjust her hat, but Tom insists that she not look at her reflection in the mirror. According to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, a child begins to develop an ego or an integrated self-image through a mirror reflection. The reflection of a unified "I" is a deceptive image of an idealized, coherent self that the child both identifies with and feels alienated from. Because the mirror stage begins the process of identification with images outside of the self, it is useful in understanding how representations of women affect the formation of female subjectivity. That Tom does not want Pompey to see her reflection suggests two things—the distance and perhaps unsuitability between herself and her uniform and the fact that he has styled her appearance to suit the needs and expectations of others, not herself. At stake is Pompey's relation to her own image; if she feels alienated by her reflection, then she will be less willing to internalize Tom's injunctions to refigure her gender identity. Tom needs to be the only "mirror," the only authority to award Pompey with an image of herself, one he has chosen, and thus he switches the light off, attempting to leave her literally and figuratively in the dark.

Nevertheless, she passes through a kind of mirror stage. In the light of the fireplace Pompey catches a glimpse of herself and realizes that she is not wearing "riding clothes" as she had previously thought: "I am in uniform" (217). Hence the dream she had her first night at the Schloss has been realized. She calls her reflection "horrible," and says that the hat, as

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15 Hats are a loaded symbol in Smith's work. As we will see in the poetry more extensively, hats always signal a shift or the possibility of a shift in gender identity. They usually connote the positive power of self-invention. That Tom will not allow Pompey to fix her hat, therefore, suggests a serious problem.

if it has taken on a life of its own, "stays quietly in my hands." She has lost a sense of agency and a sense of who she is. Far from identifying with a "unified I," she remains ungratified by her reflection. Furthermore, her identity crisis is complicated by a category crisis. The conflicting gender images of a woman's body in a man's uniform underscore the dissonance between her identity and her reflection. Although the developing, uncoordinated child in Lacan's narrative may feel some alienation from her image because she does not experience physically the unity she sees, in Smith's narrative the woman remains doubly alienated. There is something developing and even uncoordinated about Pompey, but in her "mirror stage," far from solidifying an ego, hers becomes subsumed: "The flames on the hearth shoot up and their savage wild light is reflected at my collar, is held reflected and thrown back... the light is tossed back again from the stars upon my collar and the buckle at my waist." In the end she becomes like a mirror herself, a reflector, not a reflected. As she repeats four times, a "savage light" bounces off of her. To be in uniform for Pompey, then, is to lose one's self, to become a vehicle for dispersing something cruel and uncivilized. Once again Pompey has found a monster in the mirror, but perhaps the most frightening monster is the mirror itself. If the brass on her military uniform serves up a reflection, then we must see in that reflection a savagery in ourselves.\footnote{In her introduction to Over the Frontier, Janet Watts calls the image of Pompey in uniform the heart of the book. She notes its recurrence in Woolf's Three Guineas: "His eyes are glazed; his eyes glare. His body, which is braced in an unnatural position, is tightly cased in a uniform. Upon the breast of that uniform are sewn several medals and other mystic symbols. His hand is upon a sword... And behind him lie ruined houses and dead bodies--men, women, and children" (142). Interestingly, both Woolf and Smith rely on a visual image as perhaps their strongest argument against war. That Smith's soldier is a woman underscores her interest in changing gender identities. As I mentioned in the text, Woolf imagines women as outsiders; Smith imagines them as soldiers.}
Once suited, and therefore suitable, Pompey rides off with Tom toward the frontier, a destination that proves to be, as I have said, an "exclusively masculine" realm. The point Smith is making is that to enter the male world, for a woman, is not to be free. The promise of androgyny falls by the wayside as the men refashion women to suit their own needs and then reveal their anxiety about admitting a woman into their plans in the first place. For instance, instead of showing any concern for the difficulties Pompey may have in adjusting to military life, Colonel Peck warns Tom, "Look out she doesn't pinch your job" (220). The military has no use for "feminine" skills; their plan is to reshape Pompey into a man as closely as possible. As we have seen, Smith literalizes their intention through the figure of the uniform, that which, as the etymology of the word suggests, renders everyone the same under one form, one mass, one hegemony. Clothes literally make the man in this book. Pompey observes:

I must laugh a little about this job-pinching business, to think of all that is stirring already in my heart; that this cloak is what there is for an outward and visible sign of my inward and spiritual sensation, growing growing with a strong swift growth to a full strength, that is what there is in my secret heart of pride and ambition, of tears and anger.

Oh how frightful are these sensations. (220)

As she wears the uniform, Pompey becomes "a man." Thus Smith challenges here the idea of a core gender identity in favor of one that can, by force or will, take part in a complex interplay and slippage between sign and referent. Pompey calls herself "Pompey die Grosse. Pompey der Grosse," manipulating at will the gendered German definite pronouns and, in her choice of language, alluding to Germany as a site of sexual experimentation before World War II (228). Yet her control over her
gender identity as she approaches the frontier extends only so far as language, and a foreign language at that. She still remains trapped in a uniform she characterizes as, "so detestable. And the thoughts that go with it, they are so utterly detestable." Admitting an alienation between herself and her newly assigned gender identity, she is "heavy with knowledge that is not my knowledge, and almost with the experience of a military strategy that certainly is not my own" (224). In frustration she asks, "Why must I wear this coat that is already putting such unfemale thoughts into my head?" (228). Tom's response, "dangling a tepid potato upon his fork," is that he is "Glad to hear it" because to him that means she will abandon her "feminine" whining, sobs and tears. Surely Pompey is like that tepid potato. She had been seduced into war precisely because she had abandoned many of the traditional feminine traits in favor of "pride and ambition," but over the frontier these qualities are masculinized. Thus she must wear the uniform and, in a vicious circle, the uniform encourages more pride and ambition, and more "tears and anger" because pride and ambition still remain unrecognized in the form of a woman. Smith's assertion in the first novel still rings true: the thing that really counts is what is making you all the time.

To understand more clearly Pompey's transformation from female to male, consider, by way of contrast, the change in Woolf's Orlando who effects a reverse transformation from male to female. For Woolf, "It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex" (188). Garber calls her transformation more of a "pronoun transplant" (134), and notes that Woolf's assertion about Orlando's change "suggests a privileged sphere of choice and self-
determination, even the self-determination to be a 'mixture... of man and woman' that seems, on the one hand, to belong to the realm of fantasy, and, on the other, to that of the wealthy and worldly" (135). On the other hand, Pompey does not retain an equal sense of agency; she is forced to change; she is transformed. Whereas the inside always corresponds to the outside for Orlando, for Pompey the inside must make adjustments, must understand its pride and ambition as latent "male" traits only. Garber says that "there are no vested interests patrolling that borderline [the inside and the outside] in Woolf's fantasy," but we can be sure that they stand guard in Smith's narrative. Embodied in Tom and the military, the vested interests of such a male world, as I have called it, and even the world Pompey left behind, must assign specific qualities to separate genders to render them culturally intelligible, and therefore, controllable.

Smith makes clear that another of these specific qualities is heterosexual desire and desirability, but for Pompey to approximate masculinity as closely as possible complicates matters. Dressed and acting like a man, she reads culturally as a lesbian, a subversive identity inadmissible over the frontier. Therefore, Tom must encourage Pompey's military work but contain the threat of her "pinching his job" or attaining too much power. He seduces her to keep her in romantic thralldom so that she wields a gun by day, but submits to him by night. Admittedly, I am not being much of a romantic in refusing to read the novel as a love story, but their relationship, like hers and Freddy's, leaves something to be desired. Notice that Tom makes his advances on her only after she has taken off her uniform; although nudity is a powerful seductive force, he only relates to her sexually once the threat of her power has been shed. Their love scene
at the beginning of episode seventeen seems equally suspect. Their bedroom seems more like a prison with its barred windowpanes, low ceiling and pervasive darkness. It overlooks a wasteland as vast Eliot's but not as parched: "the vanishing flat rainsodden plain that stretches far away with never a sign of habitation but ours and never a tree or a bush or a blade of grass that is not bent and twisted beneath the blowing high wind. . . . There is no sound at all (230-31). Smith records a slippage between the outer, oppressed, infertile landscape and the characters inside. As Tom holds Pompey in his arms (above his head, not near his heart) she remarks that "This is a curious and amusing inversion" (232). Her choice of words is telling. She is on top, he is below, but the "inversion" does not place Pompey in a powerful position. She begs to be let down "or I shall become into a frozen remoteness to be for ever spreadeagled against the cold darkness of the dark ceiling" (231) in much the same way as the crucified soldier in the art gallery. Thus even her "dominant" position is a vulnerable one. Raised in his arms, she evinces no surrender as the traditional romantic heroine would. When she admits that "after dinner every night we do a lot of hard work that is a peculiar great pleasure to me" (237), she is not talking about sex; she means decoding the messages that come over the phone from Headquarters. As a writer herself, Pompey would naturally be drawn to making and deciphering meaning.

Ultimately, therefore, sexuality fails in this novel. Like the fictions Smith exposed in the first novel, sexuality is equally susceptible to the infection of politics and ideology. Pompey cannot correctly occupy the positions of dominance and submission, "masculinity" and "femininity" when and as she is supposed to, and perhaps this is good. Her failure to
submit appropriately is a kind of success, but as Smith continues to show, that success comes at a price as Pompey experiences again the pain of a lost lover. War, death, and loneliness conflate into one "wilderness of pain" (63). Tom tries to appeal to her affection when he is sick and needs a nurse, but she leaves him for more military maneuvers, fully subsumed now in the pursuit of her pride and ambition. As an insult, he calls her a "careerist," yet like Dr. Frankenstein, he is the one who created the monster. And ultimately he is the one who could destroy her:

"And if you don't come back, be sure I shall come and fetch you. And when I come for you, you must be ready. Do you hear?" (he shakes me) "You must be ready." "Ready for what?" "Home."
"Tilissen?"
"London." (269)

Pompey knows London is as dangerous as the frontier. Now that she is finally free from home, Tom threatens to return her. Thus, like Freddy, he assumes a domesticating role. For him to play the protector here, to fall back on stereotypical gender roles, is to devalue the work she has already achieved. Tom parallels the man in *Three Guineas* who defends war by saying he is only trying to protect women. And like the women "outsiders," Pompey ends up having no country. She, too, "absents herself from military display, tournaments... and all such ceremonies" (*Three Guineas* 109) when she criticizes the Archbishop and Generalissimo in the last episode: "I have allowed myself to be attracted to their privilege... Privilege in sophistication must divest itself of the colour and integrity of performance" (271). As a result, they turn against her, containing her as Tom wished to do by locking her in a room from the outside.
The parallel with *Three Guineas* is instructive because Woolf and Smith, two women writing about war at the same time, reach similar conclusions in different ways. Recalling texts like *Lysistrata*, Woolf's approach to preventing war is a communal one. She encourages women to maintain an attitude of indifference to war and to reject patriotism and nationalism by asserting that their country is "the whole world" (107-09). Woman as a group are to work for peace and for their own civil rights.

Smith, on the other hand, shies away from group identifications of any kind. "Death to all ideologies," Pompey cries, wary of any "groupismus whatsoever" (255, 260). When pressed to answer "And on whose side are you?" Pompey replies, "I am on the side of my friends" (158) regardless of ideology. Smith does not call for all women to band together against war; in fact, through examples like Mrs. Pouncer she reveals women's complicity in politics and fighting. Her solution is ultimately more individually oriented. Pompey asks, "And if we cannot achieve in our individualities this power are we any less guilty if we pursue it, or again, abandoning the sweet chase, identify ourselves with a national ethos, take pride in our country, in our country's plundering..." (271-72). Although Smith would agree with Woolf that both sides of the frontier are infected by cruelty and "dotty idealismus" (255), she has Pompey turn inward to search for peace: "The mind of a person must be for ever more interesting, more tantalizing to invite, than all of the thoughts it projects" (256). In their depiction of Pompey's voice(s) and thoughts, both of Smith's novels testify to this fact. As we have seen, Pompey has been fighting individually against cultural forces and political ideologies all along, struggling against conventional gender roles as she
crosses from femininity to androgyny to masculinity. As a result, her
mind is often as wartorn as any battlefield in which she finds herself. The
novel does not end without one last self-criticism: "I have brought myself
to this absurd pass. I may say I was shanghaied into this adventure, forced
into a uniform I intuitively hate. But if there had been nothing in me of it,
nothing to be called awake by this wretched event, should I not now be
playing . . . with those who seem to me now beyond the frontier of a
separate life?" (267). Pompey rejects the role of the victim to the end.
Admittedly much of what happens to her is against her will, but she knows
her own vulnerabilities, her own drive for ambition and pride which are
not always positive values. Smith catalogs the difficulties culture presents
to women who wish to shed their traditional roles, but in so doing she also
refuses to naively heroicize those women who, as a group or individually,
take up the struggle. In response to a comment about the forces of evil,
Smith told Naomi Mitchison, "The buck ends with our own humanity. If
there are these forces of evil . . . you are siding with them, in allowing your
thoughts to panic. Your mind is your own province--the only thing that is"
(qtd. in Spalding 136). We have watched Pompey's mind at work,
negotiating with herself and the "forces of evil" through two novels. As
we turn to Smith's poetry, the mind is still at work exploring the limits of
agency in redefining gender identities against established cultural
signification. As we cross the generic frontier from novels to poetry, a
line from A Good Time Was Had By All, published a year before Over the
Frontier, sounds, in fact, much like Pompey:

Forgive me forgive me my heart is my own.
Chapter Three
Ceci n'est pas un Hat

"Let us swop hats and excheck a few strong verbs..."
James Joyce, Finnegans Wake

"The hat in the hands of the hatmaker catches fire. / She is not surprised; she has always thought one would." These lines from Cynthia Macdonald's poem, "Alternate Means of Transport" (17), describe a hat whose violent potential for combustion leaves its creator thoroughly unruffled. The hatmaker coolly acknowledges the latent power of hats; steeped in history, they lend a comfortable familiarity as an article of dress, but their contiguity to the head allows them to signify the mind sparking with creativity beneath.1 Two other "hatmakers," René Magritte and Stevie Smith, recognize the smoldering potential in hats as well. Magritte forges a metonymic link between mind and hat in an aptly titled painting of a bowler-hatted man, "The Presence of Mind." In other paintings bowler hats seem to cork whatever private ideas would "rise and escape" (Robinson 147). In contrast, to doff one of Smith's hats is to open a Pandora's box of possibilities. Hats function metonymically, metaphorically, and symbolically in her novels, poems, and drawings. They can confound the viewer as quickly as Magritte does when he labels a bowler "la niege." Like Magritte's famous hats, Smith's are filled to the brim with ambiguity, incongruity and irony.

Her fascination with hats began with her own eccentric fashion sense and the prevailing fashions of the times. She insisted, for instance, on

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1As Alison Lurie maintains in The Language of Clothes: "Whatever is worn on the head... is a sign of the mind beneath it" (176).
wearing a large brimmed hat for her *Novel on Yellow Paper* publicity shot. In her poetry, no other article of clothing, with the exception of a few poems about dresses, maintains Smith's interest with the same attention and intensity. There are poems specifically about hats and women's conflicted desire for hats, and most of the drawings appended to her poems depict characters, usually women, in an array of hats, some fashionable, some funny, some absurd. As I will demonstrate, a reading of these hats depends on who gives the hat to whom, on what register the hat operates, and the relationship of the hat to the text. For Smith, like Magritte, hats are not, therefore, simply fashionable accessories.

In his recent study, *The Man in the Bowler Hat: His History and Iconography*, Fred Miller Robinson argues that Magritte specifically used the bowler hat, a symbol of conventionality and bourgeois values, as a means of exposing "a magical life" that the hat conceals (131). Like the pipe in "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," hats appear as generic objects which, in turn, set up a context for subversion. A tension arises between word and image so that the pipe is not really a pipe; it's an object arbitrarily assigned the word "pipe." Bowler-hatted men are not conventional men; the hat "masks unconventional impulses, or an outlaw inner life" (Robinson 130-31). Similarly, the hats in Smith's poems connect the subversive with the everyday, and belie what they appear to represent. The tension in Smith's hat poems arises not specifically between word and image, or painting and title, but between sign and identity. More specifically, the gap Smith creates opens between *vestimentary* sign and gender identity. Thus, in the same way that one might look at Magritte's painting and confidently say,

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2 For poems about dresses, see "On the Dressing gown lent me by my Hostess the Brazilian Consul in Milan, 1938" and "La Robe Chemise" in *Me Again*.  

"This is a pipe," so culture often appraises verbal and iconic representations of women with equal inevitability, reading intelligible appearances, that is, images that conform to cultural standards of femininity, as female, and essentially so.

As Judith Butler argues, however, it is important to examine the "matrix of intelligibility" that renders certain gender identities recognizable and legitimate and others "developmental failures or logical impossibilities" (17). "Gender," she asserts, "ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex . . . gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (7). Smith's poetry proleptically takes up Butler's injunction by depicting gender identity as a performative, situational construct, capable of being put on or taken off as quickly, though perhaps not as easily, as the exchange of a hat. As vestimentary signs used either to reformulate or to reify gender roles in many of Smith's poems, hats encapsulate the complexities and strategies involved in constructing gender. Like Magritte's bowlers, they disorient us as readers and viewers, challenging us to look for the subversive beneath the everyday.

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Jack Barbera and William McBrien open their biography of Stevie Smith with a narrative of hat-selection. Ostensibly devoted to the story of Smith receiving The Gold Medal for Poetry from the Queen, their narrative slips repeatedly back to the issue of improper accessorizing. Smith went to a church jumble sale and purchased a second-hand hat to wear to Buckingham Palace. This hat, not its wearer, became the focus of
attention. According to the Vicar of St. John's, "everybody thought it was killingly funny that that hat was going to go up to the Queen" (3). The Vicar's statement reduces Smith metonymically to her hat, and she emerges from beneath it only to have her story interrupted again as her biographers speculate that she arrived at the palace with her hat pulled "over her dead straight hair" (4). Although we do not know exactly what the hat looked like, what is important is that it was clearly an inappropriate fashion choice for such an occasion. Smith, who was fully aware of what one "should" wear to see the Queen, recognized that "appropriateness" is itself a construct, and one that can be played with just for fun; the medal was already hers.

Critical attention to Smith's appearance is not unusual because she purposely cultivated an eccentric look, especially toward the end of her career when she would dress like a little girl to read to the public. She had a keen sense of performance and often played on the contrast between a childish appearance and poems that were anything but. Admittedly, to assume such a guise seems problematic for a woman poet trying to achieve respect and success. Yet, as Francis Spalding argues, Smith's style of dress served as a visual manifestation of her willingness and need to transgress accepted codes, including social conventions that defined what was fashionable or even feminine (246). Thus, Barbera and McBrien's attention to her hat choice underscores the importance of challenging hegemonic gender roles in Smith, and for them to present her first and foremost as inappropriately accessorized is to suggest that something transgressive lurks beneath the broad brim of her many odd hats.
As accessories, hats operate to signify "woman." The proper hat caps off the correct ensemble as the fashion magazines of Smith's time would have attested. A hat not only denotes gender, but it positions its wearer in accordance with prevailing fashions and with the images of women or men that those fashions define. But what if a woman chooses to ignore fashion and, in fact, wants to step outside of the parameters of gender her culture deems appropriate? Smith's critics typically resort to her many poetic voices, ranging from the child to the stoic philosopher, as illustrations of her ability to reconfigure identity. Her characters, one might say, wear different hats, but rather than charting various personae, a more useful method of approaching Smith might ask what is at stake for her in manipulating disguise and appearance. How do we account for her investment in multiple identities and self-fashioning?

In "The Diseases of Costume," Roland Barthes argues that "in all great periods of theater, costume had a powerful semantic value; it was not there only to be seen, it was also there to be read, it communicated ideas, information, or sentiments" (Essays 46). Hats become, then, a kind of language open for interpretation and misinterpretation. Although clothing is a game in fashion, Barthes argues, a "keyboard of signs from which an

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3The same question can be applied to class positions, but I do not take it up in this chapter because the issue is not as prevalent in Smith's work as the issue of gender roles.


5 In Seeing Through Clothes, Anne Hollander underscores Barthes's argument that clothes and accessories are readable signs: "Because of their complex visual situation, clothes also cannot really be compared, as they often are, to kinds of verbal behavior such as informative speech, exclamations, or bursts of suggestive and persuasive rhetoric. If anything, clothes are rather like conventional expressions in a literary form, of which the canonical examples have been assimilated by the reading public. One might say that individual appearances in clothes are not 'statements,' as they are often called, but more like public readings of literary works. . . (xv).
external person chooses one day's amusement" (Fashion 257), clothing and accessories also carry the ruthless power of signification: "The body is taken 'in charge' by an intelligible system of signs" which can render women into little more than "a collection of tiny, separate essences rather analogous to the character parts played by actors in classical theater" (Fashion 260, 254). The "game" does not allow free play, therefore. Barthes' wants it both ways, arguing for the legibility of vestimentary signs while insisting upon the danger in misreading. The hat selected specifically to communicate a desired message, particularly if that message is parodic, can just as easily be misread and thus recuperate its wearer into a normative and intelligible identity.

Smith, on the other hand, allows the dual possibilities of subjugation and self-determinism. Her characters "wear different hats," as it were, to underscore the importance of being able to occupy different subject-positions. As Robinson illustrates with Charlie Chaplin's bowler, a hat can identify its wearer with multiple subjectivities inflected, for instance, by class and politics. Chaplin's bowlers were "heavy with the social history of grubby city streets" historically, but they also signified, like top hats, the height of fashion (75). Thus, as symbols hats can function in entirely self-contradictory ways. Like Chaplin's Tramp or Smith's Pompey, as I will demonstrate, one can exploit these contradictions exchanging hats and appear genteel or lower class, masculine or feminine. Only shoes, with their attendant fetishistic dimensions, might rival them for the status of overdetermined accessory.6 Finally, hats are signs of the minds beneath

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them, then their contradictions force us to accept the contradictory nature of our own identities. With hats, Smith calls into question nothing less than the stability of ontology though her critique most often focuses specifically on women's gendered selves.

In *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), the protagonist, Pompey Casmilus, is an eccentric woman, self-described as a "foot-off-the-ground-person" (45). She refuses to conform to anyone's standards of proper feminine behavior. Her fiancé wants her to move to the suburbs and play the role of the submissive wife; she breaks off the engagement. Her friends parade their maternal instincts; Pompey produces poems as her "kiddo[s]" (33). As a narrator, she refuses to be polite: "Do you, Reader, ever have this suffering feeling of economics and unrest? Do you? Like hell you do" (180).

Juxtaposed against Pompey are Rosa and Lottie. Recall from Chapter One that the foot-off-the-ground Pompey refuses to conform to their style of dress, which reflects their standards of femininity, so in a pivotal scene in the novel they attempt to refashion her: "And one day I remember Lottie said: Pompey you should dress with more chic. So. And she put on me her hat. . ." (73). With the transfer of her hat, followed by her coat and a piece of fur, Lottie attempts to transform Pompey into a version of herself, a proper representation of femininity. Pompey retaliates by treating Lottie's hat like a joke. She "laughed and laughed" at her "long narrow head, and on top a hat like a turban wound round" (74). Her comparison of Lottie's hat specifically to a turban magnifies the degree of difference she feels in relation to the sign of womanhood placed on her head. To achieve distance from the hat's
intended signification, however, she problematically appropriates a position of colonial power and realigns the hat with the garb of the native other. To resist the hat's "ruthless power of signification" she continues to define the hat merely as costume, as "dressing up." Exchanging hats is "fun" for Pompey not because she is willing to succumb to her friends' desire to "make her a woman" but because she turns their efforts into parody by refusing to take them seriously. By labeling their attempt mere costuming, Pompey reinforces the fact that there is no "chic woman" beneath the hat.

Nor does an intelligible version of femininity appear beneath a hat in Smith's next novel, *Over the Frontier* (1938). Pompey attends a black-tie affair sporting khaki shorts and a pith helmet. She imagines the reader's disapproval: "Your *solar topee*, no really Pompey, this is the last straw." Pompey replies with characteristic wit, "Neither the last nor the penultimate straw, Reader." The topee functions again like costume; Pompey claims it represents "the bounds... of Empire" (71), although to the guests at the party it more likely signals an unwillingness to dress within the bounds of acceptable attire. Invoking the "Empire," she takes another colonialist stance, as she did with her turban joke, and sits at the top of a flight of stairs "mock[ing] the guests" (74). The inappropriateness of her actions and her hat encodes a simultaneous critique of English imperialism, a political stance the novel upholds. A German instructor spies her across the room and approaches to seduce her with his knowledge of foreign languages. Significantly, the term he chooses to translate is "hat":

Well look now he was saying, *"Hut" is hat.* But then I said, "What is *Hut*?"
"Please? Oh that is also *Hut*."
"But how extremely confusing and inconvenient, for certainly I live in my hat is not the same as I live in my hut."
"Please? Oh that, it does not arise." (76)

He does not realize that Pompey is mocking him, too. His attempt to translate her hat, the sign of social nonconformity at the party, or to assimilate it gracefully into party chat fails, as does his seduction effort. It is as if the hat stands between them, resisting translations from German to English and from conversational banter to the language of love. As a sign of "the bounds of Empire," the hat demarcates boundaries that bleed from the personal to the political later in the novel.

As I argued in my second chapter, Pompey goes to war in the middle of the novel, fighting an unnamed enemy which resembles the Germany of 1938. In a scene that resonates with Lottie's hat exchange from Novel on Yellow Paper, Pompey is again handed proper attire to wear, this time to fashion her into the masculine image of a soldier that her fellow officer, Tom, envisions. He forcefully puts a coat on her, "so tight and so constraining" that she feels coerced into the mission on which she is about to embark. She displaces her anxiety onto her hat: "But let me put my hat on properly, let me see that it is straight" (216). He forbids her to look in the mirror, but when she does the horror she feels on seeing her reflection in an alienating uniform translates as an inability to put on her hat: "my hat stays quietly in my hands, I have no further thought of it at all" (217). An immobile hat, one that cannot be switched with a friend, made fun of, treated as costume, or used to mock a crowd is a dangerous hat; the body is susceptible, "taken in charge" as Barthes puts it, and the hat offers no ironic distance, no means of refusal.
It is encouraging, therefore, to see the same hat reappear toward the end of the novel as a sign of Pompey's agency, of her ability to transform herself into a soldier more successful than her role model Tom, and one ultimately able to resist the patriarchal, military forces which have been working all along to shape her according to their own purposes. One of Tom's battle strategies fails, costing many lives as Pompey informs him. "It was a risk we had to take." "I don't agree," she responds firmly, and then pulls the "furred helmet" on her head as if to resist his efforts to convince her she is wrong. When she leaves him for good, she pulls a cap down over her ears again, foreclosing the possibility of communication; she will hear nothing he has to say.

Hats reappear once more in this very strange novel. A lesbian named Miss Hatt appears at a party, attired in masculine pants "only rather well cut." Pompey misinterprets her pants as riding clothes, but she is promptly corrected that "Miss Hat wore pants on principle" (209). Miss Hatt does not wear a hat, but she does not need to. With her name, she embodies the various semantics hats accumulate in Smith's novels: she represents sexual and sartorial difference, a refusal to conform, and social mobility. Unlike the hats handed to Pompey, positioning her in accordance with dominant standards of femininity or masculinity, Miss Hatt is handed to no one and positions nothing. She is not a passive recipient but an active participant, pulling her lover to the dance floor in flagrant disregard of others' homophobia. The metonymically named Miss Hatt enacts what the most positive images of hats do in all of Smith's work; she arrests our attention, works against social convention, and crosses forbidden frontiers.
A woman like Miss Hatt appears in "Magna est Veritas" (CP 372), a poem in which Smith dramatizes through the act of hat selection the tension between agency and cooption. The speaker recognizes that women are often classified and categorized by their appearance. The stereotype of the old maid in glasses, for instance, persists as one obvious effect of culture's response to women's looks. Smith's speaker resists assimilation into a taxonomy of stale and limiting stereotypes by presenting a set of terms with which to identify. The poem begins: "With my looks I am bound to look simple or fast I would / rather look simple." She seems to be constructing a strange and unnatural binary between two terms that do not really oppose each other. That she takes these terms as a given--she is bound to look one way or the other--could indicate the degree to which she has internalized cultural perceptions of beauty and thus bound herself in a strict economy of self-definition predicated on appearance. We do not know, in fact, what she looks like; Smith attaches no drawing to the poem, nor does she describe the woman's appearance. "Simple" could characterize her as looking or seeming mentally retarded, ordinary, or unadorned. "Fast" could mean sexually loose or quick and manipulative like a "fast operator," but it also resonates with the sense in the first line of being "bound" like an animal "fast" in a trap. However, if she is "bound" to look one or the other, her choices represent odd terms within which to be shackled. They may appear entrapping, but they do not correspond to the kinds of limited options society offers women on the sole basis of their looks. In other words, the terms offer plenty of room in which to maneuver. She chooses

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All parenthetical references to Smith's poetry refer to the Collected Poems unless otherwise indicated.
to look "simple," but there is nothing simple about a woman who defines her own terms.

A hat appears in line two, further ushering in the possibility of agency. The transition after the first line signals the shift. The speaker decides that she would "rather look simple / So . . ." (italics mine). The conjunction "so" indicates resolve or a conclusion. She takes action, significantly, by choosing a hat: "So I wear a tall hat on the back of my head that is rather a temple." The antecedent to "temple" is unclear; it could refer to her head or her hat. If the hat is like a temple then it undercuts the sense of simplicity as ordinary or unadorned although she may look simple-minded in such silly headgear. If she is comparing her head to a temple then she evinces a stronger self-regard than her acceptance of the restricting terms "simple" and "fast" would seem to allow. In either case, the tall hat remains undetermined as does her appearance so that it is the act of choosing a hat that emerges as significant in the poem.

By manipulating her appearance with a hat, she is no longer "bound" or trapped in the roles relegated to "simple" women. She seems, in fact, to be mocking those roles by masquerading as a simpleton, a strategy which serves, ultimately, to relocate her elsewhere. As Mary Ann Doane explains, "To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image" (26). The hat exaggerates the "simple" identity the speaker assumes, thus destabilizing the image and dismantling the equation between appearance and identity. The "people" in the poem who look at her and say "Don't bother about her" are more likely candidates for the category "simple," not because of their appearances, but
because they cannot understand her resistance to their assumptions about her.

Furthermore, consider the mobility the speaker achieves with the hat. She moves in the poem from "I am bound" to "I walk" to "I collect facts" in the eighth line as if she, like the dancing Miss Hatt, is stepping out of the bounds of a prescribed identity into one she constructs for herself. Her affected simplicity recalls Christopher Ricks' assertion that Smith's "writing depends upon its being in question to what degree her innocence is mock-innocence" (244). We are encouraged to look beyond the surface of her speakers and to examine the various surfaces they slip beneath and between. The speaker in this poem, like Smith, manipulates appearances to resist easy categorization. She claims simply to "collect facts" that contribute to "almighty Truth," but the poem belies the possibility of any totalizing Truth or essential ontology. Looks are deceiving, and if, as the last line mockingly maintains, "Truth... will / prevail in a bit," clearly a bit is a long way off. According to Martin Pumphrey, "Under the mask of oddness and triviality... [Smith's] poems repeatedly investigate the difficulties of negotiating between inner desires and outer restraint" (100). The speaker, certainly more odd than trivial, negotiates between her desire to reconstruct her identity and the "outer restraint" of cultural perceptions that take women only at face value. The "temple" of her hat (or head), however, is no sacred place. Beneath it, like a bad girl in church, she contemplates "the allure and danger of resistance and transgression" (Pumphrey 100).

When a hat functions as masquerade, therefore, its wearer stands to gain power and mobility in the distance manufactured between image and
identity. However, to the degree that they represent culture's efforts to solidify traditional gender roles, they can just as well serve to subjugate women. It is as if their proximity to the head gives them access to the mind, and any distance a woman might achieve through masquerade or parody can collapse under the weight of the hat's intended signification. For instance, in the poem titled "The Hat" (272; fig. 1), Smith depicts a woman who projects onto her hat fantasies handed to her by her culture:

I love my beautiful hat more than anything
And through my beautiful hat I see a wedding ring
The King will marry me and make me his own before all
And when I am married I shall wear my hat and walk on the palace wall.

The apparent simplicity of the title justifies a suspicion of whatever seems simple in Smith. This is not a hat, just any hat, but the hat. The "the" in the title works both to imply universality and totality--a hat Platonic in its form--and to suggest that the hat we will encounter is specific and particular, a variation to be singled out and studied. The tension in the title reverberates in Smith's use of hats in all of her poems. Hats can offer a totalizing, essential reading of gender--each sex is assigned a proper hat and, thus, a corresponding identity, position of power and authority. Or, each sex may manipulate hats, cross-dress or cross-accessorize as a sign of resisting assigned gender norms.

When Smith read this poem on a BBC radio broadcast in 1952, she prefaced it by saying, "marriage is not always a solution of problems, though this girl, fancy-fed in a dream of rich hats, seems to think it is" (qtd. in Barbera and McBrien 180). She suggests the passivity and vulnerability of women waiting to be spoon fed their socialization, one palatable and poisonous bite at a time. Although "hats" do not seem to be
the stuff of matrimonial fantasies, the promise of a rich hat is a pledge of completion, something to finish off the incomplete woman, to top her off like a hat finishes an ensemble.

Recall Barthes's description of the costumed body that is "taken in charge' by an intelligible system of signs." The same kind of force acts upon the speaker of "The Hat" as ownership and property circulate through the poem. She owns a hat and the King, who will "make her his own," clearly possesses her. Despite the fact that she is rendered as property, she claims to love her hat because through it she sees the hope of matrimony. But she is not just looking through her hat; she is talking through it if she claims that marriage will, as Smith says, solve her problems. She will be made the King's own "before all," and thus the consumer of hats becomes the consumed. As an object of the gaze, she is assimilated into a cultural construction of womanhood that defines her as spectacle and property.

In line three, therefore, she moves grammatically from subject position (I love, I see) to object position--"The King will marry me and make me his own." The hat "takes her in charge" by signifying her as marriageable material and positioning her in the societal gaze. Notice as well Smith's equation between marriage and property. The conjunction "and" links "marry me" easily with "make me his own." By the end of the poem the hat places her within her fantasy, but Smith suggests that her dream is a dangerous one. Each line is longer than the previous one, embedding the speaker deeper and deeper in her own fatal desires. The last and longest line breaks at "the," which does not rhyme immediately, as past lines have, with the line before it. The delay in rhyme temporarily
stops the flow of the poem, jarring her fantasy and signaling that something is amiss. By the end of the poem the speaker, still clinging to her hat, treads precariously, like Humpty Dumpty, along the palace wall, presumably on the edge. The hat that facilitated her matrimonial fantasies ushers in potentially suicidal ones as well. Furthermore, Smith suggests its cross purposes in the drawing attached to the poem. The woman's hands grip the brim as if to restrain the power of the hat. Like the bowlers on Magritte's airborne Golconda men, her hat could lift her from the anchored world of uniformity, invisibility, longing, but she does not remain simply suspended in mid-air. She descends to a man whose home is indeed his castle, a site of possession, entrapment, and danger.

The connection between hats and spectacle returns in a later poem titled "Poor Soul, poor Girl!" (396; fig. 2) in which a debutante wishes to be looked at. The role of debutante by definition positions a woman in what Laura Mulvey calls a traditional exhibitionist role. Mulvey says that "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. . . . Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness " (33, italics Mulvey's). According to Smith's drawing, the debutante styles herself to receive the approval of the male gaze. Although hats are not mentioned in the poem, she wears a crown on her curled hair and sits expectantly in an evening dress that draws attention to her cleavage. As the hat in the previous poem did for the king's wife, the crown confers provisional social status through association with royalty. However, in "Poor Soul" the hat, as a crown, functions ironically, undercutting the prestige it is supposed to
signify. Like the wife of "The Hat," the deb has dangerously internalized a
desire to be objectified. The debutante role reproduces the spectacle of the
movie star and depends upon being viewed for its legitimation, but because
the deb's culturally constructed desire for attention is not fulfilled, she
fantasizes her own version of walking on the palace wall: "I cannot
imagine anything nicer / Than to be struck by lightning and killed suddenly
crossing a / field." She states her fantasy of self-destruction more clearly
than the speaker of "The Hat," and Smith underscores it more with humor.
Her death wish seems too violent and dramatic to be taken seriously, and
her conviction that "Nobody cares whether I am alive or dead" is both sad
and self-pitying. She measures her identity by male desire and class
expectation, as if her crown could immediately gratify her needs. If we
are to pity her, as the title suggests, then we should to the extent that she
believes she is what she wears. If the hat is a sign of the mind beneath it,
then the debutante's mind is imprisoned in costume.

The deb is a dupe because she believes that the crowns on her head is
more than a pointy hat. In another crown poem, Smith depicts a girl who
must resist the crown's lure. Through the dialogue between a mother and
daughter in "The Queen and the Young Princess" (313), she reveals the
home as a central site of socialization and the mother as the key instigator.
The poem begins with the daughter desiring separation from the mother:
"Mother, mother, let me go." When the princess asks what kind of life she
can expect, the mother informs her that she is doomed to repeat her own
oppression:

Much the same, child, as it has been for me.
But Mother you often say you have a headache
Because of the crown you wear for duty's sake.
So it is, so it is, a headache I have
And that is what you must grow up to carry to the grave.

Smith plays with the irony of the crown as powerful; the only power the mother passes to the daughter is the power to hold up under pain, to endure. She further instills in the daughter the desire for her own oppression: "Up, child, up embrace the headache and the crown / Marred pleasure's best, shadow makes sun strong." "Embrace" suggests desire, but the daughter's "duty" is to renounce pleasure and desire. The only legitimized pleasure is "marred" or impaired because it is always already in service to "the crown" or the Law. "Marred" also suggests its cognate "married"; read in this way, the queen teaches her daughter that marriage constructs the woman as shadow whose "duty" is to remain in passive contrast to the sun and to produce "sons." As his shadow, she is always the relational term, signifying the male's power and relying on him for her visibility.

"My Hat" (315; fig. 3) serves as a possible response to the queen from the young princess. The daughter's voice opens the poem: "Mother said if I wore this hat / I should be certain to get off with the right sort of chap." In the previous poem the queen tells the princess to embrace the crown; now a mother offers a bigger hat with even more power. For the mother the hat signifies not only the possibility of marriage but the daughter's "womanliness." Less regal but more ornate than the Queen's crown, it forms the daughter into an object of heterosexual desire who can attract "the right sort of chap," someone approximating the allure of "the King" in "The Hat." The drawing Smith appends to the poem depicts a huge, frilly hat replete with flowers, lace and bows. This hat is clearly a parody of femininity. Why then doesn't the daughter refuse the hat, refuse
to produce herself or allow herself to be produced as hyperbolized femininity? Recent theories on masquerade suggest several answers.

Consider, as we did with "Magna est Veritas," Doane's argument in "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." She begins with Joan Riviere's claim that womanliness and masquerade are the same thing (25). According to Doane,

The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic. (25)

The mother gives her daughter the hat to assert an essentialist equation between femininity and woman, to bridge the gap between signifier and signified. Doane, however, points out that "the entire elaboration of femininity as a closeness, a nearness, as present-to-itself is not the definition of an essence but the delineation of a place culturally assigned to the woman" (31, italics Doane's). Smith emphasizes that mothers often assign this place, this site of cultural construction, to daughters who are then forced to accept or resist their positioning although mothers do not "see" it as a place; hence, the daughter knows what happens when she dons the hat, "though [she supposes] Mother / wouldn't see." The mother is blind to variations of womanhood.

By donning the hat as masquerade, the daughter recontextualizes her mother's gift; like Pompey with Rosa's hat, she treats it as a costume. In so doing, she is empowered to resist "appropriation of the self as a stable image of masculine desire" (Bernheimer 25). According to the mother, the daughter "is certain to get off with the right sort of chap" if she wears the
hat, but because it is a sign of excess femininity, it aligns the daughter, in this funny poem, with the femme fatale, a woman who, according to Doane, "destabiliz[es] the image... confounds the masculine structure of the look. [She] effects a defamiliarization of female iconography" (26). The hat, in other words, exposes the constructedness of femininity and threatens the potential male viewer, the "right sort of chap," in a way that Mary Russo describes:

Deliberately assumed and foregrounded, femininity as a mask, for a man, is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition; for a woman, a similar flaunting of the feminine is a take-it-and-leave-it possibility. To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off. (224, italics Russo's)

Thus, the power of the hat is more subversive than the mother recognizes. The hat positions the daughter in a drag of femininity, and as Butler points out in her discussion of drag, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself--as well as its contingency" (137, italics Butler's). Furthermore, "The notion of gender parody... does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed the parody is of the very notion of an original" (138).

The poem grows more complex after the mother-daughter interaction. Although the daughter says that she wears the hat ("I put it on"), the drawing suggests that the hat wears her. In the sketch, the girl is suspended in mid air, dangling by her waist on the hat's chin strap. Like a bird of prey lifting its kill, the hat carries her off. Is she, then, in control of her masquerade after all? Russo warns that "the carnivalized woman... is an image that, however counterproduced, perpetuates the dominant... representation of women by men," that is, a representation saturated with misogyny (216). She asks if women are
as effective as male cross-dressers? Or is it, like the contemporary "straight" drag of college boys in the amateur theatricals of elite universities, a clear case of sanctioned play for men, while it is something always risking self-contempt for women to put on "the feminine" . . . In what sense can women really produce or make spectacles of themselves? (216-17)

Women like Mae West come to mind, but their performance is understood and sanctioned within the context of theatricality and film. The daughter's masquerade, on the other hand, is confined to the domestic stage. She stands a greater risk of recuperation by a mother blind to parody and a wrong sort of chap who might actually be attracted by the silly hat. Russo echoes Luce Irigaray's similar warning about mimicry--by recovering her place of exploitation, the woman risks being simply reduced to it. Irigaray claims that in "this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself. . ." (84). Can the masquerade liberate the daughter, or is she dangerously reproducing male stereotypes of femininity and losing herself in the process? Smith suggests that when the daughter puts on the hat, she loses herself: "This hat being so strong has completely run away with me." In a double entendre, the daughter exclaims six lines later, "How this hat becomes me." On one level, "becomes" means "flatters." On another level, however, the hat literally becomes her. The daughter is reduced to her masquerade, to a sign of femininity, an accessory.

Although woman-as-accessory certainly carries metaphorical force, the daughter and the hat each seem to wear the other. Smith forces the reader to distinguish between them, to read the masquerade and to question its efficacy. Butler's remarks prove useful here: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively
constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). Considered in this way, the hat signals the performativity of gender, and recognizes the inevitability of play for women. Butler's claim thus unshackles women from dominant representations and empowers the daughter to perform gender identity outside any naturalized or regulatory practices of gender formation. The daughter can wear any hat she chooses with "the power of taking it off" as Russo writes. She may lose one self, but she can then put on another. Whereas Sternlicht constrains the hat's liberatory effects to freeing the daughter from "all the rigamarole and routine of courtship" (Stevie 69), the hat, in fact, allows her to undermine an identity constructed by the mandates of male heterosexual desire.

The poem concludes with the daughter affirming the power of the hat:

Am I glad I am here? Yes, well, I am,
It's nice to be rid of Father, Mother, and the young man
There's just one thing causes me a twinge of pain,
If I take my hat off, shall I find myself home again?
So in this early morning land I always wear my hat
Go home, you see, well I wouldn't run a risk like that.

The daughter asks a crucial question in her childlike rhythm and rhyme: If a woman relinquishes her right or ability to construct herself, is she immediately recuperated into dominant ideology that defines what a woman is? If she takes off her hat, does she have to return to a primary site of gender construction, namely, home? In her article about escapism in children's literature, Sarah Gilead argues that the journey away from home provides "a gratifying delay in socialization" (289). The hat, whisking the daughter off to a desert island, provides a similar delay. Moreover, Gilead asserts that the child's return marks a closure that "establishes a clear
ontological and narrative hierarchy wherein dream becomes secondary to . . . social life" (281-82). Smith, however, dismantles the hierarchy of dream and social life by refusing return. The daughter clings to her hat and / or the hat clings to her. Smith allows these distinctions to remain undecidable. She refuses to insist that the daughter can only occupy either an active or passive position. The contradictions provide as open a field of play as Chaplin's Tramp finds in the double possibilities of his bowler. In either case, the daughter claims her fantasy as her reality, that is, she exploits a culturally defined "mask" to resist the very culture that defines the "mask" as essential femininity.

"My Hat" is the most complex of Smith's hat poems. In contrast to the women in "The Hat" and "The Queen and the Young Princess," the daughter has the ability to refashion the hat offered to her. Its wings recall Mercury, the god with whom Pompey identifies and Smith eulogizes in another hat poem, "The Ambassador" (247; fig. 4). Smith depicts Hermes first and foremost in relation to his hat: "Underneath the broad hat is the face of the Ambassador." Unlike the daughter, he rides "on a white horse through hell," but like the daughter he "rides carelessly. / Sometimes he rises into the air and flies silently." Perhaps only a god can be deemed "master of the mysteries" as the Ambassador is, but the daughter's hat, like Magritte's bowlers, gives her access to a few mysteries of her own. Empowered with her winged hat, she does not, like Mercury, fly into hell but, much like Pompey, escapes it. Her hat transports her to a fantasy world where she can retreat from the sites of gender construction populated with Kings, Queens, debs, and right sorts of chaps. Yet, as Romana Huk cogently observes, the "uneasy exile" into which Smith's
women are cast or retreat provides "no simple victory over centralizing influences--no solidly 'other' footing from which to conduct any clear-cut subversion" (259). Consider the topography of the "peculiar" desert island as an example: "The green grass grows into the sea on the dipping land." The ground beneath her shifts into water; it literally threatens solid footing just as it provides no grounding in culture, for as far as we can tell she is isolated and seemingly trapped in time: "It is always early morning here." Although the island seems preferable to home, the resolution of the poem remains ambiguous; Smith offers no easy answers.

However, as Huk argues, portrayals like "My Hat" or "Cool as a Cucumber," in which a woman is "cursed" by a fairy and rendered unsuitable for marriage, "feel less like ends than means, if indefinite ones" (254), because no one in these poems understands the women's strategies; instead, Smith presents the women through "refractions" of several kinds of discourse (255). Huk approaches these poems on "the level of language" (241) and examines poems in which Smith employs various kinds of diction such as archaic, colloquial, or lyric language to "collide with one another" and open up a space for women to emerge (255). In the hat poems, on the other hand, we can observe, in addition to the level of language, the ways Smith utilizes visual codes or a semiotics of fashion, to borrow Barthes's term\(^8\), in order to challenge a superficial reading of women, a reading that too quickly accepts appearance as reality, or one that solely trusts the conflicting speaking voices.

In "Everything is Swimming," for example (429 and in Some are More Human; figs. 5 and 6), we hear two contradictory voices, the

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speaker's and the voice of a woman quoted by the speaker, and a third, foreign voice in French. The woman Smith sketches in the *Collected Poems* says, "Everything is swimming in a wonderful wisdom," but the speaker calls her a "Silly ass" and attributes her "wisdom" to intoxication, "mescalin," or some influence from her father and "that funny man William. . . ." The speaker's distrust seems verified by the drawing which depicts a woman in a primitive-looking dress that falls jagged at the hem and immodestly exposes the breasts. Further, she dons that most problematic of hat choices, a crown. Indeed, she looks crazy. Yet the last line suggests that the suspicious speaker underestimates the woman: "Elle continua de rire comme une hyène." This French voice echoes another, Hélène Cixous' in "Laugh of the Medusa," in which "Medusa," the monster once "surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives" sounds her voice in "her inevitable struggle against conventional man" through laughter ("Laugh" 334, 335). Smith's woman, laughing like a hyena, enacts what Cixous later describes in "Castration or Decapitation": "Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in woman--which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen" ("Castration" 490). It is a laughter based on difference from men, one that restores woman's decapitated head from the masculine economy predicated on silencing her. By citing Cixous I do not mean to suggest that Smith is attempting a version of *écriture féminine*, but the parallels in the texts call attention to the woman who emerges between conflicting voices and laughs, head intact, crown (appropriated from patriarchal domain?) firmly in place. The "silly woman" in the silly hat establishes her distance from the
speaker and the reader's gaze which construct her as an "ass" at best, that
is, as a portion of the body opposed to the place one hangs one's hat.

The woman returns like (and as) the repressed in a sketch in Some
Are More Human Than Others. The sketchbook, in part, reproduces
drawings from the poems and alters the text or adds captions. In this case,
however, the poem remains the same except for more quotation marks, but
the vestimentary signs change drastically. The drawing now resembles the
woman Cixous describes as subjected to phallocentric conceptions of
sexuality: "The little girls and their 'ill-mannered' bodies immured, well-
preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But they are
ever seething underneath" (335). A glance at the tight cap perched on her
unruly swarm of hair suggests that she is no laughing Medusa, but her
mirror image, the woman who represents acculturated femininity
according to Cixous--the "hysteric." She is "is given images that don't
belong to her" ("Castration" 484), like this woman in her dress and hat that
seem too snug and too choking to be her own. She maintains a volcanic
composure beneath her square hat topped off with a frill that looks more
like a fuse ready to ignite.

If the woman in the sketchbook is the silenced / decapitated hysterical,
she finds comic company in the drawing attached to "The Virtuoso" (180;
fig. 7). Here Smith depicts an actual severed head belonging to the mother
of the title character. The maternal voice may be silenced, but her hat
speaks volumes. Propped on the head that is itself a prop, the hat bespeaks
dislocation. Perhaps it is a grateful gift from a son whose lost hat is a sign
of a lost mind, but it signifies as well the absence of the "real" mother who
sits cheaply reproduced in plaster and the lack of a father, to whom the hat
may have originally belonged. This is a case where the hat is not a sign of the mind beneath it, but the one beside it—the smiling, hatless virtuoso inspired by a cross-dressed head.

The virtuoso is not the only character without a hat, however. The naked head in Smith's poems courts danger like an uncovered head in winter. The men in the sketches are most often without hats; their identities are powerfully and firmly entrenched in dominant ideologies that neither require nor allow the subversion encapsulated in hats. Consider, for instance, the images of the father and God in "Fuite d'Enfance" (159; fig. 8) or the threatening, intrusive bald head of the psychiatrist in "The Doctor" (105; fig. 9). Women's uncovered heads, on the other hand, often signify vulnerability. The disheveled woman in "Dear Female Heart" (130; fig. 10), wielding a hairbrush in a gesture of confusion or defense, "must suffer, that is all that [she] can do." The choked, hatless girl in "I HATE THIS GIRL" (106; fig. 11) mounts no defense against the perpetrator who opts to kiss her instead of kill her. "Arabella" lies hatless in her coffin (122; fig. 12), and the bare-headed victim of "The Murderer" lies lifeless in his arms (117; fig. 13). The cover of the Collected Poems provides the most obvious example of a hatless woman. We may presume that the drawing is meant to refer to Smith, and indeed the short bangs resemble the ones she wore throughout most of her life, but the sketch reappears with the poem "Every lovely Limb's a Desolation" (342; fig. 14) in which a woman feels "like a prisoner" in her "mortal isolation." She "must wake and wake again in pain" each day because she is not able to "Break, break the glass" through which she can peer but cannot escape. For this picture to appear on the cover of the poems suggests that a central concern of this
poet is the pain of entrapment in various glass prisons like traditional, stifling gender roles. In response to this kind of incarceration, Butler offers a key to the lock: "Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible" (147).

And a common accessory of the construction worker is her hat. The hats that float from head to head in Smith's work affirm "the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them" (Butler 147). Construction sites are always dangerous places, but the task of reconfiguring gender identities begins, as Butler says, with "taking up the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there" (145), or, we might add, by the nearest hat within one's reach.
Chapter Four
Bodies That Don't Matter

1. Stevie Smith's Body

Miss Pauncefot sang at the top of her voice
(Sing tiry-lirry-lirry down the lane)
And nobody knew what she sang about
(Sing tiry-lirry-lirry all the same).
--"The Songster"

If hats, as we have seen, can either reify or reconstruct traditional gender identities, then what role does the body beneath those hats play in this process? Smith's canon is filled with them, but before turning to the diverse bodies that populate her poems and drawings, consider the critical attention she has received not only for her body of work, but for her body itself. We are accustomed to accounts of the voices poets' bodies produce--the booming tones of Dylan Thomas, Yeats's sonorous, chanting keys--and Smith's voice certainly has merited critical discussion¹; but few poets' bodies also play such a critical role in our understanding of their work. Smith was not just a consummate reader of her poetry but a performer whose body was as crucial as the voice in communicating her poetic message. Accounts of her performances at poetry readings reveal, in fact, that her body was as much of a gender "construction site" as the literary marketplace, the homefront/warfront, and the domestic locales I have traced in the previous chapters. This section, then, will take up, among others, two questions Janet Wolff raises in her book, Feminine Sentences:

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Essays on Women and Culture. First, can women's bodies be the site of feminist cultural politics, and if so, can we read Smith's body as engaging in a feminist cultural enterprise? Secondly, is there any body outside discourse, and if so, what discursive situation produces that body?

Let's begin with the second question first. In that Smith was a woman poet, our understanding of her written texts must be mediated by awareness of sexual difference, and the feminist work on sexual difference and writing is, of course, well documented in the volumes devoted to the topic. But to the degree that Smith not only published her work but brought it to the public in her voice and body, we must also consider poetry readings as an influential discursive site that forms bodies, a site which participates in a culture which, as Wolff describes, "so comprehensively codes and defines women's bodies as subordinate and passive, and as objects of the male gaze" (121).

At the time when Smith would have been reading her work publicly, the late 1950s through the 1960s, women played minor roles on the stage of poetry readings. The literary community was still at least twenty years away from women's studies courses, women's publishing firms and feminist journals. In that community then, as now, "to say that women's poems have only been granted a marginal status in poetry criticism is simply to state the obvious" (Montefiore 1). That same status would apply as well to the public's perception and interaction with poetry. Martin Booth charts three channels through which poets began to bring their work to the public. First, there was the "Dylan Thomas-type reading in a theatre to wealthy theatre-goers or academics" (86). Secondly, universities supported readings and gave rise to organizations like The Group which
focused on the oral tradition of poetry and insisted on reading to each other. Thirdly, and perhaps most influentially, the BBC brought poetry to the masses through the voice, but not the body. And that poetic voice was, by and large, a male one. All three venues, indeed, were predominately masculine arenas where the large majority of the poets, event organizers, and audience members were men influenced by the hegemony of the male poetic tradition. Even Booth himself, writing as late as 1985, construed women's poetry as unchanging, unchallenging, and essentially feminine. Sylvia Plath stands as his lone exception to "the neat emotions and feminine gentleness that one tended to associate with women's writing" (187).

This is not to say that women were and are not also complicit in maintaining this status quo, as Smith was too well aware. Her review of Joan Murray Simpson's 1968 anthology of women's poetry reveals how little had changed in the poetic climate within which Smith had been writing for over thirty years. She remarks on the problematic conflation of femininity and triviality by Lady Stocks who, in the foreword to Simpson's edition, advises women:

"to take heart and prove that they are poets" notwithstanding the fact that the greatest poets are men. Awkward.

The compiler... does little to ease matters. She tells us that "in order to please everyone, a good armful of flowers (which is after all what the word anthology means) should include not only tall lilies and perfect roses but some simple daisies and pungent field flowers as well." Perhaps as a pungent field flower I might observe that 20 lines have been cut from one of my poems, without the fact being mentioned or permission asked. Awkward. (Barbera, Me Again 180)

With acid wit Smith critiques both the traditional link between women and nature and Simpson's breezy, indifferent editing which further divests
seriousness and complexity from women's poetry. Moreover, the title of her review, "Poems in Petticoats," points to the body as the ground for the dismissal of women's poetry.\(^2\) Thus, if a woman poet takes the stage to read her work, sexual difference, and hence the potential for dismissal, is doubly foregrounded in both the poems and the body from which the voice speaking those poems emanates. She's working a tough audience. How then can the poet's body operate within and beyond the negative constructions that mediate our reception of that body and the poetry that comes from it? This returns us to the first question, whether women's bodies, and Smith's in particular, can be read as cultural critique.

As Susan Bordo's work on the female body exemplifies, "the body is not only a text of culture. It is also, as anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Michel Foucault, among others, have argued, a practical, direct locus of social control" (165). However, the tight surveillance that society exerts and women internalize to keep the body fit, contained, self-effacing, and non-threatening leaves ample room for that most unfeminine of transgressions--making a spectacle of oneself. Poetry readings, then, might seem an opportune space to test out the possibilities of the carnivalesque. The drunken, swaggering performance of the tortured but brilliant poet is a familiar staple in our cultural consciousness although this poet is almost always gendered male. Does a women poet have the same poetic license? Already marginalized, cautioned to be "neat" and "gentle," she risks further trivialization with any theatricality.

\(^2\)Smith's review appears reprinted in *Me Again*. As if to underscore Smith's disaffection, the editors include, beneath the review, one of her sketches depicting a woman who seems to have thrown her body across a bed in disgust and exhaustion. Behind her, on a bookshelf above some scattered volumes, looms a bottle marked "poison."
Enter Stevie Smith, described by the poet Christopher Logue as a "gaunt, plain, stick-legged, flat-chested... unearthly creature" (qtd. in Barbera 2). Barely over five feet tall and most often dressed like a school girl in clothes that were thirty years too young, Smith, one of the few women poets who would have been reading on any given night, shared the stage "with a much younger, denim-and-leather-clad male gang" (Stevenson 24). Frances Spalding notes, not surprisingly, "Stevie... altered the tone of these occasions" (263). Certainly her unusual style of reading and even singing her poems, her "chanting, off-key manner that could be hilarious and haunting, powerful and unsettling," altered the tone of many readings, but so too must have that body, that frail form often enacting a hyperbolized femininity reminiscent of the girl in "My Hat." Norman Bryson's account of her reading at King's College, Cambridge, suggests the transgressive nature of her performances. In it we see how a woman's body can act upon a constructed, discursive situation even as it operates within and challenges established constraints:

She recited her poems in an extraordinary declamatory style, almost singing them, quite high pitched. It was not an easy style to understand. It wasn't a church voice, and it wasn't incantation like Yeats, and it wasn't the alarming voice that might come from behind a mask of Greek tragedy, like Sylvia Plath. There seemed elements of all these in the voice she used, but the dominant tone was of cheerfulness exaggerated, as if the rise and fall of a cheery, vernacular voice were pushed higher and lower and became a stylized sing-song that wasn't cheerfulness but had an alienated relation to cheerfulness. It was remarkably stylized... She introduced into her performance... extraordinary and inappropriate tones, of sheer disgust--through the clotted words, but it felt almost like disgust at the words--and of enormous disappointment... It was rather alarming that our conversation about middle English, which had been somewhat polite... suddenly
produced this drama, this explosion. . . . One couldn't see what the
cheeriness had to do with the disappointment or the disgust.
The performance was unnerving because it was so excessive. . . .
The meaning of the words was set aside in the performance. And the
motives for this were entirely unrevealed: this seemed almost the
main point. It was as though what was being dramatized was a state
of being so pent up, so much without outlet, that emotions couldn't
have, any longer, appropriate objects. (Spalding 267)

It is her voice that disarmed the audience, the cheerfulness at odds
with the disgust and anger, but bear in mind that "this drama, this
explosion" erupted from a body most likely clad in a pinafore paired with
rolled down socks. Her audiences, no doubt, were often surprised "by the
contradiction between her appearance and her sharp wit" (Spalding 270).
After all, the male voice "explodes," "unnerves," may be "pent up," but for
a woman to express rage and disappointment is to leave the listener, baffled
by the inappropriateness, searching for motives.

Much is at stake in Smith's "exaggerated cheerfulness." Like the
daughter "certain to get off with the right sort of chap" in "My Hat," Smith
would be certain to satisfy adequately an audience anticipating her
"cheeriness," but she turns their expectations against them, confounding
them with the contradiction between her appearance and not just wit, for
women can certainly be witty, but the excess of cheerfulness which suggests
posturing, putting on the feminine, and in so doing, putting on the
audience. The image of the female poet on stage "orchestrates a gaze, a
limit" (Doane 43), and Smith uses this structure to exploit her feminine
appearance as a masquerade which "in flaunting femininity, holds it at a
distance. . . . It effects a defamiliarization of female iconography"
(Doane 49). The masquerade allows Smith not only to read but to
perform. If the audience expected girlishness and triviality from a woman
on stage, they got it from Smith who, like a boxer, completed her combination with an upper cut of "inappropriate" emotions and, as a final punch, would often stand on a chair to sing a poem or two.

Smith foregrounded her alterity by emphasizing sexual difference in her voice and body and using the resulting contradictions to challenge the norms and conventions these readings upheld. Her intense stylization suggests there is no natural female poetic voice, or male one. At risk, of course, is reappropriation, and Smith's performances could have been neutralized as the desperate antics of a lesser poet disguising the poor quality of her verse in theatricality. However, as Spalding claims, the climate of poetry readings at the time changed in part as Smith's resulting popularity increased the demand for accessible and innovative uses of language and wrenched poetry readings from the domain of the educated elite. Though she was not performing out of a conscious dedication to body politics per se, she was painfully aware of how women poets and their tradition have been constructed as "embroidering trivial themes...[and] stamping a tiny foot against God" (Roethke 133-34). Aware, as well, of the impact of a woman's body on stage, she manipulated her audience's gaze and expectations, using her voice and body to help "create a new climate in which her voice would increasingly be heard" (Spalding 265).

Similarly, it is often Smith's body that we, as readers, encounter before we read the poems, the "voice." Even a quick scan of the covers of her books reveals specific constructions of Smith that will make her, perhaps, more marketable or more enticing as an author to whom those unfamiliar with her work (not a small number) will be attracted. Author photographs are not uncommon on book covers, but in Smith's case her
image is the rule, not the exception. Almost all of the books by or about her have an image referring to her on the cover. Efforts to apprehend her, or to sell her, often lead to a type of containment mediated by the body first. Beginning with the Pinnacle editions of the novels we see, not Smith, but Glenda Jackson who played her in the film Stevie, looking pensive on the cover of Novel on Yellow Paper, curious on Over the Frontier, and wistful yet confident on The Holiday. These are all qualities to be admired in a novelist and suggest she is planning other projects, more for us to read. With the stamp of celebrity on the covers, we are assured that Smith will appeal to the popular imagination.

On the other hand, the Virago Modern Classics editions of her novels appeal to her potential readers' aesthetic tastes. Each cover depicts a detail from a portrait of a woman by Tamara de Lempicka, Roger Fry, and Lawrence Gowing, respectively. She is art deco on NYP, muted and earthy on OTF, and poised in rosy hues on The Holiday. These representations evoke Smith and the women about whom she writes. They appear strong, self-assured, and ready for the discriminating reader.

Should that reader pick up her biographies, she would discover a different embodiment altogether. Francis Spalding's Stevie Smith is smoking and looking far away, as if mid-sentence. She looks older and tougher than the Stevie who peeps out behind the formidable, frowning Ivy Compton-Burnett on Ivy and Stevie, and she is, in my opinion, more appealing than the kinder, gentler Stevie who graces the cover of Barbera and McBrien's biography. Virago's Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith offers, in fact, two versions of her: one, a sketch of a woman in a large hat smiling in front of a world of oppositions behind her,
rain and sunshine, a cityscape and large trees, sun and moon, water and land. In the lower right corner, ringed in yellow, gazes a portrait of a very young and lovely Smith, in a hat brimmed like a halo around her shadowed face. As if she knows something we don't know, she does not meet our eyes. The resonance between the two pictures suggests the contradictory stances Smith's work takes—as philosophical, as childish, as sexual and as reserved.

And there are more contradictions in the poetry volumes. The hatless girl on the cover of the Collected Poems I discussed in chapter three is not on the New Selected Poems, published twelve years later. This cover depicts not only a chic woman in a chapeau, but a glaring, larger-than-life-sized cat with teeth bared. Again we get different versions of Smith: culture vs. nature, sophisticated reserve vs. raging animality. All of these contradictory images evoke pictorially the anxiety expressed by Ogden Nash's widely-cited lines, "Who and what is Stevie Smith? / Is she woman? Is she myth?" (qtd. in Stevie 243). If she is clever, philosophical, and prolific, as she is, how can she also be a woman, Nash seems to ask. If it is true, as James Laughlin, the American publisher of Selected Poems, told Smith, that it is difficult to "break through with a new name, especially a poet" (Barbera 243), then what is at stake when the effort at "breaking through" begins with a version of her appearance? At odds in and on these texts is a kind of mind/body dualism that articulates mind as an active, male principle, and body as a passive, female one whose only agency too often, as in modern advertisements, is "speaking' a language of provocation" (Bordo 6). But in the case of the Smith "industry," she, as usual, gets the last laugh. As appealing as some of her images may be, as much as they
may resonate with the kind of exploitative manipulation employed by
advertising to catch readers' attention with the silent endorsement of
celebrity, Smith slips out of any totalizing, predominant representation. Is
she woman? Is she myth? Is she, as Arthur Rankin wonders, "an
'irregular variable,' a term denoting a celestial luminary whose behaviour
is erratic and unpredictable" (17)? Maybe. She may be all of those and
more, but she will never be, finally, reducible to her body.

II. *Those Englishwomen*

I agree, [the female body is] a hot topic. But only one? Look around,
there's a wide range. Take my own, for instance. -- Margaret Atwood.

The disruption between performance and identity that Smith enacts
on stage is echoed clearly in one of her briefest yet most central poems,
"This Englishwoman." Only one couplet in length, the poem is as self-
conscious about the body's materiality as Smith is in her performances.

This Englishwoman is so refined
She has no bosom and no behind. (CP 68)

Just as she differentiates in the pronouns the precise and crucial distinction
between "The Hat" and "My Hat," so again she particularizes that this is not
"The Englishwoman," a typological character study, but "This
Englishwoman," one specific woman not to be totalized or essentialized as
an entire category. Similarly, just as the many hats in Smith's work
reformulate identities and constructions of gender, so beneath these hats are
bodies, not The Body, capitalized, abstracted, and theorized solely as a text
inscribed by history and culture, but particular, individual bodies which, in
their differences, bear the marks of socialization.
In the poem, the verbal restraint reflects the spare, reduced body of the woman whose "refinement" requires the suppression of desire and the denial of pleasure. The poem and sketch suggest that the woman is anorexic; particularly, she lacks breasts and buttocks, two bodily regions culturally marked on women as sexual.³ In its brevity and characteristic wit, the poem addresses the construction of femininity on the body itself. As an effect of her class stature, the woman's body succumbs to what Kim Chernin calls a bourgeois "tyranny of slenderness" (qtd. in Bordo 185), placing the body historically in a post-Victorian period in which body management became a preoccupation of the middle-class as well as the aristocracy. Whether refinement necessitates a reduction of the body, or the woman merely interprets refinement as a bodily disfiguration, is unclear from the poem's ironic tone. Either way, social pressures appear to be acting on her and corroborate Bordo's claim that "preoccupation [with fat, diet and slenderness] may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining 'docile bodies' sensitive to any departure from social norms" (186).

And if, as Wolff argues, the juxtaposition of text and image intervenes in the discursive construction of the body over and against existing regimes of representation, consider the drawing attached to the poem. Unlike the "refined" images of women on, for instance, the covers of Smith's novels published by Virago, the scrawny picture of refinement she offers mocks the term. Smith sketches a kind of Victorian portrait of

the appropriately sexed woman who, as Helena Michie observes, "emerges as one who eats little and delicately... Weakness, pallor, and rejection of food are signs of transition in the refined heroine" (17, 16). Yet, as Michie also notes, the anorexic appearance can signal that this transition is being effected, if at all, quite awkwardly, and perhaps, I would add, with some resistance. Michie goes on to say:

The vision of the delicate young lady has, of course, a class as well as a gender component. A lady does not need to eat both because she does not have male 'desires' and because she does little to work up an appetite of any sort. Her femininity and her social position are defined quite literally by negation. (17-18)

The Englishwoman's body shows the signs of this negation as she stands gaunt with a sunken chest and bony arms seeking protection from the sun under her hat and an umbrella. Her face appears complacent, even smug, but her desire to hide from the sun suggests a self-effacing unwillingness to be in view, unlike the debutante in "Poor Soul, poor Girl!" who so desperately wishes for both refinement and attention. Both sketches poke fun at the women, or an audience who would too quickly subscribe to the ideals of class status that these women do not, in fact, embody.

In "This Englishwoman," most emphatically, Smith makes the case that there is no one embodiment of gendered class stature or "Englishness," a representative Englishwoman, any more than the mocking tone directed at the particular "poor soul, poor girl" is directed at poor girls in totality.

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In fact, when characters mistakenly generalize about Englishwomen, they are reprimanded, as in "The English Visitor":

And the people said she would never think of Alan again
And it was typical of Englishwomen.
But No, said an angel, you are wrong
She will think of him freely and frequently
She is not less sorry than you are
Only she was brought up differently. (305)

Other times Smith gives them enough rope to hang themselves with. The priest sent to minister to a women sentenced to die in "The Hostage" (325) reveals his professional ineptitude as he minimizes her suffering: "he remembered she came from the British Isles, / Oh, he said, I've heard that's a place where nobody smiles." Smith undercuts his propensity for generalization by erasing his authority under the name Father Whatshisname. Likewise in a poem which promises to essentialize in its title, "The English" (359), Smith refuses to deliver. The first word of the first line qualifies the title: "Many of the English..." and we learn that, more specifically, many of the "intelligent English, / of the Arts, the Professions and the Upper Middle Classes, / Are under-cover men" whose last vestiges of originality or individuality have died, leaving them little more than hollow bodies, "corpse carriers" not unlike T.S. Eliot's Hollow Men. Imperative for Smith, then, is the insistence on difference, specificity and individuality which she often figures, as in "The English Visitor," in conjunction with a body's mobility: "chiefly it is my walking they hate. / Then the beautiful woman ran up the mountainside / As over the top she was spinning."

Furthermore, Smith makes the dangers of buying into a construction of gender- and class-as-negation immediately explicit two pages after "This
Englishwoman." In "Maximilian Esterhazy" (70), a spurned love object addresses the title character, and in so doing metaphorizes herself out of her body into "nothingness:

O Maximilian stern and wild
Wilt thou not look on me thy little child
Thy once so darling dear, so closely presst,  
So cared for, so extravagantly drest,
Raised up from nothing in thy thought to be
A furnished dwelling of felicity?
Now thou dost frown and all my walls descend
Like Jericho's and there is a swift end
Of comely donjon and of crested tops
Of flying buttresses and decorated props.
O never castle in the hills of Spain
Was half so much of nothing as thy Jane,
When thou dost turn away and no more look,
She is a song unsung, an unwrit book.

The speaker metamorphoses from a child to a dwelling to, ultimately, a blank page, a recurring trope Susan Gubar traces in writers as different from Smith as Shakespeare and Henry James. She notes that "This model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page participates in a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation--a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality" (295). Like Isak Dinesen in "The Blank Page," Smith addresses this tradition and also implies that "female creativity has had to express itself within the confines of domesticity" (297); however, Smith goes even a step further. The speaker expresses herself as the confines of domesticity, a "furnished dwelling of felicity" which eventually degenerates to the "blank page" of the "unwrit book." Yet to have to read through all of this metaphorization is to be distanced from the speaker's body, the very thing that cries out to be
looked at by Maximilian. Framed as a character in a poem written in an archaic diction, compared to architectural edifices and, eventually, to the silence and blankness of the "song unsung, an unwr book," the speaker's body is more shielded than ever from Maximilian's or the reader's view.

Michie describes this kind of rampant metaphorization as metatrope, "where the figure used to describe a heroine is conventionally recognizable as itself a chain of metaphors" (87). In the case of self-framing, the effect is "to create a distance between herself and her own physicality" and to allow us, metonymically, to read the values of the society in which she appears. Smith's speaker moves from a first-person infantilization in the first two lines to a third-person perspective in which the speaker refers to herself as a "she" not an "I" by the poem's end, creating even further distance and progressing toward a self-proclaimed "nothingness," the ultimate negation toward which, perhaps, "This Englishwoman" moves as well. Many of Smith's women, in fact, deny the body first and foremost in their efforts to internalize and solidify an identity externally prescribed. I will discuss an opposite move in her poems about sexuality later in the chapter, but what is important to note here is an unease with bodies that Smith registers for many of her women who aspire, in fact, to be released from bodily constraints, as if this would free their discomfort with their gender identities as well. This would help explain, likewise, the opening lines of her poem "Girls!": "Girls! although I am a woman / I always try to appear human" (167). The strategy behind these lines, however, is not so much to erase the (or any) female body as it is to undercut the category "woman."
Martin Pumphrey illustrates with "Girls" his argument that in Smith's poetry women as a group are "enshrined and enslaved... powerless... silenced" (103). Thus, for the speaker of "Girls" to appear "human," not female, is to wrench herself from the constraints endemic to the category "woman" and frequently voiced by women such as the anonymous "Miss So-and-So" in the poem whose efforts at reinforcing gender norms are labeled "awful balsy nonsense." To insist on women's difference and individuality, Smith frequently couples the mobility we saw in "The English Visitor" with recurring motifs of leavetakings. Lee Upton says departures are "her most compelling and characteristic movements," and she accounts for their frequency by examining Smith's position as a woman poet: "[Her position] proves especially revealing, for her speakers may each repeatedly be 'someone who is more' than her culture acknowledges... Leave-taking signals that she is between states... ungraspable and peculiarly freed" (22, 23). This liminal freedom often reads as disaffiliation: "I longed for companionship rather, / But my companions I always wished farther. / And now in the desolate night / I think only of the people I should like to bite" ("In the Night" 204). Or, as Upton notes, relationships between women remain cordial but insist on difference; in "A Dream of Comparison," for instance, Eve and Mary are most able to speak, Upton contends, when they disagree the most: "They walked by the estuary, / Eve and the Virgin Mary, / And they talked until nightfall / But the difference between them was radical" (314).

Furthermore, the recent reference guide, Great Women Writers, (which includes Smith among 135 of the "world's most important women
writers) attests to the fact that normative definitions of "womanhood" are, for Smith, too tightly circumscribed:

The typical attitude of a wife toward her wifehood [or] a mother toward her motherhood...is discomfort and cynicism. Figures in Smith's poems are perpetually chafed by the discrepancy between their needs and the roles into which they believe they have been, in one way or another, stuck. (510)

We have seen this attitude already in poems such as "My Hat" and "The Queen and the Young Princess." In "No Categories!" Smith states explicitly "No hierarchies I pray...Oh no categories I pray" (258). These lines echo the risk Ann Snitow illustrates: "Whenever we uncritically accept the monolith 'woman,' we run the risk of merely relocating ourselves inside the old ring of an unchanging feminine nature" (10). But is there, Smith would ask, any immutable, essential feminine nature? If the poem "Girls!" admits that she is a "woman," then admittedly she already makes a kind of essentialist claim, for all definitions essentialize to a degree. For Smith the challenge is to utilize essentialism when necessary, to hold the categories up for scrutiny, and to interrogate what it means to talk about women as a category.
III. False Girl-Forms

Blow wind, blow, blow away the frightful form, scatter
The false girl-form and the words' mutter.
—"La Speakerine de Putney"

More women in Smith's work fall namelessly into socially prescribed roles than discover the kinds of mobility or escape we saw in "The English Visitor," and this subsumption is, again, marked on the body. In "Lightly Bound" (266), for example, a mother expresses the discrepancy between her needs and her role in terms of bodily evacuation first: "You beastly child, I wish you had miscarried / You beastly husband, I wish I had never married." There is a significant difference between telling a child "I wish you had never been born" and "I wish you had miscarried," for the latter connotes the bloody and painful passing of the birth that the former elides. The mother's desire to be free from bondage works from the body outward, from the child she has carried to the equally "beastly" husband to whom she is bound legally. In the conclusion of the poem the wife's imagination can only conjure the feeblest fantasies of release: "You hear the north wind riding fast past the window? He calls / me." "Do you suppose I shall stay," she asks, begging the question, "when I can go so easily?" The handcuffs on her ankles and wrists, depicted in the drawing in the Harold's Leap edition of the poem, give Smith's response.

Within the category "woman," perhaps the most pernicious subset is "the lady." In "The Hostage" Smith specifically and repeatedly calls the woman to whom "Father Whatshisname" ministers "the lady." Although the poem states she has "done nothing wrong" she is sentenced to die, but Smith suggests she is not a "hostage" to an arbitrary legal system so much
as one to an arbitrary gender category. Always the outcast, the lady has no
place in the social fabric ("But I was outside of it, looking, finding no
place, / No excuse at all for my distant wandering face") because she
eschews marriage and maternity. She imagines kissing her "darlings," but
then her mind wanders to a wind blowing "my beauties off / . . . Oh yes I
liked it, that was the worst of it." Of marriage she vows, "Out of the
question. . . / I'd rather be dead." Her guilt, if any, stems not from her
resistance to social norms but from the dissonance between her desire to
die and how this desire does not befit a "lady"; it is "despondent you know,
ungracious too." She will "hang at dawn," but the noose that tightens
around the neck asphyxiates the term lady as well. That she has always
been an exile ("why should it only be I that was sent to roam?") calls the
term "lady" into question to begin with and enacts some of the issues Judith
Butler raises in Bodies That Matter.

After Gender Trouble, Butler turns her attention to the materiality
of the body and argues, in terms of sex, that "materiality' is formed and
sustained through and as a materialization of regulatory norms that are in
part those of heterosexual hegemony" (15), one that would require, for
instance, the "lady" to materialize the marriage and children whose
dematerialization she fantasizes about instead. Those who fail to
materialize their sex "correctly" form a domain of "abject beings who are
not yet 'subjects' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the
subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and
'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated
by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject. . . "(3). This "field of
deformation" in turn "fortifies those regulatory norms" which maintain the
legibility and hegemony of the properly sexed, but at the same time, Butler asks, "how might it force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as 'life,' lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving?" (16). Or, as Smith asks in this poem, who goes to the gallows though he or she "has done nothing wrong?"

Smith's investigations into bodily subversions and challenges to regulatory norms do not call into question how those bodies become "sexed" in the first place, as Butler does. However, like Butler, she speculates about the body's role in challenging gender norms that can, at the most extreme, call for the destruction of that body. "The Hostage" holds up a body that doesn't matter, but one, like most of the bodies in Smith, that welcomes death anyway. The bodies that captivate Smith's imagination (and Butler's for that matter) are those which lurk on the margins of the intelligible and the normative, and Smith literalizes or embodies their abjected states often through fantastic transformations out of the legitimate and into something else entirely.

Fairy tales are one place these bodies appear in Smith's work. In another "lady poem," "The Small Lady" (471), Smith describes the kinds of entrapment waiting for women too eager to become ladies: "In front of the mighty washing machine / The small lady stood in a beautiful dream." Like the wife in "Lightly Bound" the small lady's capacity for imagining freedom from bondage is about as "lightly bound" as a muzzle: "That these clothes so clean (oh what a relief) / Must still be ironed, is my only grief." Rankin says that the lady is "wedded so it would seem, to domesticity and progress" (41). Although "welded" might be a more accurate description of her tie to domesticity, Rankin's metaphor reaffirms
the link that Smith consistently underscores between marriage and oppression, but he skews the view of "progress" she offers in the poem. "The Small Lady" is one of several revisionist fairy tales in Smith's canon, and like many of them, it envisions subversion through bodily transformation. A witch appears before the lady, suggesting that her dreams can be reconstructed, via the body, beyond domestic ideology's meager fantasy of a reliable washing machine: "What is it you still wish for my pretty dear? / Would you like to be a duck on a northern lake?" Parroting assertions that bind her to her own oppression, the lady resists: "Human inventions help properly, magic is a disgrace." However, by even listening to the witch, "the harm was done" and the lady transforms into "a false shape." The poem does not make it clear whether she has, in fact, become a duck, or rather that the "false shape" stands in opposition to the "small" and "pretty" shape of a "lady," a shape Butler might denote as "governed by regulatory norms." Rankin reads the poem as one of "total loss" because the small lady has lost "home and comfort," but as "My Hat" has already made clear, home and comfort are no loss at all. Transformation via the addition of a hat or a change in body releases women categorized as ladies and daughters. For Pumphrey, the poem represents "an impossible choice": "While marriage, domesticity, and the ideal of Purity in terms of which female desire is culturally constructed may silence, subordinate, and isolate women, at the same time, they offer the security and protection of a known world" (110). However, it is precisely the privileging of security, protection, and known quantities that Smith calls into question in this poem. In an ironic tone she concludes, "Heart of my heart, it is a mournful song, / Never will this poor lady come
home." The small lady may be on a "far northern lake, she is without help" but the mechanical help she has sacrificed has been replaced: "Come, ray of the setting sun... Light my kingdom."

Pumphrey correctly argues that "the consistent presence of play and fantasy elements in her poetry... provides both the means and the cover for cultural and social subversion," although "the fairy world, at best, offers an imperfect alternative" to socialization (110). However, his argument might be extended to consider how the body fuels the fairy tales by functioning as the grounds for a need for an alternative at all. Perhaps the body that matters least in Smith's canon is Rapunzel's in "The Afterthought" (256). In this revisionist fairy tale Smith takes up the story of the imprisoned maiden, what Maricia K. Lieberman calls "the prototype of female passivity," waiting to be rescued by a man (192). In this case the poem begins with the prince's voice initiating the story, crying out the traditional request, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel let down your hair," but then the poem takes a comic turn as he elaborates beyond his assigned script into a self-absorbed monologue about topics ranging from centipedes to Edgar Allan Poe that delays their necessary escape even as it enacts his criticism of Poe: "I wonder sometimes by the way if Poe isn't a bit introspective, / One can stand about getting rather reflective, / But thinking about the way the mind works, you know, / makes one inactive, one simply doesn't know which way to go." Part of Rapunzel's body, her hair, functions as the key to her escape from incarceration and yet it is precisely her body that gets elided in the prince's stampeding discourse. He is clearly more infatuated with the sound of his own lecture than with the prospect of rescuing Rapunzel. As a result, she is rendered totally under erasure in the last two
lines: "What is that darling? You cannot hear me? / That's odd. I can hear you quite distinctly." What is the prince responding to? She hasn't spoken a word in the poem. The prince's paraphrase of Titurel, "I rejoice because by the mercy of the Saviour I / continue to live in the tomb," would be the closest approximation to Rapunzel's thoughts by that time, but she remains silent and he only imagines her voice. If he can, in fact, hear her "quite distinctly," then she is reduced to nothing more than a reflective sounding board for his own discourse. The body in the drawing, requiring immediate rescue from a witch, is neglected entirely as hair spills over a wall and her face gazes impatiently downward. The message of the fairy tale is clear. The passive maiden doesn't matter; the story really hinges on the prince.

Smith was all too familiar with the women physically trapped in fairy tales. Rapunzel in the tower, Cinderella in the house with her stepsisters, Snow White in the glass coffin all "glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine's cardinal virtues [and] suggest that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity" (Rowe 210). They seem doubly imprisoned in their homes/ coffins and in their bodies waiting for that awakening kiss, so that when Smith writes her own fairy tale it is little wonder that the girl, drawing on the mobility that is so powerful and necessary in Smith's work, devises her own rescue. Mary goes to a wishing well in "Cool as a Cucumber" (240), but before she can wish for the ever elusive and oh-so-desired prince, "a fairy came up out of the well / and cursed her up hill and down dale." This particular fairy, far from
decking Mary out in the requisite ball gown like Cinderella's, effected a
completely different transformation:

And now she gets worse and worse
Ever since she listened to the fairy's curse
She is nervy grim and bold
Looks over her left shoulder and does not do as she is told.

She is quite unfit for marriage
Of course

She sounds more like the lady of "The Hostage" here than the traditional
passive princess and in fact resists her socialization to marriage and
domesticity in her response to the miller's son who begs her to come back
to him: "And when she heard him she broke into a run." As she shrinks
from her conventional role in fairy tales, her body transforms as well.
The speaker of the poem, who has disapprovingly deemed Mary's condition
as "worse," calls her "pale, really unhealthy, / And moves so queerly,
rather stealthy." Queer mobility is a good thing in Smith, and stealth is
always to be admired. Thus in the last lines when Mary "has not been seen
since then. / If you ask me she'll not be seen again," we can read her
invisibility as an occupation on the margins of some other discourse,
another landscape she attains with her own agency beyond the textual world
of fairy tales.

Sometimes a woman's transformation comes from an exterior
source, as from witches in fairy tales, and in the case of "Friskers or Gods
and Men" (268) what appears to be a "curse" can again, as in "Cool as a
Cucumber," be recuperated. "Friskers" reinforces "the idea that the female
body is a creative woman's chief liability" (Ostriker 93). The title excludes
women altogether, but the sketch attached suggests that a woman voices the
question "Oh what can be happening pray what are they at? / Oh why am I slowly turning into a cat?" In the drawing a cat with a floppy bow in its hair seems to squirm uncomfortably in a frilly dress too small for its transforming shape. If originally the body in the dress was human and female, Smith again figures escape through a radical transformation of that body. The speaker tries to understand her physical transformation: "Is it Zeus responsible, tired of my love?" He reduces her from a woman to a "puss" that is, a cat or, as the word connotes, female genitalia, her essential bodily difference from "Gods and Men." Thus, as another poem, "Dear Female Heart," argues, to fall into the category woman is to "suffer, that is all you can do" (130), and to deconstruct the category involves deconstructing the body first and foremost. Though Friskers is redefined by the gods literally as a pussy, the cat outgrowing its dress suggests that this ostensibly castigatory and containing transformation opens the way for the woman to escape the gender identity that always defined her, through various bodily versions, as a pussy anyway.5

However, in a companion poem, Smith seems to kill Friskers off. "Pretty" (469) introduces another way women are reduced to their bodies and valued only for their exterior. As Yeats wrote in the year Smith was born, "To be born woman is to know-- / Although they do not talk of it at school-- / That we must labor to be beautiful" ("Adam's Curse" 29). His speaker makes two points here. To be beautiful requires effort, and women must labor to achieve beauty; we must pursue it for social success.

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5Emily Dickinson provides an illuminating parallel to the comparison of women and pussy cats. In response to her brother's charge that her writing was too "exalted" in style, she retorts: "... you want a simpler style. ... As simple as you please, the simplest sort of simple--I'll be a little ninny--a little pussy catty..." (qtd. in Bennett 152). Likewise, her use of "simple" foreshadows Smith's ironic deployment of the term in "Magna est Veritas" in which, as I argued in chapter three, the woman who "would rather look simple" is not simple in any conventional sense.
The proliferation of texts ranging from the kinds of women's magazines Pompey publishes to the critiques of the beauty imperative offered by Naomi Wolf among others, testifies to the continued strength of this cultural imperative. Thus we can laugh at the understatement in the first line of "Pretty": "Why is the word pretty so underrated?" Smith enumerates a host of pretty things in the poem, all of which confound cultural constructions of beauty. Beginning with Romantic nature tropes she finds "In November the leaf is pretty when it falls," but Romanticism goes by the wayside as she also remarks on the pike "in the pretty pool" who "stalks / He stalks his prey, and this is pretty too." So is the "water rat" who "cannot shut his nostrils / As the otter can and the beaver." The fun she pokes at prettiness aligns Smith with women poets like Carolyn Kizer and Erica Jong who take a comic stance to undercut the seriousness of beauty (Ostriker 105-06), but her poem maintains an undercurrent of something more ominous and ultimately nihilistic. The preying pike and hunting owl are pretty because they are "careless and that is always pretty." Though the line suggests, as Yeats affirms, that beauty should appear effortless, care-less, Smith goes on: "This field, this owl, this pike, this pool are careless, / As Nature is always careless and indifferent / Who sees, who steps, means nothing, and this is pretty." Now we are trapped in a kind of Darwinian beauty pageant where only the strongest survive and nature could not care less. If pretty is as pretty does, then stalking prey replaces the swimsuit competition and even those of us at the top of the food chain are rendered vulnerable: "Cry pretty, pretty, pretty and you'll be able / Very soon not even to cry pretty / And so be delivered entirely from humanity / This is prettiest of all, it is very pretty." To observe
beauty, in nature or in others, is for Smith appropriative: "So a person can come along like a thief--pretty!-- / Stealing a look, pinching the sound and feel." But the joke is that everything decays, becomes decisively not pretty. As Mark Storey notes, the apparent heartlessness of the end of the poem eases Smith away from simplistic sweetness, another value ascribed to women (191). She turns women's most prized cultural asset on its head, but too late for the woman of "The Sad Heart" who laments, "I never learnt to attract, you see, / And so I might as well not be" (184). In the sketch, not surprisingly, the woman's ankles are bound. To "Pretty," on the other hand, Smith attaches a sketch of a "pretty" little girl holding what looks to be a dead cat, perhaps the expired Friskers. Slouched in the girl's lap, the dead pussy cat suggests that the reduction of women to their reproductive organs is at best a dead metaphor.

As an alternative, Smith offers the title character in "Saffron" (444) who is praised for her ability to evade a fixed gender identity by transforming her body on her own accord, not from some kind of curse from a fairy or the gods:

Green are her eyes green her hair,  
The spirit of Bice is winter's prisoner.

When spring comes Pale is her name, and her hair  
And eyes are pale blue, and she is freer.

In summertime she is called Saffron,  
Yellow are eyes and hair then. I welcome

Bice, Pale, and Saffron but I love best  
Beautiful summer Saffron, running fast.

Because this beautiful spirit should not be frozen  
And is furthest from it when she is saffron.
In keeping with her use of fairy tales, Smith frequently aligns bodily malleability with enchantment. In contrast to a poet like Emily Dickinson who, in "I think I was enchanted" (#593), figures enchantment as a "Conversion of the Mind" which enables her to identify with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and claim her own strength as a woman poet, Smith construes enchantment as a bodily transformation as well as a mind change. In one of her most famous poems, a prince turned into a frog prefers to stay that way: "I am happy, I like the life, / Can swim for many a mile" ("The Frog Prince" 406). Corporeal metamorphosis provides his escape from fairy tales' inevitable acculturation to social roles. He asks if "other enchanted people feel as nervous / As I do?" because disenchantment ushers in the familiar staple of the "heavenly girl" with whom he will doubtfully live happily ever after. If, as another poem's title asserts, "Every Lovely Limb's a Desolation," then perhaps shedding those limbs for frog legs is not such a loss after all.

Smith also draws on Biblical narratives to underscore the desire to escape the body. In "Lot's Wife" the wife's lot is to die. Like the Frog Prince she is skeptical about marriage: "Though a marriage be fairly sprung. . . In the end it is sure to go wrong" (210). The sense of mobility in Smith's poetry that usually marks a woman's individuality and power founders in the case of Lot's wife; though her "footsteps run to and fro"

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6Smith’s revisions of fairy tales, Biblical narratives, and mythology characterize much of her work and the work of many women poets. An important process for women poets, the "re-visionary task," as Liz Yorke describes it, allows women to call into question "the conventional logic of patriarchal discourses. . . . The re-visionary task of reminiscence and retrieval also involves re-inscription, a process in which the old narratives, stories, scripts, mythologies become transvalued, re-presented in different terms [in order to provide] a thorough-going critique of established definitions, values and ethics relating to the representation of women" (1-2).
she "offend[s] wherever I go." Thus she implores "Take me to the valley of asphalt, / And turn me to a river of stone." Her subjectivity is contained in the role of wife and this kind of entrapment plays out on the body that sighs, moans, and desires a transformation that won't free her like "The Small Lady" but will merely stop the frantic movement endemic, perhaps, to the role of a wife. Solidified into stone, a variation of the Biblical pillar of salt, pain is held at bay or dealt with in comforting isolation: "no tree may shift to my sighing, / Or breezes convey my moan." In contrast, recall Pompey in Novel on Yellow Paper. She is invested in a kind of "to and fro" rhythm that she distinguishes emphatically from marriage: "The rhythm of friendship is a very good rhythm. . . . [It] is so strong in my blood; I must go, I must come back. . . . And this rhythm is antipathetic to marriage" (198). Lot's wife, on the other hand, embodies the future Pompey explicitly rejects when Freddy tries to talk her into marrying him: "Bring your ideas down to earth. . . . Keep your feet on the ground" (221). What could be more grounded than a "valley of asphalt" or a "river of stone", and what more immobilizing?

Thus the woman who resists proper socialization bears the price on her body; she is hung, she turns to asphalt, she dissolves: "La Speakerine de Putney" (187) opens, "This heap of ashes was a learned girl" and implores, "Blow wind, blow, blow away the frightful form, scatter / The false girl-form and the words' mutter." What would be a "true girl-form"? Is "girl" always already false, and if so, how does a woman wrench herself from the cultural constraints attributed to the "false girl-form" she inhabits in her body? If she confronts her image in the mirror she sees, if she is lucky enough to be "enchanted," a ghostly, smiling
reflection abstracted from fleshly constraints ("The Ghost of Ware" 299). Unenchanted, that is, not framed within the discourse of a fairy tale, she relinquishes agency as Lady T does:

I look in the glass
Whose face do I see?
It is the face
Of Lady T.

I wish to change
How can that be?
Oh Lamb of God
Change me, change me. ("The Repentance of Lady T" 199)

Though she holds a brush to her hair in the drawing, trying to achieve the "prettiness" Smith debunks, Lady T can only imagine change as coming from a higher source. Smith introduced this poem in a reading as one she likes because it is "more relaxed," but the comic vision of the helpless lady still points to a larger question voiced in line 6. "How can that be" asks how can the change be effected, but also, how can it be that she would desire change? How can it be that she is not satisfied with the status quo, with the "lady" reflected back in the mirror? But she isn't, and neither are most of Smith's women. The body reflected back to them in their own mirrors or in society's disapproving gaze is one they wish to escape. Women are valued for all the wrong reasons, as so much of Smith's work takes pains to prove:

All these illegitimate babies. . .
Oh girls, girls,
Silly little cheap things,
Why do you not put some value on yourselves,
Learn to say, No?
Did nobody teach you?
Nobody teaches anybody to say No nowadays,
People should teach people to say No.
But the girls say: I shall be alone
If I say 'I am valuable' and other people do not say
it of me,
I shall be alone, there is no comfort there.
No, it is not comforting but it is valuable. . .
("Valuable" 447)

And the effects of this false valuation are produced by and on the
body as it struggles for beauty and love, and produces, at best, illegitimate
babies. Bodies in Smith's poems most often shackle women and betray
them. Her work plays out the kind of mind / body duality Bordo traces:
"The body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and
confounder of its projects: these are common images within Western
philosophy" (3). She adds "But what remains the constant element
throughout historical variation is the construction of the body as
something apart from the true self. . . and as undermining the best efforts
of that self" (5). And of course, this scheme is gendered. Men are cast as
mind or spirit, and women are loaded down with the role of the body.
Similarly for Smith, "Man is a spirit. This the poor flesh knows" ("Man is
a Spirit" 236). Man, and Smith does not use the term as a generic pronoun,
is accorded mobility and freedom by escaping the body. Notice the eye
rhyme in the following lines of "feebleness " and "femaleness":

Oh would that I were a reliable spirit careering around
Congenially employed and no longer by feebleness bound
Oh who would not leave the flesh to become a reliable
spirit
Possibly travelling far and acquiring merit.
("Longing for Death Because of Feebleness" 368)

As Smith in the four walls of her secretarial room knew too well,
"careering around" is not an option often accorded women. Instead, the
first line of "The Actress" speaks for many women in the workplace, "I can't say I enjoyed it, but the pay was good" (198). When she states, "I have a poet's mind, but a poor exterior, / What goes on inside me is superior," her assertion sounds as defeated as the mother in "Lightly Bound" who thinks she can "go so easily." The actress compensates for the perceived limitations of her body by claiming a poet's mind, but it is not that mind that she works with "upon the Stage, amid painted greenery." Of course, as Smith's work always implies, what woman isn't already acting, playing out her assigned gender role or manipulating it to the best of her ability?

IV. Sex and the Single Girl

Forgive me forgive me my heart is my own
And not to be given for any man's frown
Yet would I not keep it for ever alone.

Forgive me forgive me for here where I stand
There is no friend beside me no lover at hand
No footstep but mine in my desert of sand.
--"Forgive Me, forgive me"

This returns us to Butler who asks early in Gender Trouble, "To what extent does the category of women achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix?" (5). In an attached footnote she elaborates:

I use the term heterosexual matrix throughout the text to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. I am drawing from Monique Wittig's notion of the "heterosexual contract" and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich's notion of "compulsory heterosexuality" to characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine
expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (151, n. 6)

And here is Paula Bennett on Emily Dickinson:

When imagining her speaker in love with a man, Dickinson was apparently unable to conceive of a relationship (or a language in which to express it) that did not conform to heterosexuality's cultural inscription. Women were smaller, weaker, and less empowered men... [Dickinson's heterosexual love poetry] demonstrates all too effectively how Western sexual arrangements and the discourse in which they are embodied have helped mold women psychologically to embrace and identify with weakness, lack and pain. (159, 161)

To the degree that gender identity is constituted by sexuality and this construction is marked on the body, it becomes evident that bodies and sex will be of some concern to Smith although the number of poems in her canon about sex are relatively few. For Smith like Dickinson, to write about heterosexuality and sex is to engage in a battle against cultural inscription, though Smith explores how "Western sexual arrangements" help define and shape the bodies of women as well as their psychological identifications. We have seen how Smith persistently critiques marriage as a formative, entrapping institution that solidifies traditional gender identities, but rarely does sex enter the picture in these critiques. Recall in the novels, for instance, that although Pompey admits "Oh how I enjoy sex and oh how I enjoy it" (NYP 140) bodies rarely play a part in her passion. She consistently thwarts Freddy's advances, and she longs for Josephine, but without consummation. Though Pompey sleeps with Tom in Over the Frontier, Smith relegates most physical description to euphemisms like "in the saddle again." In part, she is working to wrench the female body from the effects of heterosexuality. As she explains in OTF, "Oh if there is to be
anything of pleasure at all in the sweet uses of heterosexuality, please remember to be feminine, darling Miss or Mrs., but once out of bed, pursue your own way..." (153). That heterosexuality forms a passive, feminine figure is evident in poems like "This Englishwoman," "Poor Soul, poor girl!" and "The Sad Heart" in which the woman who "never learnt to attract" men wishes to die. But if the body appears in any poems about sex, it is most clearly, and most detrimentally, fleshed out in a heterosexual frame.

"Seymore and Chantelle or Un peu de vice" (514) is without a doubt the most striking aberration in Smith's body of work. The poem depicts two children in sadomasochistic play: "Pull my arm back, Seymour, / Like the boys do, / Oh Seymour, the pain, the pain, / Still more then, do." More graphic than most of Smith's speakers, Chantelle describes the pleasures of her pain:

Seymour, when you hold me so tight it hurts
I feel my ribs break and the blood spurt,
Oh what heaven, what bliss,
Will you kiss me, if I give you this
Kiss, and this and this? Like this?

Arms, ribs, blood. Rarely does even this much corporeality enter Smith's poems, and when it does, it is the female body in pain. Admittedly the relationship is consensual; Chantelle is not assaulted like the hatless victim in "I HATE THIS GIRL." Yet notice how the possibility for the most graphic sexual description is elided: "Tell me, Seymour, when they... when.../ does it hurt as much as this / And this and this? Ah what pain" (ellipses Smith's). Who are "they" and what do they do to Seymour in the space of the ellipses? The poem does not admit Seymour's body and his pleasure, but it does allow Chantelle's in relation to him and to "Nanny"
who "swished me so hard... She broke her hair-brush. What bliss"
(ellipses mine). Like the daughter in "The Queen and the Young Princess,"
Chantelle is forced into submission by a mother figure although Chantelle
willingly "embraces the headache" by transforming it into a kind of sexual
bliss. But is she also being taught to play the "shadow" who will "make sun
strong"? The opening of the poem, "Pull my arm back, Seymour, / Like
the boys do" suggests that other boys dominate Chantelle, take a hand (if
not a hairbrush) in what could be interpreted as her training in
heterosexuality. The poem risks, then, the conflation of women and
masochism. Although, as Jessica Benjamin explains, the mainstream of
psychoanalytic thought today rejects the idea of female masochism (81),
Smith clearly is exploring "how gender polarity underlies such familiar
dualisms as autonomy and dependency, and thus establishes the coordinates
for the positions of master and slave" (Benjamin 7).

I would like to read the poem as a funny, playful piece on
"perversity," an exception to her other poems about sex, but it seems to fit
best instead as the rule, not the exception to heterosexuality. As Smith
unveils the dominant and submissive roles that help regulate gender
formation, we see the girl's pain and watch her transform it as her source
of pleasure, but Seymour's pain is less clear, as is his body. Perhaps
Seymour and Chantelle grow up into Miriam and Horlick who, in
"Goodnight" (572), "spend a great deal of time putting off / going to bed."
Based on an actual conversation Smith witnessed, the poem paints a sexual
scene less physically sadomasochistic, but more oppressive:

    Horlick, look at Tuggers, he is getting quite excited in
    his head.
Tuggers was the dog. And he was getting excited. So. Miriam had taken her stockings off and you know Tuggers was getting excited licking her legs, slow, slow.

It's funny Tuggers should be so enthusiastic, said Horlick nastily, It must be nice to be able to get so excited about nothing really, Try a little higher up old chap, you're acting puppily.

It is Tuggers, not the husband, who approximates oral sex with the wife, as if her pleasure should be relegated to the dogs. By reducing her body to "nothing really" he negates not only her potential for pleasure but the body itself. In fact, Smith's configurations of heterosexual love and desire often rely on this strategy. In "Autumn" (169), for example, bodies are placed totally under erasure:

He told his life story to Mrs Courtly
Who was a widow. 'Let us get married shortly',
He said. 'I am no longer passionate,
But we can have some conversation before it is too late.'

The suitor has already rejected the possibility of sexual relations because he is no longer passionate, regardless of what passion may still burn in Mrs. Courtly, and his offer of conversation appears anything but mutual since he is the one doing all the talking. To underscore the point that bodies don't matter in this potential union, Smith depicts the couple in the drawing standing in rain that covers their bodies and the landscape around them.

If the woman's body is not erased in heterosexuality, its capacity for reproduction, that is, its defining sexual difference from men, is appropriated. In "Eng." (45) Smith asks "What has happened to the young men of Eng.? / Why are they so lovey-dovey so sad and so domesticated?"
They are "without sensuality," and, more problematically, "They see in their dreams a little home / and kiddies / Ah the kiddies / They would not mind having babies." But the women who can have the babies are trapped hearing the life story of unpassionate suitors, they are refined to the point of anorexia, or they are wishing they had miscarried the babies once they have had them. Their sexuality constructs them for the service of male heterosexual desire; their pleasure is in their pain.

In contrast to these relationships that render the body intelligible at best, dissatisfied at worst, Smith portrays homoerotic bonds between women. In much the same way that Smith's most charged relationships were with women, so she eroticizes friendships in her poetry textually and in the drawings. In "The Pleasures of Friendship" (208) she writes that the "pleasures" (in the plural for they are many) are "exquisite." Although she enumerates only one, "walk[ing] on the grass," the drawing suggests others. Two women stroll in open view, one with her hand placed squarely on the other's breast. And when the friendships end, the women are not as indifferent as Lady Ross who admits to her dead husband in "Widowhood or The Home-Coming of Lady Ross," "Now I live alone by the sea / And I am happy as never I used to be / Harold, can you forgive me?" (459). Instead, as in "The Broken Friendship" the pain of separation takes a physical toll. Describing another woman named Ross, Smith illustrates the despair of a woman ignored by her friend when she confesses what could be construed as unrequited love:

'My heart is fallen in despair'
Said Easter Ross to Jolie Bear.
Jolie answered never a word
But passed her plate as if she had not heard.
Mrs. Ross took to her bed
And kept her eye fixed on the bed-rail peg
'When I am dead roll me under the barrow,
And who but pretty Jolie shall carry the harrow.'

In contrast to Lady Ross, this Ms. Ross is immobilized by the loss of a loved one. Her paralysis registers denial of the love object and the prohibition of speaking that desire; it can only be coded as "my heart."

However, within the confines of a fairy tale and its imaginative license, Smith can depict physical attraction between women. In "The Lady of the Well-Spring" (311), for instance, "the English child Joan" can embark on a quest, traditionally reserved for the male, to rescue a captive woman. She escapes a French drawing room where, as Pumphrey notes, "French ladies" are depicted as masked and imprisoned; their "white faces / barred by the balcony shadows seemed to grimace." In the woods she finds a woman described more fully than most in Smith's poetry:

Where on a bank a great white lady is lying
A fair smooth lady whose stomach swelling
Full breasts fine waist and long legs tapering
Are shadowed with grass-green streaks. The lady smiles
Lying naked. The sun stealing
Through the branches, her canopies, glorifies
The beautiful rich fat lady where she lies.

Although her body, too, is "barred" by the shadows of grass, this anarchic world is preferable to the socialized confines of the drawing room. And the lady's fatness "suggests not the voluptuous appeal to the male eye found in Renoir's paintings but a self-oriented sensuality that contrasts directly with the publicly confirmed 'freedom' of the sophisticated society women" (Pumphrey 109). The homoerotic attraction Joan experiences has also always been "barred": "Never before in history... Has lady's flesh and so divine a lady's as this is / With just such an admiring look as Joan's met
with." Importantly, the naked, white body of the lady is met with the reader's gaze as well and held up for admiration. Like the daughter in "My Hat," Joan refuses to return home: "Right, says the lady, you are my captive. . . . / Do not think of her as one who loses." The speaker thus approves of Joan's choice though this magical landscape is not presented as a perfect alternative to the high-society drawing room. "Piping screaming croaking clacking" fill the woods, but, significantly, Joan chooses the flesh over the masks of "white faces" and the "difficulty of [their] conversation."

Even as Smith endorses lesbian eroticism over the "mask" of a heterosexist culture founded on, among other things, the model of the male rescuing the damsel in distress, she adopts the mask of the fairy tale narrator to describe same-sex attraction. These kinds of masks in Smith's work, according to Pumphrey,

permit no illusion that the formations of culture and language are anything other than constructions. . . . Power lies, her poems suggest, not in the Romantic illusion of the created self but in the constant manipulation of the culturally defined masks by which the self is known--to create a private space behind the surface of public experience. The elusive "self" of the poems is not to be found in any one mask or image but rather, obliquely implied, in the endless play of construction and deconstruction the poems demonstrate. (112)

Admittedly, this kind of play opens the space for gender construction work, for her to play with mimesis as Irigaray describes it, that is, to "try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (76). However, a problem arises when the mask becomes the only way to explore alternative sexualities.

Thus, in "Angel Face" (488) the speaker implores "Sweet Angel, love me, love me," but the angel, an ethereal, disembodied version of a
love object, hovers above her "In the snowflake glowing smugly." This snowflake, a cover for the "angel face" we never see, is "white and silent" and "it will make / Soon all flat and like a white lake / In a white and silent state / Beaming flat and vacant." White is an important color here. Describing her attraction to a pair of white glasses worn by a gay male friend, Eve Sedgwick discovers that white is gendered differently for men and women: "White the pastel sinks banally and invisibly into the camouflage of femininity, on a woman, a white woman." It is also, at the same time, no color, yet in many cultures it signifies mourning, and of course, virginity--"to the ways our gender tries to construct us heterosexually as absence, and as the dissimulating denial of it" (255). These associations circulate around the white obliteration of the angel's snowflake. Femininity and mourning conflate as the snowflake denies difference, but conceals the attraction of sameness. Silence and vacancy substitute for public disclosure. The poem recalls Stevens's "Snowman": "For the listener, who listens in the snow / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (54). The nothing. Smith's speaker cannot embody her love object; though the angel bids her, with sexual connotation, to "Come soon, come soon," the angel's sexual appeal is ultimately contained in fantasy life: "To be so appealing, teasing / Smiling, teasing and appealing, / In thy white and silent way / Saying only, Come away." The white and silence of the imagination can produce doubt; the speaker questions if the angel exists and so she concludes the poem asking, "If I doubt thee, if I think thee / But a figment of my fancy, / Sweet Angel, love me, love me, / In thy bosom cover me." Her plea for corporeal proof dissipates as it resonates simultaneously with the poem
"Love Me!" (191) in which the speaker who similarly cries "Love me, Love me" provokes revulsion: "Once I cried Love me to the people, but they fled like a dream, / And when I cried Love me to my friend, she began to scream." Smith does not depict erotic engagement with the female body, though she can imagine it and ask for it. Perhaps the internalized monstrosity Pompey evinces in *Over the Frontier* when she imagines preying on Josephine like a vampire threatens Smith's poetic vision, whitening-out lesbian sex into the nothing that is.

If same-sex desire functions only behind a white mask, this does not preclude the enactment of desire altogether. In "Tender Only to One" (93), one of her most anthologized poems, Smith veils a description of masturbation behind a childish mask. Plucking petals off a flower, the speaker is playing the girl's game "he loves me, he loves me not." Pumphrey notes how the game teaches girls to value purity and to learn passivity as they wait for what culture defines as the ultimate reward, a man's love. Yet a space for subversion opens in the speaker's initial pose: "the child who knows her play is being observed and whose gestures and words as a result are in part private and in part directed at an audience that will be both invited and excluded from the game." For Pumphrey, "the speaker mocks the literary expectation that she will herself to the reader. . . . the speaker elusively manipulates the mask of female reserve" (106). Where does this literary expectation come from? Do only female speakers "give themselves" to (male) readers? Is "reserve" a mask assigned to the feminine only? Although Pumphrey's reading here seems essentialist, the possibility for subversion he describes seems rich.
Smith intimates that beneath the imposed passivity the flower game teaches lurks female sexual pleasure: "Tender only to one / Tender and true / The petals swing / To my fingering. . . ." The two lips of the vulva are often figured as petals or flowers, and the verb "fingering" certainly suggests auto-erotic pleasure. Thus, Smith dismantles the construction of women as passive at its inception. Games like "he loves me not" appear innocuous because they are playful, but it is precisely their playfulness that masks their coercive force. What if women recuperate play not only for resistance, but for pleasure? Is the price death?

Tender only to one,
Last petal's breath
Cries out aloud
From the icy shroud
His name, his name is Death.

Sternlicht and Rankin read the last line as a death wish in conformity with Smith's suicide motif. Yet sexual climax from Donne to Keats to Eliot is often troped as death. The "icy shroud" refers to the resulting "frigidity" when women's sexual needs are repressed or are not met. Death points not to life's termination but to the foreclosure of the possibility of heterosexual union. If women choose masturbation over intercourse, they free their sexuality from the economy of reproduction and male desire and open instead new possibilities of gender identity beyond use and exchange value.

Pumphrey determines that the speaker must inevitably feel guilty from "the conflicting demand of the chosen ONE and the rejected many 'who will think her love to blame!'" (105). His assignation of guilt only compounds the problem of women's sexuality when it is constructed as a unit of exchange that marks the woman guilty for "giving it away" to one man and promiscuous for "giving it away" to two. Of course, "tender" can
also be read as money; if we read the poem as about masturbation, then the girl's exchange value is in relation only to herself.

So what if women reclaim play for their own pleasure and not for the reproduction of children within the economy of heterosexuality? What then would be the significance of the speaker, like "The Actress" on the stage "amid painted greenery," performing her pleasure in front of an audience both invited and excluded from the game? First, her performance positions the audience as voyeur so that the reader occupies what Laura Mulvey would call a masculinized spectatorial position (35). The male spectator responds to the female image either by assigning guilt and asserting control (the voyeur) or disavowing castration by turning the represented figure into a fetish (fetishistic scopophilia). The speaker opens herself to the vulnerability of objectification if the reader is male, but what if the reader is a woman? Feminist film theorists such as Mary Ann Doane typically assign the female spectator either the role of masochist identifying with the female victim or transvestite identifying with the male viewer. Yet a woman enjoying autoerotic pleasure does not suggest victimization; she maintains agency in her desires. Instead, the image opens a space for radical female spectatorship in which the viewer need not identify with the role of masochist or cross-gendered transvestite. Masturbation suggests illicit pleasure or even an opportunity for lesbian identification, neither of which subscribe to culturally sanctioned gender identities. Although, as Sedgwick identifies in "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," modern views of masturbation normalize and naturalize the practice as part of an individual's development, "to have so powerful a form of sexuality run so fully athwart the precious and embattled sexual identities whose meaning
and outlines we always insist on thinking we know, is only part of [its] revelatory power" (109, 113). Though the body is still metaphorized in "Tender Only to One," the suggestion that sexual pleasure and power can be achieved outside of the frames of compulsory heterosexuality or closeted homosexuality is a step toward a revelatory power, toward actualizing "The Actress's" claim that "what goes on inside me is superior."

Ultimately, as the poems veiling homoeroticism and as the vexed sexual relationships in the novels show, Smith's treatment of sexuality is never as explicit as one might expect from a writer who admits that she loves sex and asks, "Is there anything more beautiful than the naked body?" (NYP 102). She insists upon the importance of writing sexual desire, both heterosexual and homosexual, even though that desire is most often filtered through metaphor or ellipses. In "I Like to Play with Him" (CP 53), the speaker insists:

I like to play with him
He would be lovely to play with
He is so solemn sensitive conceited
He would be lovely to play with
I could pretend
Say so-and-so and so-and-so... . . .

She never speaks the "so and so." The reader is left to imagine the eroticism of the conversation, if there is any, in much the same way that it is up to the reader's imagination to envision the distinct differences between the female bodies in the poems or the various kinds of transformations they undergo. Though she would never write a poem in celebration of her uterus, her poetry opens the way for the reader to think about bodies and their attendant desires. Essences need bodies, so to avoid essentialist definitions of "woman," she must reinscribe the foundational
text of essentialism--the body--as specifically and variously as possible. Her evasive metaphors and fantastic fairy tales attempt to get outside the body, to wrench the category woman from the bodies women live in. To the actress who has "a poet's mind, but a poor exterior" Smith's poetry strives to say the body doesn't matter.
Conclusion
Pandora's Playbox

So far we have seen in Smith's novels and poetry textual evidence of her commitment to challenging culturally determined gender roles and to uncovering possibilities of constructing gender identity. Her writing takes an anti-essentialist position as its inaugural point and then launches into regions only her distinctive imagination could conjure. From Novel on Yellow Paper's secretarial pool and the no man's land of Over the Frontier to palace walls and desert islands, we leaf through what Adrienne Rich calls "an atlas of the difficult world." There are no easy alternatives to the discourses, narratives and cultural imperatives that define gender, and Smith offers no stable or definitive cartography with which to guide us through these hard-hat areas. At best we get various paradoxes. Death plots offer salvation. The possibilities of self-fashioning can lead to self-destruction. Bodies are troped as prisons, but only through the body can women discover pleasures "tendered only to one." Ironies multiply and profundity emerges through a staged disingenuousness. Romana Huk contextualizes Smith's undecidability within postmodernism and describes her tactics as those which dramatize "the impossibility of speaking from any essential selfhood--or, at the very least, of doing so without interruption" (263). She adds that "Smith's texts, rather than overturning dominant perspectives from the purview of a stable counterperspective or moral imperative, disrupt without redefining. . ." (248). There is, therefore, no necessary reconstruction after Smith's deconstructions.

Admittedly, this kind of persistent openness vexes the attempt to conclude a study of Smith, but it also allows for pleasure; her slippery
ability to defy any simple categorization urges us to redefine or sharpen our definition and approach to poetry, and it invites us to return to the poems, charting the differences between Smith and other poets, between men and women and between women themselves. The poems do not progress in a linear fashion and they do not work toward some summit of truth. They neither foreshadow nor look backward; their glance, like the eyes of the woman on the cover of the *Collected Poems*, is always sideways.

This lateral movement across the poems and across the pages of the poems reveals another important component in Smith's work--the inescapable presence of her drawings. Huk discovers in them a kind of window for understanding Smith in that they "counterpoint any and all emergent statements produced in her poems... Her extradiscursive 'codas' often contradict or explode the words and/or traditional tone of the forms they accompany" (247). They serve as perhaps Smith's most playful and subversive "construction site," the place where we literally see, that is, get a visual representation of, the carnivalesque banter of traditions, languages, and cultural scripts that reverberate in her work. Whereas multivocality challenges the notion of a fixed, female essence on the linguistic register, with the drawings Smith adds another dimension to this critique, one Michel Foucault would characterize as infinite:

the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where
they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by our eyes
but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. (9)

Similarly, with Smith's drawings, the words of the poem do not simply tell
the story of the pictures; nor do the drawings merely illustrate the text.
The drawings, as we have seen, supply yet another marker in the play of
difference. The hats in chapter three, for instance, contradict the text of
the poems in order to expose the gap between vestimentary sign and gender
identity. The various textual and visual chapeaux allow Smith to challenge
any superficial readings of women and to call into question the power to
reinvent oneself. Her characters "wear different hats," as it were, to
underscore the importance for women to be able to occupy different
subject-positions. The sketched bodies in chapter four also comment in
concert with the poems, glossing the emaciated desires of "This
Englishwoman" or exposing the futility of escaping domestic entrapment in
the image of a woman's bound ankles in "Lightly Bound."

Of course, part of the difficulty in pinning Smith down, of
apprehending the "infinite" relation between text and drawing, stems from
the fact that she never took a clear stand on the value of the drawings
herself. She once admitted to Kay Dick that "the drawings don't really
have anything to do with the poems" (Dick 70). She kept them in what she
called a "playbox" along with income tax and investment materials.
Nevertheless when her volume Harold's Leap sold poorly, her new
publisher agreed to bring out Not Waving But Drowning only on the
condition that she omit the drawings entirely. She refused, writing to her
friend Naomi Replansky that "now I feel the drawings are so much a part
of the verses that they must be published with them. . . . Chatto thought
the drawings were too comical, but then so often are the poems, and the drawings I think are not only comical" (Me Again 298).

And neither is she. Chatto's admonition attempts to contain the writer straying too far from the kind of poetry Auden admired in the young Adrienne Rich: "the poems... are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs" (qtd. in Gelpi 126-27). Compared to this "model student" image of the poet, Smith seems like the bad kid at the back of the classroom scribbling funny pictures of her teacher in the margins of her notebook. In this sense, the drawings serve as another manifestation of her reluctance to conform to the narrow expectations of the woman poet. Their placement on the page enacts a kind of theatricality, not only a potential upstaging of the poet's "quiet but not mumbling" text but also the active dramatization of more "writing." They represent the excessive markings of a woman's hand, a different kind of physical movement across the page than writing, one bound not by line length, rhyme, or scansion, but only by the edge of the paper. In them we see the woman's hand adding an additional kind of pleasure to the act of creating. As "characters" on the page, they reflect the character of her poems, and the character of the poet.

As such, this underlying subversion of the "serious" counteracts those critics who would contain her as merely "comic." In combination with her childishness, flippancy, and humor, the drawings are a kind of tease that sends her over the top for many readers as one whose poetry can only be best described, in Martin Pumphrey's words, as "uncomfortable."
Yet Pumphrey's take on the non-serious in Smith is crucial in understanding her drawings:

Quite evidently her teasing segregates her readers into those who opt for the simple stability of the notion that "this is play" (and therefore need not be investigated) and those who pursue the ramifications of the challenge her teasing presents.

If . . . the reader pursues the destabilizing effects of the question "Is this play?" then he/she is forced to consider the nature of the complicity the poems invite and to recognize the ambivalent, carnivalesque quality of their laughter that is at once challenging, self-mocking, and subversive. From this perspective, it becomes evident that Smith juxtaposed the (private/secret) world of play and magical possibility with the (public) known world of the conventionally Real in order to contest cultural forms and assumptions.

And the drawings are one way of underscoring this disjuncture between the "known," the "legitimate" and the "appropriate" in poetry and something that occupies the space traditionally associated with the feminine—a private/secret "play" world that, refusing containment, invites our complicity and demands our attention. Always for Smith, the play is the thing. Her work urges us to deconstruct the notion of "serious" poetry and take in more with our eyes than the words on the page.

In order to account for the anomaly the sketches produce, critics compare Smith to poets like William Blake. In a quick list of surface similarities, Janice Thaddeus finds that Smith, like Blake, "writes parables, redefines Christianity, addresses animals, sees angels, uses simple language and illustrates her poetry, but in all essentials she and Blake are significantly different" (84). Indeed. Smith read Blake and, in a review, admired the fact that, like herself, "Blake was full of contradictions" (qtd. in Barbera 151), but the critical move to align the two poets grasps more at
the straws of their drawings than it illuminates Smith or her influence. Poems like "Little Boy Sick" which begins "I am not God's little lamb / I am God's sick tiger" echoes Blake, and, as Francis Spalding argues, "there are many reasons why Blake would have appealed to Stevie [including] his use of parody and the rhythms of speech; his creation of many voices and his ability to unsettle meaning, his concentrated intensity, tautness and use of compressed syntax" (59). He operates as an influence on Smith like her other self-confessed mentors Byron, Tennyson and Browning, but these kinds of connections do not indicate the difficulty critics have in assigning value to Smith's tone and scale. Her influence is nowhere as strong as the canonical Romantics'. Yet, I do not feel comfortable in assigning terms like "lesser" or "greater." Instead, comparisons with poets like Blake should serve to shed light on the difference of Smith's project and to provide a kind of vantage point or leverage which allows the reader to avoiding hyperbolizing Smith as well as trivializing her.

Her sketches bear more similarity to those of James Thurber, and again we can make certain connections, bearing in mind the disadvantages of writing on humorous artists that Robert E. Morsberger outlines in his work on Thurber:

[The critic] must make his subject convincingly significant; but if he overstresses the serious side, he may make him appear ponderous or pretentious. . . .

Some academic readers insist that an author be reduced to a single thesis, but such an approach can lead to rigid oversimplification. Few artists are so consistent or so confined, and criticism can be more challenging when it examines the complex variations of artistic perception and performance. (7)
In terms of artistic performance, both artists drew compulsively, and in both cases their sketches could be described as "depend[ing] on a simple, animated line to express something about the enclosure of modern life" (Gopnik 175). The drawing attached to "Ceux qui luttent" (154; fig. 15), for instance, seems especially Thurberesque, deflating a weighty French proverb ("those who struggle are those who live") with a simple street scene. Robert Emmet Long's description of the relationship between Thurber and his cartoons could apply as well to Smith. They reveal her "spontaneity and high spirits, [her] gift for evoking laughter, as well as something almost sinister, in the conceptions... struck off with such rapidity" (23). However, one of the most "sinister" elements in Thurber's work is his depiction of women. His drawings include an array of feminine types transformed into the grotesque. The menacing wife stalking her little, hounded husband, the fat, manic woman careening helplessly out of control in a parody of grace on an ice rink, and the chinless love object admired by a man with an egg-shaped head are a few examples of the middle-class caricatures that typify Thurber's style. Smith's women, on the other hand, rarely turn into caricatures or the grotesque, and if so, only with an attending irony. A menacing wife in Smith's poems, for instance, would seem morally justified in stalking a husband like Rapunzel's prince in "The Afterthought." Smith's sketched women, as we saw in "This Englishwoman" for example, refuse any totalizing embodiment of "Englishness," or gendered class stature.

A comparison of Smith and Thurber, in fact, works in the opposite direction of Smith and Blake. Critics read Thurber as either merely a "New Yorker wit" or as the "preeminent humorist and satirist of his age"
(Long 1), but Smith's work seems more capacious and more conducive to a study informed beyond thematic concerns or binary themes. As Francis Spalding writes:

> Her humour not only contributed to the comic achievement of her work but brought out its philosophic content. For the anarchy of her humour runs deep, making comparisons with James Thurber or Ogden Nash wholly unsatisfactory. Thurber's humour, for Stevie, had merely 'the blunt fun of the comic picture postcard, slightly upgraded'" (167)

Although Smith "wore the mask of comedy, the mouth of the face beneath gasped with a Munchian scream." Unlike Thurber, she "suffered the arrogance of male privilege [and] the drudgery of thirty years secretarial work that drove her to attempt suicide. . . " (Spalding 1). Sexual difference, therefore, steered their lives in different directions and allows for different readings of their work.

Dorothy Parker's description of Thurber's drawings provides another useful contrast. Although Thurber's people "have the outer semblance of unbaked cookies," she admits, "there is about all these characters, even the angry ones, a touching quality. They expect so little of life; they remember the old discouragements and await the new" (qtd. in Morsberger 161). Smith's people, on the other hand, have for the most part a decidedly different quality, one I would call defiant. Although they are fleshed out in simple lines with little shading or cross-hatching to provide solidity, they claim a vigorous life of their own. The sprightly figures with "Intimation of Immortality," for instance, dance in the face of death even as they allude again to the Romantic influence on Smith (33; fig. 16). To "Thoughts about the Person from Porlock" she adds posturing
figures, much like herself, as seemingly invested in their own particular stances as in the content of the poems with which they are in some way associated (385; fig. 17). In both instances, the allusion to the Romantic tradition cannot be overlooked. The sketches reveal the anxiety of influence taken on by someone who smiles and refuses to play the game. They confirm that Smith has done her homework, read the canon, and used her precursors to punctuate her difference. In "Thoughts About the Person from Porlock," for instance, she insinuates herself in the story of "Kubla Khan." Not only does she yoke her drawing to Coleridge in the poem, providing a new textual resonance to the old canonical work, but she describes the person who interrupted Coleridge in his composition as someone who "had a cat named Flo." Recall that the drowning tigress who stands as a figure for Pompey at the end of Novel on Yellow Paper is also named Flo. The parallel between the two cats allows Smith to write herself into Coleridge's poem as an interrupting and interventionary agent in the canon.

However, "Not Waving But Drowning" (303; fig. 18) provides a corrective to the idea that Smith's poetic project is solely about claiming a place in the canon. The poem describes the dangers of difference but it also urges the reader to consider the values of difference, too. The sketch with the poem serves as a kind of test, as if Pompey's voice which admonished the reader in Novel on Yellow Paper to "work it out for yourself" (9), still waits in the wings, cueing us to be careful, to read closely. Line one establishes the sex of the drowned figure: "Nobody heard him, the dead man," and in line five he is called "Poor chap," even though the drawing is of a woman. We do not have to read the figure as a
woman; in fact, to ascribe femaleness to a figure with long hair is to buy into the "false girl-form" Smith condemns in "La Speakerine de Putney." But if the person is coded as female, then she can be read as a siren figure luring listeners into deeper waters, out of their depth. Smith's feet, however, are firmly planted on the shore. Though she, too, "loves larking," her challenge is always not to venture "too far out" where "larking" is dismissed and where her poems remain unheard. "Not Waving" is Smith's revenge poem; the figure is drowning but she is not.

And is the figure really drowning? Although the title bespeaks a dreadful fate for those outside systems that establish identity, the drawing shows someone not drowning at all but staring smugly at the dry and callous misreaders who remark too dismissively, "And now he's dead." The poem stands as a kind of analogy for the drawings in all of Smith's poems. Nobody may "hear" them but they continue to speak, almost "too far out" from the body of the text, but not quite. As extradiscursive components, they dramatize multiplicity, the play within language, and the possibilities of deconstructing meaning so that there are always meanings thrashing about in the sea of textuality.

In an even more graphic form, the sketch of "Croft" (195; fig. 19) literally fleshes out the indeterminacy of gender. The text of the poem reads simply

Aloft,  
In the loft,  
Sits Croft;  
He is soft.

but "he" is in a dress. This poem appears in the volume titled Mother, What is Man?, and it certainly confounds the question. Although Barbera
argues that Croft is not a transvestite, he falls into a humanist trap that recuperates the drawing as one that "does represent his spirit, if not his gender" (235). It would be more accurate to say that the feminine external appearance denotes Croft's gender identification. Croft may not be a cross-dresser per se, but the drawing enacts what Marjorie Garber calls the transvestite effect; underscoring the constructedness of gender categories, the transvestite "signifies the undecidability of signification" (Garber 37) in much the same way as the man in "Not Waving But Drowning" does. Croft recalls as well the dance scene in Over the Frontier in which feminine attire signifies Pompey's vulnerability. Clothes do not reflect a stable gender identity in this poem any more than they did in Over the Frontier. In the "mirror scene" of the novel, Pompey feels at odds with her reflection in the male military uniform that Tom forces her to wear. He assigns her the uniform to effect a permanent, internal transformation in her, but it does not. The phrase "clothes make the man" applies to Smith's work only insofar as "man" is not a fixed, essential category but a social space one can fill or, in the case of Croft, disavow. Furthermore, the drawing suggests the degree to which cross-dressing produces anxieties about the possibility that identities are not fixed, that there is no underlying, stable "self." The transgressive Croft is tightly framed and contained within the pictorial space and appears hunched and claustrophobic with only one tiny, barred window as access into the world. Without the sketch, the poem's spare simplicity would fall flat, but the addition of the drawing completes the poem, dramatizing the tension between gender identity and appearance.
In contrast to the dissonance "Not Waving" and "Croft" create, Smith also includes drawings that exaggerate gender codes ultimately to expose their construction. These are the drawings Rosa and Lottie of Novel on Yellow Paper might have created, but without the irony. Many drawings in the sketchbook, for instance, unveil the traditional construction of women's desires as skewed. One caption reads "Love is everything. One looks for it" (fig. 20). If the reader holds the book upright, the drawing either seems sideways or assumes the posture of sleep or death. If the book is turned so that the drawing appears upright, then the woman is glancing down at her own body, not directing her gaze and desire outward to someone who might supply love. The words, read in this way, seem to drip down the page. Another caption assures the reader that "These girls are full of love" (fig. 21), but the drawings depict Rapunzel from "The After-thought" on the left with a face more twisted and grimacing than the one with the poem and, on the right, the girl from "Valuable" who produces "illegitimate babies" because "nobody teaches anybody they are valuable nowadays" (447).

"Conviction (iv)" appears to make another claim for love:

I like to get off with people,
I like to lie in their arms,
I like to be held and tightly kissed,
Safe from all alarms.

I like to laugh and be happy
With a beautiful beautiful kiss,
I tell you, in all the world
There is no bliss like this. (179; fig. 22)

However, the strength of the speaker's conviction is dramatically undercuts by the drawing which renders the implicit passivity of the first stanza a
dangerous thing. What exactly is going on in this far from Edenic, pastoral scene? It is unclear whether a woman is being raped or a couple is, with mutual consent, "getting off." The sharp lines of the grass, flowers, and woman's hair suggests the violence of the wild, as does that odd, looming beast, either a watchdog keeping them "safe from all alarms" or an emblem of lust that mocks the innocence of a simple, "beautiful kiss" (Barbera and McBrien 198). Either way, the drawing reinforces Christopher Ricks' assessment of Smith's work as "mock innocent"; it requires us to reconsider the last line of the poem. It isn't that no bliss can compare to the one the speaker praises, but rather there simply is no bliss at all. The real conviction of the poem seems to deny the possibility of the safety, beauty, and happiness she desires.

In "Le Désert de l'Amour" (120; fig. 23), as another example, the woman plays the coquette as she parodies romantic enthralldom: "I want to be your pinkie / I am tender to you / My heart opens like a cactus flower / Do you thinky I will do?" This poem appears in Tender Only to One and as the title poem of the volume ensures, women in Smith's poetry are "tender" only to themselves, so "pinkie's" vow of tenderness is already suspect. The drawing depicts a woman geared for the desert in a pith helmet much like the one Pompey wore in Over the Frontier to signify her unwillingness to conform to appropriate attire. In the sketch, the helmet is perfectly appropriate, but the body beneath it signifies in excess conformity to societal constructs of femininity. The long eyelashes, bejeweled neckline, large breasts and tiny waist hyperbolize the feminine ideal, and should the reader miss the point, Smith places two large, pointy pyramids in the background to mirror "pinkie's" breasts. Notice, too, how the
buttons on the man's shirt pockets look like eyes staring at the woman's chest. Only in the "desert of love" would women want to be called a "pinky," compare themselves to flowers (a comparison Smith hates as her review of the Femina Anthology of Poetry makes clear), or hope that they will "do" for the man's gaze. The drawing ironizes the woman's desire in the same way that the drawing with "My Hat" parodies the mother's efforts to construct her daughter as attractive and marriageable. In each case, the women end up in desert islands or deserts, one free from the "right sort of chap" and one not.

The image of the desert also points toward one of the most traditional and damning constructions of the feminine--association of women and nature. In "The Castle" (228; fig. 24), Smith uses the sketch of a woman surrounded by flowers to problematize this conflation. The speaker of the poem describes in simple terms her life in the castle, presumably the stuff fairy tale fantasies are made of: "I married the Earl of Egremont" and "We had two boys, twins." She calls it a "romantic time" though she admits that she only sees her husband in their bed at night, never by day. As the poem progresses, however, the fantasy becomes imprisoning as so many fairy tales in Smith's work do. Around the "ramshackle castle" the "hollyhocks grow tall," and the children are kept in the dark about their paternity, certainly a legal fiction for them at best: "My children never saw their father / Do not know, / He sleeps in my arms each night / Till cockcrow." The poem concludes with the woman's incarcerated desire: "Oh I love the ramshackle castle, / And the turret room / Where our sons were born." Like Jane in "Maximilian Esterhazy," the speaker identifies with the castle as a "furnished dwelling of felicity."
The drawing, on the one hand, naturalizes the woman's fantasy, and indeed fantasy may be all the poem is about since by the end it seems improbable that the Earl exists. The woman stands "underneath the wall" surrounded by the hollyhocks and wearing similar flowers on her dress. She seems to merge with the encroaching natural images around her. However, it is this same surrounding "nature" that bars her from the castle, the two separated by a tall wall. Her hands seem pinned to her skirt as she stands passively waiting, perhaps for the Earl who never appears "by day."

On the other hand, her sidelong glance suggests another way to read the drawing. She is not looking to the castle at all, but at another place, somewhere outside the circumscribed world of marriage and babies. The flowers can be read as providing a kind of camouflage for her from the confines of domesticity. Smith often figures nature as a site of escape for women such as in "Deeply Morbid" and "The Lady of the Well Spring" for example. Read in this way, the poem resembles a rehearsed or parroted fantasy spoken by a girl who really is looking elsewhere, identifying not at all with the castle but with a rampant, Bacchic alternative. This reading of the poem is further supported by examples such as the sketch in Some Are More Human Than Others (fig. 25) in which "Athalie and Hypatia chose to be lost." They, too, are subsumed by the natural world, but they resist the conflation of women and nature in both their boyish attire and their act of choosing, that "grand old burn-your-boats phrase" that Pompey praises so highly in Novel on Yellow Paper. Their clasped hands near the center of the frame further suggest a same sex desire that is decidedly "contra naturam."
Indeed, escaping domesticity is a theme that pervades Smith's work since the early novels. By elaborating on the theme in the drawings, Smith gains a new kind of leverage. The textual descriptions of domesticity she exposes in the Fictions for Married Women in *Novel on Yellow Paper* give way to the visual register on which she can paint the same kind of surface appeal and expose its underlying cracks as well. As early as her first volume, Smith sketches out "the idea these funny asses have of matrimony," to put it in Pompey's words (*NYP* 150). "All Things Pass" (55; fig. 26) reads like an epitaph: "All things pass / Love and mankind is grass."

Bruce K. Martin reads the ungrammaticality of the epigram as Smith's "insistent linking of love with life," two terms which might not otherwise mix too well (130). "Love" and "mankind" operate as a kind of collective noun equated with grass; both can be mowed down. But perhaps "Love" belongs with the first line; all things pass it by, and "mankind" is a grassy, undifferentiated mass unable to seize upon love. Oddly, Sternlicht calls this the most charming page in *A Good Time Was Had By All*, but a closer look at the sketch reveals a picture not so much charming as bleak. The curtains are drawn apart to suggest a world of possibility for the couple, but locked in a stiff and unpassionate embrace, they appear doubly trapped in the claustrophobically decorated room against the dark windowpanes, and in traditional gender roles. The kneeling man seems in control as he assumes the stereotypical posture of proposing marriage, and the woman's body blends into the couch, suggesting rootedness and effacement. The drawing reinforces the title by implying that this romantic cliché of a moment is very transitory; love's passing may be more welcome than the title would have us think.
In her next volume, Smith continues in this vein with "The Murderer" (117; fig. 13) whose drawing would, without knowledge of the title, seem on the surface like another ideal home scene complete with a decorated mantel and a roaring fireplace. The pet parrot, in place of the traditional dog at his master's feet, is our first clue that something is not quite right, that the scene chatters and repeats something with no substance. A man embraces a woman on a chaise lounge beneath a window with pretty dotted curtains. The woman's open-mouthed expression could merely signify romantic thralldom until we read the text which, in the first line, makes clear that the gaping mouth has drawn its last breath. She lies in the arms of her killer who informs the reader as coldly as the speaker of Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" that he has had to do her in, or, according to his euphemism, "we had an accident." She is killed because "She was not like other girls--rather diffident." The word "diffident" also implies its cognate "different," and in fact it is the woman's difference from other women, her singularity outside the economy of domesticity, that marks her for death in the poem. The home scene in the sketch mirrors many, including the one Browning initially describes in "Porphyria," but the drawing depicts the painful disjuncture between fantasy and reality for women, especially for those who dare to differ.

And for those women, like the mother of "The Queen and the Young Princess," who urge conformity, Smith, of course, takes the opposite stance. Although parents warn the children not to "paddle too deeply" in "Advice to Young Children" (174; fig. 27), it is the mother who is indicted as "awful" and "aging" in the drawing. The children ignore her effort to control, but she is subsumed in the term "couple" and trapped in the
pictorial space. Directly over the mother's head, Smith draws the sun casting the fierce light of blame on she "whose heart the years had turned to rubble." The father crouches over the back of her chair, looking as though he is about to pull it out from under her. All of the family members gaze at her and the tide jags toward her sharply. She is almost as confined pictorially as the ankle-bound mother in "Lightly Bound." As Pumphrey says about maternal influence in Smith's work, "it is mothers, aunts, and governesses, not fathers, who try to convince daughters to 'follow the path of female duty'" (103). Although the mother's speech is not specifically directed toward a daughter, the admonition that "'Children who paddle where the ocean bed shelves steeply / Must take great care they do not, / Paddle too deeply''" sounds like the all too familiar "pseudo-masculine buck" Pompey despises in the male "Lady Novelist" who writes "'girlies' papers" for women with no capacity for the deep.

Mirroring the tight pictorial space is the rhyme of the poem. All of the couplets conclude in end rhyme except for the first, which is broken into three lines. Significantly, line two interrupts the rhymes of "steeply" and "deeply" with the phrase "do not." "Do not" stands as perhaps Smith's most persistent warning not only to the children of the poem but to her readers--do not hesitate to ruin the formal neatness of three tidy, rhyming couplets; do not fear breaking up the surface of language with paradox, or contradiction; do not leave the poem unattended, untouched, or unsettled by a "doodle" or two on the edge of the page. These admonitions are easier said than done, but Smith's distinctive skill makes them appear easy. The drawings, in their apparent simplicity, require us to redefine the terms with which to evaluate Smith. "Poetry," for her, "does not like to be up to
date, she refuses to be neat" (MA 10). It is this persistent messiness, in the form of another refusal, that calls us back to the construction sites of her work.

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In his reflections on poetry and the novel, C.K. Williams defines what he calls an "elemental pleasure" of poetry:

The potential reader, then, will often be off-balance in intuiting how to approach a poem. . . . For the experienced reader, though, this sense of disorientation, of surprise, is one of the primary expectations of reading poetry. To be confronted, shocked, to understand that a poem might demand a revision of one's notion not only of the poem one is reading, but of poetry itself, becomes an elemental pleasure. (21)

Smith's poetry, and novels for that matter, serve up this kind of disorienting pleasure nowhere more clearly than in their treatment of the construction of gender. To return to the geographical metaphors with which I opened this chapter, intrinsic to Smith's project is a preoccupation with the issue of place. For Diana Fuss, a similar interest in location, particularly in the problem of where men stand in relation to feminism, offers a way to negotiate "the essentialist dilemma" (28). She argues that what is essential to social constructionism is the idea of the subject occupying a particular subject-position. Because it allows for varying perspectives, this idea of location de-essentializes any essential claims to the singularity of Woman. Differences in ethnicity, sexuality, race,
nationality, class and culture construct and reconstruct subjectivities which may, at times, find it useful to deploy either essentialist or anti-essentialist positions for their purposes.¹

Similarly, the idea of place is crucial to Smith's largely anti-essentialist position. Recurring tropes of home and frontiers figure prominently in her work. In Novel on Yellow Paper Pompey flees from her home and the suburbs, places in which she locates domestication, compulsory heterosexuality, and rigid gender roles. In Over the Frontier Smith grafts gender onto the division of homefront and warfront to show how each location is infected by the other's oppressive ideologies. She tropes the frontier as the outer limits of traditional gender roles and then goes on to disclose how the "lust for power" (271) is inescapable in any subject-position. The poems underscore the value of mobility through disavowals of home and domestic scenes as well. The "Wretched Woman," for instance, is trapped in her kitchen, but the daughter of "My Hat" finds freedom on a deserted island. Similar locales remote from "civilization"--fairy worlds, the sea, forests--serve as frequent destinations for her self-constructing heroines, but just as often she casts them in an imaginary, illusory light which undercuts their practicality and viability.

Perhaps the prime site for recuperating essentialism in Smith's work, as in feminist debates, is the body. Within the framework of feminist theory the constructionist "zeal to jettison the body" clashes head on with the essentialist claim that the body is the fundamental site for political activism (Schor xi). Smith aligns herself more closely with the former position. She tropes the female body as a prison, and in order to escape

¹Fuss cites an example of deploying a provisional essentialist stance Gayatri Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (31-32).
essentialist definitions associated with those bodies, she imagines physical transformations that wrench women from their bodies and into animal or spiritual forms. Yet her commitment to challenging the culturally determined gender roles that map the feminine onto femaleness does not prevent her from taking an essentialist stance in poetic performances. Playing the "poetess," she mimes femininity with her own body in order to denaturalize it, to expose it as a performance she can adopt or reject at will.

Smith's poetry envisions a kind of utopian gender playground where anyone can choose or discard a gender identity, but despite her playfulness, she always keeps the impossibility of this fantasy in the foreground. Like everyone else who enters the debate, she is neither purely constructionist or essentialist. She was not a self-proclaimed feminist, but like many feminists she was committed to change, and she would agree with Naomi Schor that "the issue of biological fixism is a red herring; what really matters is what the best strategy is for bringing about change" (xvi). To use another metaphor of location, we have to forge the most useful path between the theoretical purity of the constructionist position and the political utility of essentialist claims that "women" are oppressed as a sex. To paraphrase Smith's words from Novel on Yellow Paper, what really matters is finding "your own place to go to" regardless of what influences construct you (183). As she says, "in this world of catch-as-catch-can we are so often being in the place that is certainly not our place at all, and so being unhappy." That her work does not offer a privileged site free from gender trouble, that she does not resolve the debate, may be her greatest value. The complexity of the novels and poetry points to answers, raises
more questions, and ultimately urges, indeed *requires* you to "work it out for yourself."
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Appendix

Figure 1

The Hat
Figure 2
Figure 3
Figure 7
Figure 9
Figure 11
Figure 13
Figure 15
Figure 17
Croft

Aloft,
In the loft,
Sits Croft;
He is soft.
Love is everything.
One looks for it.
These girls are full of love.
Figure 22
Figure 24
Athalée and Hypatia chose to be lost.
Figure 27