

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: The Listening Cure: Theorizing Gender Fluid Performance through Katharine Hepburn's Transatlantic Accent

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Jon Lewis

My mother named me after Hollywood icon Katharine Hepburn, but what made a working-class girl grow to love this posh celebrity so much? The obvious answer is that my mother aspired to be posh herself; but lack of money or sophistication were not the only things impacting her potential— there was also gender. The voices in my mother's home and school told her to be a woman, to do the things society expected of a woman, and leave the rest to men. In my estimation, though, Katharine Hepburn was the one voice that subverted these socially constructed imperatives. My thesis emphasizes the importance of voice in gender performance by conducting close-listenings of *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor, 1935) and *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor, 1940) in order to better understand how Hepburn's Transatlantic accent contributes to the gender fluid persona that drew my mother's attention and affection.

While many look to Hepburn's progressive fashion sensibilities as evidence of her non-traditional gender performance, consideration of her "fake" accent is often dismissed simply as a marker of her upper-class status. However, I argue that Hepburn's voice is equally important as her appearance in terms of defying a classically feminine persona, and ask instead how the classist, historic, and psychoanalytic underpinnings of the geographically ambiguous Transatlantic track with its gender fluid implications. The films I examine represent two periods of Hepburn's career. Although her star image shifted slightly after being labeled "box office poison" in 1938, attention to her accent reveals a consistent element of fluid gender constitution, and as a style of spoken English used to this day to portray characters outside the realm of binary gender performance.

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The Listening Cure:
Theorizing Gender Fluid Performance through Katharine Hepburn's Transatlantic Accent

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Katherine Dawson

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Katherine Dawson, Author

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DEDICATION

For my mother, who named me.

INTRODUCTION

My mother did not grow up in a posh house. Her immigrant father worked nine-to-five at a valve-making factory, her mother stayed at home, and she and her three siblings ate pasta with red sauce — a cheap but filling meal— most every night. When the family finally got a television set, her evenings were also filled with the glow of classic movies revived for network broadcasts. Somewhere along the way, she became enamored with the early work of famously posh Katharine Hepburn, an actor already 30 plus years into a career most women couldn't hope to maintain past age 30.¹ Eventually, my mother gave Hepburn's first name to me. At least, this is what she tells me, despite the difference in spelling.

My namesake, aside from her inimitable career, is perhaps best remembered for her androgynous fashion sensibility and her nasally Transatlantic accent. The latter, however, will be the focus of this work. Though it has also been known as the “Mid-Atlantic” accent (among other monikers to be further discussed), I prefer the term “Transatlantic” because I find that the prefix “trans” appropriately mirrors my imagining of this vocal aesthetic as one which allows a speaker the ability to transition through a range of gendered positionalities— and also to avoid any confusion with the sociolinguistic usage of “Mid-Atlantic,” which refers to the dialect currently spoken in the Mid-Atlantic U.S. states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland. By whichever name, though, the accent is, as Kevin Drum of *Mother Jones* called it, “that old timey movie accent” common to characters of the upper-crust: a manicured speech somewhere between British and American English that has, since the middle of the 20th century, fallen greatly out of favor. Drum says as much in a 2011 commentary, where he admits that the

¹ The word “actor” rather than “actress” is used throughout this work in solidarity with the movement of most contemporary performers towards a gender-neutral professional title.

Transatlantic accent makes many films of the '30s and '40s, for him, simply “unwatchable.”²

Four years later, James Fallow published a piece in *The Atlantic* called “That Weirdo Announcer-Voice Accent: Where It Came From and Why It Went Away.” In the article, Fallows refers to former University of Pennsylvania linguist William Labov, frequently cited in reference to research on the Transatlantic, who indeed identified the accent with posh Americans of the Northeast, and furthermore notes its declining popularity as early as World War II.³

As a girl born well after World War II, neither wealthy nor from the Northeastern United States, why was a “posh” voice like Katharine Hepburn’s so appealing to my young mother? How could she listen to Hepburn’s voice and hear anything but an erudite affectation that in no way reflected her reality? The obvious answer is that she aspired to be posh herself. After all, most films of studio-era Hollywood were marketed with aspirationalism in mind. On the heels of the Great Depression, studios quickly learned that audiences craved lavish depictions of the American dream: genre films of the rags-to-riches variety, or romantic comedies set in the lives of the “idle rich.”⁴ Even a generation later, for working-class kids watching the ‘ABC Sunday Night Movie,’ the craving likely remained. But in the case of my mother, the aspirational appeal of Katharine Hepburn was not as simple as glamorous high-living. A lack of money or sophistication was not the only thing impacting her lifestyle and opportunities—there was also gender. There were things my mother wanted from life that simply wouldn’t be available to her as a woman.

² Kevin Drum, “Oh, That Old-Timey Movie Accent!” *Mother Jones*, motherjones.com, August 9, 2011.

³ James Fallows, “That Weirdo Announcer-Voice Accent: Where It Came from and Why It Went Away,” *The Atlantic*, theatlantic.com, June 7, 2015.

⁴ As Jon Lewis explains in *American Film: A History*, genre films such as the “gangster film” and romantic comedy flourished in studio Hollywood following the Great Depression, as financially suffering American audiences were eager to distract themselves with “the petty problems” of the “idle rich” (92).

Despite being born at the kick-off of 1960s radicalism, feminism, and social progress, my mother's upbringing was marked by rigid, gendered expectations. When she wasn't glued to old movies on television, she was a talented and passionate athlete; but her father only had eyes for the sportiness of her brothers. She was determined to go to college; but scholarships granted for athletics were still privileged to male players. Her parents couldn't fathom her desire to attend college anyway, and certainly wouldn't help facilitate it. Her classmates made it clear to her that playing any sports other than cheerleading would raise questions about her sexuality. The recently rolled-out Title IX had made room for my mother's participation in activities previously limited to males, but society at large had yet to expand its mind.⁵

The voices in my mother's home and school told her to be a woman, to do the things society expected of a woman: get married and leave the rest to men. In my estimation, though, Katharine Hepburn was the one voice that subverted these socially constructed imperatives. Her unique voice, marked by the Transatlantic accent, while more obviously aspirational in its glamorization of all things moneyed, is also aspirational in its ability to float the speaker between masculine and feminine positionalities. However, in seeking support of this theory, it has been easier to find critical analysis of Hepburn's appearance than of her sound. Although her star image is widely held as one representative of feminism, queerness, and independent womanhood, there is little in the way of describing how aesthetic qualities of voice, namely accent, may contribute to her maintenance of a variable gender performance that brings those positionalities together in one fluid, yet unified space.

⁵ According to the U.S. Department of Education, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 states that "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

To examine the gender fluid qualities of Hepburn's Transatlantic accent, I propose close-listenings of two films which operate as useful foils: *Sylvia Scarlett* (Cukor, 1935) and *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor, 1940). The goal of this close-listening analysis is not only to highlight the sonic elements of Hepburn's gender performance, but to elevate the feminized domain of voice and listening within film discourse. As feminist film scholar Amy Lawrence observes in her book *Echo & Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema*, "the image is assumed to be the source of enchantment...sound, like Echo, seems to fade away."⁶ By likening the "sound/image hierarchy" of film to the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus, Lawrence effectively makes the case that an increased attention to sound represents an inherently feminist practice, given the dominant obsession with scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, as embodied by Narcissus.⁷ Lawrence summarizes this gendered imbalance of cinematic focus perfectly in saying, "although they are interdependent, the stories of Echo and Narcissus are not fully parallel...it seems Echo [sound] suffers more."⁸ Given Hepburn's own legacy of feminism, it is fitting that this new approach to studying her persona gender fluid should find its roots in practices of feminist film scholarship.

Aside from attempting to right the uneven scale between sound and image in film scholarship, acknowledging the role of sound in Hepburn's cinematic performances is also to acknowledge the methodical practice of studio-era production, which not only intimately

⁶ Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: women's voices in classical Hollywood cinema*, (California University Press, 1991), 1

⁷ Per Ovid's myth of Echo and Narcissus, Echo is said to have been a talkative nymph who plotted to trick the goddess Juno and as a result was cursed to only repeat the words of others, never speaking first herself. Echo then fell in love with Narcissus, but he rejected her. Echo continued to pine for Narcissus, eventually turning to stone, with nothing left but her echoing voice. Narcissus, after rejecting her and many others, is cursed to feel the same longing of the women who have loved him; and so, having caught his reflection in a pool of water, he became enamored and unable to look away. Eventually, Narcissus starved and died where he stood, with Echo nearby repeating his every last word.

⁸ Lawrence, 2

oversaw design of sets, costuming, and lighting, but the training of actors in body and voice. As both *Sylvia Scarlett* and *The Philadelphia Story* were produced within Hollywood's studio system, it is important to consider the original context in which Hepburn's vocal styling was groomed in order to fully appreciate how that voice ultimately translates to audiences, and how it may in fact be understood as subverting the very institutions that may account for its development. While the Transatlantic accent may have been hopefully employed in popular media to disseminate a standard mode of English, the gender queering effects I observe in Hepburn's speech defy a standard, gendered performance in much the same way the accent defies any specific region as its home.

Although *Sylvia Scarlett* and *The Philadelphia Story* were released relatively early in Hepburn's long career, they represent two periods which we might refer to as Before-Box-Office-Poison (BBOP) and After-Box-Office-Poison (ABOP), respectively. These eras surround the notorious 1938 "Box Office Poison" list featured in an article called "Dead Cats" by critic Harry Brandt, which included Katharine Hepburn, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Fred Astaire, and more.⁹ Despite having won her first Academy Award in 1933 for *Morning Glory* (Sherman, 1933), in the years following, Hepburn would be associated with numerous flops, 1935's *Sylvia Scarlett* being perhaps the most egregious among them. Not insignificantly, the film also represents what we may now consider Hepburn's most subversive role to-date, that of the daring, eponymous Sylvia Scarlett who becomes Sylvester Scarlett, and who even shares an onscreen kiss with the unknowing Maudie Tilt (Dennie Moore).

The Philadelphia Story, in contrast, represents one of Hepburn's most successful films, effectively marking Hepburn's safe exhumation from the dangerous waters of "box office

⁹ Harry Brandt, "Dead Cats," *Independent Film Journal*, May 3, 1938.

poison” two years after the list’s 1938 release. As if made as a direct apology for the scandal of *Sylvia Scarlett*, *The Philadelphia Story* offers a plot which seems to work in reverse operation, as leading lady Tracy Lord, played by Hepburn, begins her journey as a woman too much like a man, but eventually submits to the rules of the game, vowing to strive for the feminine qualities she had apparently been lacking.

Hepburn’s performances in these films, as well as her star persona on the whole, have meant different things to different people over time. For feminist film critic Molly Haskell, the Hepburn she had come to know by the publication of her 1974 book, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, was a “superwoman.”¹⁰ By Haskell’s own schema of female character archetypes, the “superwoman” exists in polarity with the “superfemale” as two possible tropes that fall under the larger alternative typologies of the “independent woman.” While the superwoman represents a brand of woman who finds agency in assuming traditionally masculine qualities, the superfemale is “exceedingly ‘feminine’ and flirtatious,” and ultimately uses these traits to affect those around her negatively when she becomes frustrated with the “docile role society has decreed she play.”¹¹

For Haskell’s cultural moment of 1970s second-wave feminism, Hepburn understandably stood out as an icon of gender equality, as her roles so often depicted women with social positions and agency, which, at the time, were still too often limited to men. But looking and *listening* back now to Hepburn’s screen performances during our current moment, where the fight for intersectional feminism and non-binary inclusivity is nigh, it seems clear that Hepburn’s performance of gender is anything but static or even unidirectional in its movement from feminine to masculine. The superwoman and superfemale tropes, however, are useful in

¹⁰ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 1973), 228-230.

¹¹ Haskell, 214

identifying moments of fluidity in Hepburn's vocal performance, as well as more broadly conceptualizing the inverse nature of Hepburn's fluid gender performance across *Sylvia Scarlett* and *The Philadelphia Story*.

Just as Haskell's superwoman finds her independence through a performance of more masculine qualities, so too does Sylvia of *Sylvia Scarlett* ultimately achieve her agency through her transformation to Sylvester. And just as the superfemale exploits her objectification within the patriarchy by being "exceedingly 'feminine' and flirtatious," in order to succeed, so too do we see Tracy Lord frequently exaggerating her "feminine masquerade" for her own advantage, eventually forsaking more masculine qualities in order to save her relationship.¹² More interestingly, in the scope of my research, though, is the way in which Haskell's identification of the superwoman and superfemale tropes relates back to separation by oceanic space. According to Haskell, the superwoman type hails from a legacy of female characters from Anglo literature, such as Shakespeare's cross-dressing Viola of *Twelfth Night*, while the superfemale can be found throughout the novels and plays of continental Europe, such as Emma Bovary or the eponymous Hedda Gabler.¹³

In *Sylvia Scarlett*, Sylvia/Sylvester quite literally makes a journey from continental Europe to England and transforms from an extra-feminine girl to a roguish boy along the way. In *The Philadelphia Story*, Tracy Lord plays the head-of-the-household while her father is away, and demurs to a subservient bride by the end of the film. In this simplest of readings, we can see how unidirectional movement from superfemale to superwoman, and then superwoman to superfemale, defines these roles which carry Hepburn to and from the dangerous waters of "box office poison." The Transatlantic accent, which supports both performances, thus becomes

¹² Haskell, 214

¹³ Haskell, 214

clearer as a raft that might float Hepburn between masculine and feminine poles. Certainly, the warm reception of *The Philadelphia Story* by American audiences is evidence that the socially acceptable movement of Hepburn's characters towards a more feminine persona was felt and celebrated. Still, however useful this basic schema is in understanding *Sylvia Scarlett* and *The Philadelphia Story* as foils, close-listenings rather than close-reading (what is so often only close-looking) can complicate the seemingly unidirectional movements from superfemale to superwoman and vice-versa. Just as the Transatlantic refuses to identify with simply one geographic location, a detailed account of Hepburn's voice illuminates her characters' refusal to ever simply identify with either a masculine or feminine gender positionality.

After all, while *The Philadelphia Story* in its more palatable characterization of a romantic female lead might have officially marked Hepburn safe from the ranks of "box office poison," neither it, nor any other Hepburn film, is without its own subversive characteristics insofar as gender representation is concerned. Indeed, as Hepburn the star has been acknowledged by critics and scholars over the years as projecting an image of feminism, queerness, and gender ambiguity, her screen performances, too, embody these characteristics, perhaps not always in appearance, but constantly through voice: specifically, in the sound of Hepburn's Transatlantic accent, which in its trademark refusal of geographic localization, mirrors a refusal to adhere to any one socially prescribed performance of gender, or any simple transformation from superwoman to superfemale. While *Sylvia Scarlett* and *The Philadelphia Story* can be seen in their simplest forms as stories of women undergoing unidirectional transformations from feminine to masculine and vice-versa, I submit that close-scene analyses which center the practice of listening alongside looking, and alongside an historical and

psychoanalytic understanding of the Transatlantic accent, reveal a more constant state of flux, or fluidity.

If we allow dominance of the visual to persist in cinematic analysis – in other words, if we fail to *listen* as well as look– we risk reducing the dimensionality of expressive communication in a way that specifically favors masculine epistemologies.¹⁴ In much the same way, if we dismiss the Transatlantic accent as a spoken style that solely conveys class status, we risk obscuring its other implications, bypassing the intersection of class and gender that gave Hepburn’s voice its fluid agency. Given these two conditional statements, with their respective emphases on listening and intersectional analysis, the basic methodology of my thesis is as follows: in the first chapter, I establish a mode of listening for gender fluidity that goes beyond the singular element of vocal pitch, which has marked previous studies of women’s voices in film, but which has consequently left Hepburn out of a conversation in which she clearly belongs. By considering “collective elements of speech”—accent—in addition to the physically rooted element of pitch, conflation of gender with purely biological aspects is avoided. To this end, an interrogation of Hepburn’s prestige accent along two major linguistic axes, historic and psychoanalytic, each with respect to gender, precedes and is then read against *Sylvia Scarlett*, which, as discussed, has been chosen strategically to examine Hepburn’s more subversive work leading up to her “box office poison” label.

Having established a mode for listening to Hepburn’s gender performance with a more robust context of the Transatlantic accent within history, psychoanalysis, and *Sylvia Scarlett*, the second chapter of my thesis coincides with the transition into the second chapter of Hepburn’s

¹⁴ As Laura Mulvey theorizes in her seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the “male gaze,” or masculine scopophilia, governs the subjectivity of most dominant cinema, and without attention to the feminized domain of listening, I believe the male gaze threatens to monopolize cinematic theory as well.

career. As such, the historical analysis transitions from one focused on the Transatlantic accent to one focused on Hepburn's own star persona as it was perceived by audiences of her time. What feelings did the first chapter of Hepburn's career stir in critics and moviegoers? How might they have guided Hepburn's transition from awkward, tomboyish heroines to wry, sophisticated socialites and career women? Considering these key questions of change, a close-listening of *The Philadelphia Story* brings into focus those gender constituting acts that stay the same. Although Hepburn's post-box-office-poison career may look different visually and narratively, her posh Transatlantic accent and the privilege that comes with it remains. By analyzing this film with attention to elements of sound, language, and class, I consider how Hepburn manages to keep her fluid persona intact, even if certain compromises were made to save her career.

CHAPTER I: SYLVIA SCARLETT AND OTHER TRANSATLANTIC HISTORIES

“When uncouth articulations have been formed ... the cure will be found to lie in the systematic practice of the individual elements of speech.”
 — Samuel Arthur King, *Graduated Exercises in Articulation* (my emphasis)

As I embark upon this mission to map a fluid gender performance onto Katharine Hepburn’s Transatlantic accent, it is important to keep in mind the other sorts of “maps” drawn thus far in the analysis of gendered voice in the cinema in order to identify where this new route of inquiry may intersect with the old. Although operating at a deficit, attention to voice as a constituting element of gender performance in film is not new, and the theories and models of analysis set forth by scholars in the fields of gender studies, feminist studies, and psychoanalysis are key to my work as both methodological information and inspiration. One text that brings all the aforementioned subjects into focus and so has been crucial to my exploration of voice and gender fluidity is Kaja Silverman’s 1982 book *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Cinema and Psychoanalysis*. In fact, the title of my thesis, “The Listening Cure,” is a play on the expression “the talking cure,” which Silverman uses to describe the psychoanalytic practice of talk therapy specifically within the context of women and voice in classical, dominant American cinema.

For Silverman, “the talking cure,” refers to a familiar scenario of popular “women’s films” of the 1940s, especially, where female characters are coaxed into voicing their internal thoughts by a male character(s).¹⁵ Silverman asserts that this narrative device is one of the three major ways the female voice in cinema is situated within an “exaggeratedly diegetic space.”¹⁶ In

¹⁵ As explained in Lewis’s *American Film: A History*, “women’s films” can be understood as “traditional Hollywood melodramas, films that followed a long-standing genre formula but nonetheless spoke to the realities of women’s lives during wartime.” Notable examples include *Now Voyager* (Rapper, 1942) and *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945) (169).

¹⁶ Silverman, 59

other words, Silverman believes that while the male voice, like the male gaze, exists both as an internal as well as an external organizing structure of dominant cinema, the female voice is effectively buried within the space of the film and ultimately made to represent an interiority that speaks to the female's "linguistic constraint and physical confinement."¹⁷ But Silverman does offer an exception to this three-fold process of diegetic exaggeration in the deep voices of actors including Lauren Bacall, Mae West, and Marlene Dietrich.

In Silverman's analysis, the masculine connotations of the low-pitched voices of these three women serve as a mode of transcendence beyond the feminine, endowing their voices with an "excess" that "confers upon" their bodies a "privileged status vis-a-vis both language and sexuality."¹⁸ I agree with Silverman that these deep female voices allow for movement beyond a rigid, classically feminine persona, however, pitch, measured in Hertz or across the traditional, western eight octave scale, is not the only vocal scaffolding used to traverse the rigid binary of gender in place during the Classical Hollywood era. At a time when myriad new technologies for vocal recording were developing and "voice culture" was so in vogue, a deepening of pitch was not the only "cure" for the female voice; and so, when we consider those voices now, the "cure" for a reductive analysis of vocal gender performance should also consider the performer's accent, or the collection of "individual elements of speech," to borrow a phrase from former Bryn Mawr speech lecturer Samuel Arthur King.¹⁹

By reducing the aural aspect of gender performance to pitch, Silverman more or less buys into a conflation of sex and gender. As will be discussed in the second chapter, Hepburn did at one time attempt to fight against her natural "grain of voice," to speak in deep, "masculine" tone,

¹⁷ Silverman, 59

¹⁸ Silverman, 61

¹⁹ Samuel Arthur King, *Graduated Exercises in Articulation* (Small, Maynard & Company: 1906), ix.

and nearly ruined her voice permanently as a result. Despite having to settle for her natural range of pitch, Hepburn's name is still found alongside Garbo's and Dietrich's in countless articles, papers, books, and lists of female actors who dared to play with masculinity, androgyny, and queerness— and I suspect this common transgression also landed them together in Brandt's '38 “box office poison” catalog. Just because Hepburn fails to make an appearance on Silverman's list does not mean the variable of voice ceases to factor into Hepburn's gender fluid performance. Instead, we must consider how her iconic Transatlantic accent, in its history and its “individual elements of speech,” contribute to her portrayal of female characters who inhabit an array of gender positionalities and thereby escape Silverman's “exaggeratedly diegetic space,” as well as any distinctly feminine or masculine pigeonholes such as Haskell's “superfemale” and “superwoman” typologies.

The Gendered Past of “Good American Speech”

Although the Transatlantic accent is associated with many famous American women (Eleanor Roosevelt, Bette Davis, Jacqueline Kennedy-Onassis, and Katharine Hepburn, to name a few), its genesis and former popularity are nonetheless rooted in patriarchy. A cursory investigation of the accent's history may well obscure this reality by falsely marrying the Transatlantic accent to linguist and voice coach Edith Skinner and her 1942 book *Speak with Distinction*. While much of the recent research surrounding Hepburn's “fake” accent more or less imply that the Transatlantic was born from Skinner's speech manual, such implications are not only anachronistic given that Hepburn and others were speaking with the accent long before 1942, but ignore Skinner's own intellectual genealogy as well as some of the more technical aspects of the Transatlantic's popularity in Classical Hollywood.

To begin untangling the web of masculine influence and technological gender bias that actually brought the Transatlantic to its zenith prior to World War II, we should first expel the notion that Skinner herself is responsible for Hepburn's voice. According to Dan Nosowitz of *Atlas Obscura*, Skinner worked as a voice consultant for Hollywood as early as the 1930s; however, my own cross-referencing of biographies confirms that, despite the eventual impact of her work and pupils (for instance, Hollywood's star vocal coach, Tim Monich), Skinner's activity was mainly confined to the East coast, where she worked as producing director at the Wharf Theatre and then joined the faculty at Carnegie Mellon in 1937, later teaching at Julliard and consulting for Princeton's McCarter Theatre.²⁰ Moreover, there is no recorded interaction between Skinner (or *Speak with Distinction*) and Hepburn. Instead, though it's likely that the seeds of Hepburn's trademark Transatlantic accent were sown in her childhood as a Hartford socialite, her official speech instruction began during her college years at Bryn Mawr (1924-1928) under elocutionist Samuel Arthur King. In her autobiography, Hepburn writes that speech was a course of genuine interest to her and to her parents, who were, in her words, "very voice conscious," and frequently reminded her "that it was more attractive to make an attractive sound."²¹

The high regard Hepburn's parents held for voice was not special. Their interest is rather a confirmation of a wider fascination with "voice culture" during the early 20th century. With sound recording and producing technologies on the rise, more and more people became more and more aware of, and more concerned with, the sound of spoken English. Finally, there were media (radio, phonographs, and eventually, film), that could promote the standardization "Good

²⁰ Edith Warman Skinner Papers, 1902-1981, CTC.1984.01, Curtis Theatre Collection, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System. (digital.library.pitt.edu/)

²¹ Katharine Hepburn, *Me: Stories of my Life*, 71.

American Speech,” as Edith Skinner called it herself.²² As most observe today, the features identified with this vocal aesthetic, now commonly known as the “Transatlantic,” — non-rhoticity, crisply enunciated ‘T’s, and a religious avoidance of diphthongs to name a few — give it the sound of something part British and part American.²³ This confusing neutralization is exactly the point, as the Transatlantic is ultimately the result of an attempt to rid English speakers of regionalization.

Prior to the popularization of the Transatlantic accent through new media, formal, often private, education like Hepburn’s would have been required for one to acquire this Frankenstein’s monster of language, hence its association with all things highfalutin and posh. Just as popular articles such as *The Atlantic’s* “The Rise and Fall of Katharine Hepburn’s Fake Accent” suggest, the prim, vaguely British style of speech most have come to know as the Transatlantic or Mid-Atlantic accent was not adopted naturally by any stage, screen, or radio actors of the early 20th century.²⁴ Indeed, the Transatlantic accent does not find its roots in the organic morphology of any regional speech, but in a concerted effort by rhetoricians and linguists to create a standard, neutralized mode of spoken English. Although Skinner is unique in that her book remains a standard among performers today, she is a lone woman in a long line of prescriptivist, and as contemporary speech professor Dudley Knight has written, elitist, male pedagogues. While studying linguistics at Columbia University, Skinner was the “star pupil” of

²² Other possible monikers for this accent, appearing throughout Skinner’s *Speak with Distinction*, include “Eastern Standard” and “Theatre Standard.”

²³ *Non-rhoticity*, according to *Merriam-Webster.com* (accessed November 2019) can be understood as “an accent or dialect in English in which an /r/ sound is not retained before consonants (as in pronouncing hard and cart) and at the end of a word (as in pronouncing car and far),” while a *diphthong*, to paraphrase Skinner, can be described as a combination of two or more vowel sounds within one syllable, e.g. “hair” (*Speak with Distinction*, 97).

²⁴ The only possible exception to this is the British-American actor Cary Grant, who plays an important role in both *Sylvia Scarlett* and *The Philadelphia Story*, and, consequently, my argument on whole.

Australian phonetician William Tilly, himself a student of Henry Sweet (after whom Shaw modeled *Pygmalion*'s Henry Higgins).²⁵ All three of these “Good Speech” practitioners, as well as those in between, such as Samuel Arthur King, were concerned with collecting and combining the best, most elegant and aurally appealing features of spoken English in order to create an accent, a “vocal aesthetic,” as I’ve come to think of it, that would elevate the language and its speakers altogether. While it’s likely that Henry Sweet’s work, which is in many ways responsible for modern British Received Pronunciation, is quite different from Skinner’s, it’s still difficult to say where or when the basic style of the Transatlantic accent as we know it today came to be.

The difficulty of pinpointing the exact moment in which the Transatlantic is born is deeply ironic because it simply confirms the fact of language’s inherently evolving nature, despite various attempts throughout history to make it static and universal. While further research will hopefully yield a more detailed evolution, what can be said is that the Transatlantic accent is representative of an influential rhetorical paradigm of Western patriarchy. Not only are the founders of the essential philology behind the accent male, but as a prestige accent of old, the accent is first and foremost associated with wealthy, educated members of society, and then with actors, each of which were groups largely comprised of males before (and after, in many cases) the late 19th century. Women, when they were allowed to study speech, were also members of the upper class, and studied “Good Speech” largely as a part of their edification as ladies who would require proper social charms in order to attract and acquire a husband.

For many years, skills such as diction, elocution, and declamation were being taught at American schools for the elite in an effort to breed respected members of the community who

²⁵ Mike Boehm, “In the Cause of Freer Speech,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 2000.

would model the speech to others. And as with most any education practice stemming from Western rhetorical traditions, the ideal student of such lessons would be male. If there is any doubt about the originally assumed subject for elocutionary perfection, we might consider the language of George Vanderhoff's 1845 textbook "A plain system of elocution: or, Logical and musical reading and declamation, with exercises in prose and verse." In its preface, Vanderhoff is sure to name his audience, noting that his methods of pronunciation and public speaking will doubtlessly "be found of service to the student, in the acquisition of an art which is daily gaining ground as an essential part of the education of the *gentleman*."²⁶ We might also look to an 1856 edition of *The Connecticut Common School Journal and Annals of Education*, in an article simply titled, "Declamation," where a variety of primary texts are recommended for teachers to encourage exercises in "expression and pronunciation," so that their students, "small boys," can gain the "essential elements of correct speech."²⁷ And when we consider the dramatic legacy of English speech, we are inevitably led back to the male-only companies of Shakespeare's time, a patriarchal tradition only reified by such aforementioned American textbooks where sonnets, Shakespearian monologues, and other comparable English classics are reprinted for young men to practice reading aloud.

The particular copy of Vanderhoff's text I worked with in researching these pronunciation pedagogies bears a seal of the Columbia University Library, the very same institution where Edith Skinner herself would eventually study linguistics and elocution. Clearly at some point amidst the 19th and turn of the 20th century, women, too, were ushered into formal education with this neutralizing paradigm of "good American speech," now called the

²⁶ George Vanderhoff, *A plain system of elocution: or, Logical and musical reading and declamation, with exercises in prose and verse*, (C. Shepard, 1845)

²⁷ A.B.P. "Declamation," (*The Connecticut Common School Journal and Annals of Education*, Published Monthly Under the Direct...Feb 1856; 3, 2), *American Periodicals*, 44.

Transatlantic. Still, before women like Skinner and Hepburn would study language as part of their college degrees, finishing schools, or “charm” schools, such as Miss Porter’s (founded in 1843) were exactly the sort of institution where debutantes and other daughters of the American elite would be sent to study all the graces of ladyhood before “coming out” to society. In other words, while the young men of Vanderhoff’s classes learned “proper speech” for success in their ideal workplaces, women would learn it in anticipation of their ideal husbands. Reaching national acclaim by the 1880s, Miss Porter’s School taught princesses, Vanderbilts, and eventually future first ladies such as Jaqueline Kennedy Onassis, whose “strange elegant accent,” although more influenced by New York features than Hepburn’s, is indicative of her wealthy, Northeastern American upbringing and finishing school education.²⁸

Another notable graduate of Miss Porter’s Connecticut finishing school is the stage actress Hope Williams, whose influence on Hepburn as a performer will be discussed more in depth in the second chapter. Without giving too much away, Williams, like Hepburn, utilized her prestige accent as part of a star persona characterized by a blend of masculinity and femininity, as well as a certain degree of androgyny. Although Hepburn studied speech at college rather than finishing school, as a Connecticut socialite herself, Hepburn, benefitted from exactly the same systems of patriarchal wealth as Onassis or Williams in order to acquire her Transatlantic accent. The fact that she had the opportunity to study for a career rather than a marriage is a privilege bestowed in part by time (thoughts about women’s education were changing by the 1920s), but still largely by virtue of her wealthy and eccentrically progressive family. Her father a doctor and her mother a women’s rights activist, Hepburn enjoyed an unusual combination of financial and philosophical liberty as a child which she in no way understates in her memoirs, and to which

²⁸ Alex Abad-Santos, “Jackie Kennedy’s strange, elegant accent, explained by linguists,” *Vox.com*, last updated February 26, 2017.

she owes all her success as an actor, despite self-deprecating remarks about acting as “an idiot’s profession.” Indeed, although Hepburn never became a doctor like her father as she once wished, she used her voice to earn an independent living. More importantly, she used the Transatlantic accent, for women a marker of patriarchal wealth and marriage potential, to speak life into characters like Sylvia Scarlett and Tracy Lord, who defy traditional gender expectations by reflecting a range of masculine and feminine aspects.

Hepburn’s acquisition of the Transatlantic accent further contributed to her success given its popularity in the early “talkies,” through the end of studio-era Hollywood, which, as previously suggested, can also be traced back to masculine, moneyed biases. Both the technical legibility and regional illegibility of the Transatlantic made it perfect for popular media of the early 20th century: it transformed the supposedly inferior female voice into something recordable and impressed upon audiences a mode of “good” (read: elite), “neutral” English. Like Amy Lawrence outlines in her book *Echo and Narcissus: women’s voices in classical Hollywood cinema*, as different opportunities for audio recording grew, many claims were made by producers concerning the illegibility of the female voice. Modifications would have to be made if their voices were to be featured at all. Rather than acknowledge the potential bias toward male voices inherent in the male-made technology itself, many women were trained to deepen their voices and adopt a Transatlantic style of speech, which, with its emphasis on articulation and nasal forwardness, proved particularly amenable over new sound recording technology. In his 1929 book *The Film Finds its Tongue*, author Fitzhugh Green makes it clear that as the “talkies” came to replace the “movies,” the girls with “brains” who could pass the much-feared voice test would replace even the prettiest faces.²⁹

²⁹ Fitzhugh Green, *The Film Finds its Tongue*, (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1929), 266-271.

As Green further elaborates, the subject of “voice culture” moved to the fore in the new era of talking pictures. Although fascination with vocal cultivation may have been borne by technical innovation and adaptation, it thus became an issue of social propriety as well. As a mass medium, film had the potential to serve the goals of “good speech” advocates by glamorizing a proper style of speech on the silver tongues of celebrities. The Transatlantic accent provided the perfect vehicle as such; by the 1930s, Edith Skinner found herself as Hollywood’s go-to speech advisor,³⁰ and language authorities across popular media came to agree on the superiority of the British and American mélange of vocal features. Hamlin Garland, novelist and former chairman of the diction-award committee for the American Academy of Arts and Letters, is quoted in Dr. Harrison Karr’s 1938 book *Your Speaking Voice* as responding to the question of a standard American dialect as follows:

*“Manifestly, it cannot be British. The Oxford accent is not acceptable to the radio public, and it is equally evident that we should not adopt the lingo of the New York subway, or the accent of First Avenue...It should be a blend of the best usage of the old world and the new.”*³¹

³⁰ Dan Nosowitz, “How A Fake British Accent Took Old Hollywood By Storm,” *Atlas Obscura*, atlasobscura.com, October 27, 2016.

³¹ Harrison Karr, *Your Speaking Voice*, (Griffin-Patterson Publishing Co., 1938), 226

The Transatlantic Accent at Work

While Hepburn's voice was never especially deep (Tallulah Bankhead once famously described it as "nickels dropping into a slot machine"), she was still able to use her expertise in "Good Speech" to make a career of portraying strong female, though never decidedly feminine, characters.³² Rarely ever the damsel in distress, Hepburn's roles often reflected the reputation the actor herself carried off-screen: head-strong, clever, athletic, and generally less concerned with playing within the boundaries of feminine social expectations. Often the "tomboy," especially during her first ten years in Hollywood, one of Hepburn's most memorable roles is undoubtedly that of Jo March in Cukor's 1934 film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Brashly shouting her iconic expletive of "Christopher Columbus," and decrying the woes of lady-like expectations, Hepburn manages to give life to the indignant, boyish Jo even while stumbling through cumbersome petticoats. Of course, the "real-life" Hepburn wouldn't be caught dead in petticoats, opting instead for her trademark slacks, which caused much buzz even 50 plus years after the Civil War era of *Little Women*. A vastly less popular but more true-to-self tomboy in Hepburn's repertoire can be found in the cross-dressing Sylvia/Sylvester Scarlett. Based on English author Compton Mackenzie's 1918 novel *The Early Life and Adventures of Sylvia Scarlett*, the film was yet another product of Hepburn's collaboration with the openly gay (at least, to the Hollywood scene) George Cukor. But despite the excitement with which the two undertook this passion project, the film was a complete flop. Nonetheless, upon Hepburn's death, her niece and former *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967) co-star Katharine Houghton appeared on *Larry King Live* and asserted "I think that [Sylvia Scarlett] and her whole ambiance in that film is just quintessentially who she is."³³

³² Bart Barnes, "Actress Katharine Hepburn Dies at 96," *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2003.

³³ James Robert Parish, *Katharine Hepburn: The Untold Story*, (Advocate Books, 2005).

However, the resonance of the fictional Sylvia/Sylvester with the real Katharine Hepburn should not be understood simply in terms of dress. Just as images tend to dominate most film studies discourse, so too have they dominated consideration of “Performative Acts of Gender Constitution,” to borrow the title of Judith Butler’s seminal essay.³⁴ Indeed, many have commented on how Hepburn’s physical appearance and actions on and off screen have contributed to her “gender fluid” persona, but this prioritization of the visual is a practice I wish to subvert as I attend to the aural aspects of Hepburn’s performance of Sylvia/Sylvester (and eventually Tracy Lord), in order to level the playing field between both audio and visual aspects of cinema. As the setting of *Sylvia Scarlett* quickly changes from continental Europe to the island of England, so too does Hepburn demonstrate her ability to inhabit both superfemale and superwoman-like personas. Her voice, though dynamic in its pitch and tone, is ever constant in its Transatlantic accent, which thus seems to serve as a neutral base from which a rapidly changing performance of gender springs forth. Throughout the film, Hepburn as Sylvia/Sylvester, despite the state of her physical appearance, be it skirt or suspenders, wavers between concerned daughter, indignant son, girlish flirt, swashbuckling hero and many positions in between.

From its opening scene, *Sylvia Scarlett* prompts a keen awareness of Hepburn’s voice. The film begins in France after the death of Sylvia’s mother, and we find Sylvia looking sullenly out of a shabby apartment window over a sign in French which reads “Modes et Robes.” Although her appearance at this point is quite like the childish, 19th century frock and long hair Hepburn wears as *Little Women*’s Jo March, the voice that ekes from her girlish form in *Sylvia*

³⁴ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts of Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” (Theatre Journal, vol. 40, no. 4., 1988) 519-531.

Scarlett is shockingly high and limpid. In contrast to Jo's booming "Christopher Columbus," Sylvia's whimpering "poor Maman," at the sight of her late mother's now defunct dress shop plays upon the long, lilting vowel features of her accent rather than the crisp consonance which support Jo's boyish expletive. When Sylvia's father, Henry (Edmund Gwenn), returns home downtrodden with news of his gambling debt, Sylvia offers up her dowry money, which her father quickly accepts to help give him "a start" back in England, his native country, along with some valuable lace he hopes to sneak in duty-free. Sylvia wishes to accompany her father, but he quickly dismisses the idea, arguing that travelling with a girl is too conspicuous. The solution for Sylvia is simple, though. "Then I won't be a girl," she sputters, taking a pair of shears to her braids; "I'll be a boy, rough and hard. I'm ready for anything!"

This first key scene of *Sylvia Scarlett* affirms the socially constructed nature of gender, as Sylvia proclaims that she will in fact be a boy, shearing away her long, girlish tresses, demonstrating her understanding, per Butler, that gender is affected by the styling and behavior of the body. Indeed, by the very next scene, Sylvester is born upon the ship he sails with his father. However, cropped hairstyle and trousers are not the only things worn by Sylvia/Sylvester³⁵ that were originally designed for men. The Transatlantic accent, too, is a dressing with which Hepburn styles her voice consistently throughout the film, and which carries with it the vestiges of technological and educational biases enforced by and in favor of a patriarchal society. Given this, the moment Sylvia cuts her braids does not necessarily mark the first dive into fluid performativity.

³⁵ At times throughout this text, Hepburn's character will be referred to as either Sylvia, Sylvester, or Sylvia/Sylvester: the latter, in particular, will be used in moments where conveying the hybridity or transitional quality of the character is key. Otherwise, the use of the feminine Sylvia or masculine Sylvester is only a reflection of how the film has arbitrarily positioned the character in a given moment.

Considering the Transatlantic accent's historical underpinnings, Sylvia, by virtue of her voice, conveys certain masculine agencies even before cropping her hair or changing her luggage tag to read "Sylvester." Although Sylvia/Sylvester may not acknowledge their ability to adapt from a position of daughter to son before changing their physical appearance, even in the dialogue leading up to the momentous haircut and in many scenes after, Hepburn's Transatlantic vocal performance indicates to us ever shifting gender roles and identification, despite any change in dress. As Andrew Britton observes in his book *Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist*, in the full scene before Sylvia cuts her hair, her voice indicates to us the tension she feels in relationship to her father. At first, she appears a dutiful daughter, attempting to fill the role of her late mother with a high-pitched, languid speech of comfort wherein she gives her father the dowry money left to her and vows never to be married anyway. In the next moment, though, she is the indignant son chiding her father's criminal intentions. Sylvia/Sylvester's pitches and rhythms, as well as outfits, change throughout the entire film, but the Transatlantic accent stays the same.

Even in extended periods of visual uniformity, Sylvia/Sylvester betrays their ever-shifting gender identification through vocal variety that still manages to play out within the boundaries of Hepburn's regulated pronunciation. We find one such scene well after Sylvester and Henry arrive in England, now working as con-artists alongside the greasy, Cockney-accented Jimmy Monkley, played by Cary Grant. After a failed attempt to swindle sympathetic passersby in the park, Monkley decides he and Henry ought to work by themselves, convincing a maid friend of his, Maudie Tilt (Dennie Moore), that Henry is a theatrical producer capable of finding Maudie a job as a singer, so that she'll invite them to her rich employer's home. Alas, before Maudie dresses up her mistress's jewels that Monkley hopes to steal, Sylvester catches up to

them at the mansion, determined to save Maudie from Monkley's devious intentions. At first playing it cool, Sylvester sits in the parlor quietly listening Maudie's laughable performance but can't stand to watch once she realizes her pearls have gone missing.

In the dialogue that ensues, wonderfully full of talk about the sea, we hear Sylvia/Sylvester's inhibitions loosened by a bottle of Champagne, and through their voice we can track a series of shifting subject positions. What begins as the didactic tone of a teacher ("you're a very silly girl; don't you see what he's done?"), quickly reveals Sylvester's motherly notions of protection for Maudie, as he breaks the facade of the audition scenario, revealing the trio's true identities. He points to Monkley and Father, and finally himself, cooing to Maudie: "he's a crook, and he's a crook, and he's a crook. Three bad eggs. And we were all broke yesterday. Into a bowl! Or was it on the rocks. On the rocks...yes with the cool, sparkling water. And so he stole your pearls." The comforting words slur and coo, with Sylvester elongating words like "bad" (baaad), "all" (awwwl), and "sparkling" (spaahkling), with smoothed out 'Rs'. Just as the grand room in which they sit is wallpapered with scenes of the ocean, we can imagine long, high-pitched waves of "pure vowel"³⁶ sounds, washing over Maudie with motherly care during Sylvester's sing-song story.

Afterall, while the historical legacy of the Transatlantic imbues it with a trace of the masculine, the feminine is all the while present. Through a psychoanalytic lens, the Transatlantic as a learned or "fake" accent harkens to the Lacanian understanding of a child's entrance into the symbolic through the word of the father, as the accent gives rules and order to sounds, or syntax, just as the textbooks of Vanderhoff, Tilly, or Skinner would.³⁷ But the "pure" vowel sounds

³⁶ Skinner, *Speak with Distinction*

³⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, translated by Anthony Wilden, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).

encapsulated within the Transatlantic disrupt its syntactical features with the “pure sound” of the mother, or the “chora.” Kaja Silverman also explores this choric sound in *Acoustic Mirror*, turning to the work of Julia Kristeva, which describes the chora as the “sonorous envelope” of the mother.³⁸ The sonorous envelope, or choric state, represents a pre-symbolic period, where mother and child have yet to be distinguished from one another, and indeed, the child has yet to identify itself as a subject through the “mirror stage.” And so, “the acoustic mirror,” where Silverman derives her book title, is the moment in which the speaking person defines him or herself through language as a subject with a name, or simply the pronoun, “I.” If the structure and syntax of Sylvia/Sylvester’s Transatlantic accent are to be understood as the masculine or phallogocentric elements of speech, the long vowel sounds which invariably disrupt its cadence mark the coexistence of a maternal, pre-symbolic chora.

Indeed, Sylvia/Sylvester’s dialogue towards the first half of this scene seems to wrap Maudie in a similar sonorous envelope, while still maintaining the phonetic features of the Transatlantic. This choric blanket of sound laid out by Sylvester is then suddenly tucked around the listener, curtailed by the interruption of Maudie, who interrogates Monkley in her explicitly regionalized, dare I say “shrill” voice, to which Sylvester responds with a newly quickened quip “that’s it, he’s pinched ‘em,” much in the style of a tattle-tale little brother or sister. As the scene continues, each intervention by Monkley, Maudie, or Henry, prompts a different kind of mood from Sylvester. Again and again, their voice seems to betray yet another disposition, the guilty schoolboy prankster apologizing for helping rob Maudie (“I thought it would be like being a highwayman, but when it comes to getting a poor servant girl out of her job, I’m not having any of it”), the petulant child pounding fists against the wall (“I want the sea! I want the sea!”), and a

³⁸ Silverman, 59.

tough, fast-talking guy demanding justice (“you’re gonna giv’er back those pearls, Jimmy Monkley”). And between these shifts marked by relatively higher or lower tones, longer and shorter vowels, faster or slower rhythms, we hear grand, vowel-heavy choric disruptions like Sylvester’s long, finger-wagging “ohhh” before insisting on Monkley’s compliance. The constant throughout each character vignette is the presence of Hepburn’s Transatlantic accent. Although Sylvia/Sylvester changes appearance frequently throughout the film (from dress to pants to dress to pants), the soundtrack demonstrates that different clothes aren’t necessary to act fluidly within the space of gender.

Sylvia/Sylvester’s longing for the sea in this context furthers the metaphor of Hepburn’s Transatlantic voice as oceanic repose from the surrounding pressures of gendered and even geographic belonging. Between modes of motherliness, boyishness, and masculine aggression, Sylvia/Sylvester cries of “I want the sea!” betray a wish for youthful neutrality. Amidst the increasingly contentious voices of Henry, Maudie, and Jimmy Monkley, all of which contain steady markers of gender and geographic origin, Sylvia/Sylvester’s belies any such distinctions. In fact, of all the phrasing that might have been selected for Hepburn’s dialogue here, “I want the sea” is a sentence that arguably adds to the non-specificity of her already neutral Transatlantic speech. There are no “r’s,” or diphthongs to navigate, making it harder than it already is to say whether the character of Sylvia/Sylvester is American, British, or anything particular in between. If the “pure vowels” of Sylvia/Sylvester’s other exclamations in this scene represent the maternal, feminine elements of the chora, then this innocent, vague enunciation represents that part of the chora which is also the pre-symbolic child: a reminder of existence before knowledge of the self, the symbolic realm of the father, or the construct of gendered difference which lies therein. In other words, as the name suggests, the chora unites disparate voices into one chorus,

the Transatlantic, which, like a prism, reflects its varied constituents within a singular, yet complex voice. As a result, Sylvia/Sylvester's voice operates as a neutral space in which those surrounding voices meet in an effort to resolve themselves.

In Richard Dyer's essay "Stars as Images," he explains that stars like Hepburn are in part defined by their ability to manage social conflict or ideologies otherwise at odds through their singular "star image," or persona.³⁹ Here, the voice of Hepburn, although not visible, is undoubtedly an integral part of her star image, and in the role of Sylvia/Sylvester Scarlett as well as in "real life," manages myriad conflicting positionalities. All at once, it embodies patriarchal systems of money and education, maternal spheres of comfort and unity, and moreover, as Hamlin Garland wrote, blends the sounds of both "the old world and the new world." This latter point, in the case of *Sylvia Scarlett*, perhaps goes beyond the aural blend of British and American continental voices, but could more directly speak to Sylvia/Sylvester's journey between France, the land of the mother, and England, the land of the father: bringing things back again to the Transatlantic's inherent combination of both feminine and masculine domains. Indeed, the ambiguity of Hepburn's Transatlantic accent seems to capture certain phonetic elements of all the variously gendered and regionally grounded voices around her role in Sylvia/Scarlett, resolving them by means of integration. In this particular scene of conflict, Hepburn's voice, at the aural and symbolic levels, plays the role of mediator, ultimately convincing Henry, Maudie, and Monkley to band together and head to the sea, making an honest living as a literal chorus of singers traveling together in a Pierrot troupe.⁴⁰

³⁹ Richard Dyer, "Stars as Images," *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, ed. P. David Marshall (New York, Routledge: 2006), 153.

⁴⁰ Pierrot refers to the clownish stock character of commedia dell'arte, which eventually made its way to variety shows and pantomimes of England in the 17th century. In the context of the film, Sylvia/Sylvester, Henry, Monkley, and Maudie all dress in Pierrot costumes to perform a variety show of songs and skits along the English coast.

The fluidity of the Transatlantic accent not only makes Hepburn's characters a central point of articulation for conflict, but for courtship as well. Once on the road with "The Pink Pierrots," Sylvia/Sylvester finds herself/himself in a series of possible romantic situations. Most notably, there is an ostensibly unwanted dalliance with Maudie, who at this point in the film has married Henry, technically making her Sylvester's stepmother. Sitting in the caravan washing dishes, Sylvester is approached by Maudie, who asks about Sylvester's desire to grow facial hair, remarking that his face is "as smooth as a girl's." Sylvester puffs up his chest in response and announces with the declamatory boom of a prep schoolboy, "Well I intend to grow a mustache in a year or two." Within seconds, Maudie pulls Sylvester to the bedroom to draw a Ronald Coleman style mustache on their face with an eyebrow pencil. Sylvester admires his new look in a hand mirror as Maudie begins wondering aloud what it would be like to kiss someone with such a mustache. Sylvester begins to reply earnestly, "I don't know..." when they are abruptly cut off by Maudie, who lurches excitedly from her bed to kiss Sylvester.

This transgressive kiss between two female actors is fraught with visible and audible tension. Accompanying the flurry of action as Sylvester pushes Maudie away quickly and moves to the adjacent twin bed, Hepburn's quick vocal changes also indicate the choppy, confused progression of events. Echoes of the masculine, prep school legacy of the Transatlantic that begin the scene turn relaxed as Sylvester sits to be made over with the eyebrow pencil. During this moment of frivolity before the unwanted kiss, Sylvester's voice lightens just enough to evoke what seems more like the pitch and patter of Hepburn's natural range. We are put in mind of Hepburn's previous role of Jo March, who also dons fake mustaches and capes to put on plays with her sisters in *Little Woman*: not dissimilar to Hepburn's true past as a student at the all-girl's college Bryn Mawr, where she played a man in a school production at least once. In short, the

echo of the Transatlantic's masculine legacy turns to that of the feminine finishing schools where girls learned to speak with style in order to find a suitable man. But when met with Maudie's brash kiss, Sylvester's voice becomes low, slow, and hushed, asking, "what did you do that for?" Then, shifting away, his voice becomes again stiff and composed, brushing off Maudie once and for all by asserting, "I've got a girl already."

If we analyze Sylvia/Sylvester's vocal performances in the previous scenes against Molly Haskell's independent woman typologies, it seems the transition from masculine, to feminine, and then masculine again speaks to the superwoman characterization that Haskell would argue defines all of Hepburn's roles. In moments where Sylvia/Sylvester's vulnerability is taken advantage of, the masculine facade that had been briefly let down is quickly assumed once more in order to regain agency. Certainly, the same logic seems easily applied to the larger plot of *Sylvia Scarlett*: the story of a girl who becomes a boy to go where and do what she pleases. But this is only one of Sylvia/Sylvester's romantic articulations, and a relatively simple one at that. The progression of the relationship between Sylvia/Sylvester and their ultimate paramour, Michael Fane (Brian Aherne), is far more complicated in terms of gender, agency, and voice.

Not long after Maudie and Sylvester's brief affair, Sylvia/Sylvester meets Michael Fane when he and his friends, in attendance of Sylvester and company's musical show, heckle Maudie during her solo. Chiming in again as a voice of protection for Maudie, Sylvester heckles them right back. Fane's charm, though, quickly turns a disagreement into flirtation, and he ends up inviting all the members of The Pink Pierrots back to his home for a summer evening bacchanalia. As opportunities to speak with Fane increase, Sylvia/Sylvester's voice shrinks and slides higher up the range of the Transatlantic scaffolding, giggling and posing coy questions like a schoolgirl. It is clear to the listener that Sylvester is not so worried to be found out as Sylvia

when it comes to this potential suitor, and while Fane is slow to catch on, he still takes quite a shine to the young boy he has come to know as Sylvester. After causing a minor row amid the festivities, Sylvia/Sylvester returns to Fane's house later in the night to apologize. Alone together in the bedroom, Fane, an artist by trade, admires Sylvester. "I get a queer feeling when I look at you," Fane muses before a pregnant beat gives way to his sudden epiphany: "there's something in you to be painted!"

Fane's line in this scene, clearly self-aware in terms of the film's homoerotic subtext, is never left unexamined by critics writing about *Sylvia Scarlett*. For historian David Lugowski, who recounts the Production Code's concern over the potential promotion of lesbianism by Hepburn's crossdressing performance, Fane's line is a reminder that the film did encompass male as well as female queerness, even if the administration was loathe to name it.⁴¹ For Elyce Rae Helford, who titles her essay "A Queer Feeling When I Look at You: Gender and Sexuality in Three Films by George Cukor" in honor of the line, Fane's sentiment is the very same as those felt by Maudie Tilt and even Jimmy Monkley, who find themselves curiously drawn to Sylvester.⁴² Her essay further reports that Cukor, in his own words, admitted *Sylvia Scarlett* was "well ahead of its time" in terms of sexual subversity; and as a result, Helford writes, "while it is easy to discern queer triangles in this campy, if tangled, romp of a film, its successors starring Hepburn and Grant are far less 'goddamned daring.'"⁴³ Finally, for biographer Britton, Fane's

⁴¹ David Lugowski, "Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay Representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood's Production Code," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2, (1999): 3-35. As Lugowski goes on to explain, the PCA was quicker and more explicit in identifying lesbian content than male, homosexual content. In Lugowski's words, "when referring to different queernesses, the PCA did usually manage to refer to 'lesbianism' or 'lesbian content' but seems to have no words for gay male representation. It is usually referred to, only in quotation marks, as 'perversion,' 'that kind of humor,' 'effeminacy,' "'pansy' humor,' or 'too 'pansy.'" (19).

⁴² Elyce Rae Helford, "A Queer Feeling When I Look at You: Gender and Sexuality in Three Films by George Cukor," *Journal of Bisexuality* 7, no. 1-2 (2007): 89-112.

⁴³ Helford, 105.

“queer” line should not only highlight his own queerness, but alert us to the fact that Fane and Sylvia/Sylvester are “representative complementary figures.” As Britton neatly explains, “Sylvia doesn’t want to be ‘feminine’ and Fane doesn’t want to be ‘masculine,’” and thus meant to be.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, Fane’s “compliment” about being painted prompts a look of disappointment in Sylvester; it seems he had hoped Fane was on the cusp of recognizing that “he” might actually be a “she.” So, Sylvester takes it upon himself to set Fane straight (no pun intended) and returns to Fane’s studio the next day wearing a floral dress, sunhat, and heels that were lifted from an unsuspecting beachgoer. After a moment of confusion, followed by delighted shock, Sylvester, now Sylvia, and Fane both share a laugh of relief. Fane especially seems relieved, as though any anxieties about his fixation on Sylvester have been dispelled by the reassurance of Sylvia’s “true” gender; and Sylvia seems to put on an excessively bell-like tinkling laugh to exaggerate her ability to perform femininity. Her laughter stops fast, though, as Fane backs her into an ottoman for further examination, crowing, “sit down you oddity...you freak of nature!” Becoming hurt, Hepburn/Sylvia’s voice settles into its most natural, gender neutral register, and she demands him to answer, “what is so funny?” Michael takes the opportunity to point out all the ways in which Sylvia’s performance of femininity is lacking, much to Sylvia’s dismay. Still, he finds her attractive, and tells her as much to cheer her up a bit. Leaning in to kiss her suddenly, Sylvia reacts similarly as she did with Maudie. The girlish voice shifts to a boom again. She yells at Fane, “chock it I say,” and shoves him away. Even when the male costume has been abandoned, Hepburn’s fluid voice steps in to perform a shield of masculine agency.

Embarrassed for the outburst, Sylvia apologizes to Fane, and says she “should have stayed a boy.” Fane disagrees. Instead of returning to her masculine masquerade, Fane agrees to

⁴⁴ Britton, 94.

teach her the rules of the feminine masquerade: “You’ve got to learn the tricks of the trade...men will play tricks on you, so you’ve got to be armed.” The ensuing scene features the most vocal and emotional oscillation for Hepburn/Sylvia yet as Fane constantly builds her up and breaks her down in an attempt to make her more ladylike. Fane’s real goal, though, is not to simply make a boy a lady, but to make a lady who finds their agency in maleness learn to weaponize her femininity instead. In other words, the scene showcases Sylvia/Sylvester’s rather painful transformation from a superwoman to a superfemale, who, in Fane’s words, will, “refuse our [men’s] kisses as before, nay, a little more gracefully.” Rapid vocal variety within the space of Hepburn’s Transatlantic voice plays out the agonizing metamorphosis with a range of choric cries, murmurs, and moans.

Ironically, the fact that Fane knows the feminine masquerade and the superfemale trope well enough to teach it reaffirms the performance of binary gender as a phallogocentric construct. In the scene, Fane even goes so far as to dictate what Hepburn/Sylvia’s voice should sound like. “Don’t squeal and squeak,” he explains, and soon enough Sylvia returns to a mode of speech, still somewhat too high to be mistaken for Hepburn’s ‘real voice,’ but less shrill than before. Once this tumultuous lesson is through, Sylvia seems relieved, but regrets her poor first impression upon Fane as a woman. Luckily for her, Fane is forgiving. “Beginners have a second shot; we’ll do it all over again, shall we?” And so, the “big reveal” of Sylvia starts anew, and this time when Fane tries to steal a kiss, she avoids it once more. This time, though, she exerts her power not with a mannish shout, but with a sweetly dripping “no,” coupled with a graceful turn of the head.

This complicated exchange, rather than the simple although more shocking one between Sylvester and Maudie, works better as a metonym for Hepburn’s gender fluid role in this film

and others. Her characters can no more be defined by a singular movement from the feminine to the masculine than the spectrum of gender can be defined as a simple binary of man and woman, or Hepburn's accent as either American or British. While a dominant, visual-focused reading of *Sylvia Scarlett* could easily stitch Hepburn's character into Haskell's superwoman trope, close-listening reveals moments of the superfemale and more. Furthermore, Hepburn's vocal transcendence of gender ultimately allows her to avoid being buried in yet another layer of the diegesis, as Silverman claims is the fate of the purely female voice. In this case, Fane's capturing of Sylvia/Sylvester in his proposed painting would have represented Hepburn's objective entrapment within the film; but the revealed ambiguity of Sylvia/Sylvester's gender defers said portrait altogether.

CHAPTER II: THE “TAMING” OF TRACY LORD

Katharine Hepburn’s voice may not evoke masculinity in the same way as Marlene Dietrich’s, Mae West’s, or Barbara Stanwyck’s, but her characters manage to escape Silverman’s “exaggeratedly diegetic” space nonetheless. In *Sylvia Scarlett*, she sidesteps an impending portrait by Michael Fane, and in *The Philadelphia Story*, she makes it her goal to avoid being photographed for the social column in “Spy Magazine.” Even in her personal life, Hepburn strove to remain largely out of the public eye. Despite still holding the record for most Oscars for “best actress in a leading role,” she never personally accepted any of the four awards; but Hepburn couldn’t elude the occasional publicity photo or public discourse of her image altogether. For as much control Hepburn was able to exercise over her persona, her public’s impressions and expectations of her still impacted the evolution of her career. Between *Sylvia Scarlett* and *The Philadelphia Story*, arguably two of her worst and best films, respectively, Hepburn’s name appeared in fan magazines, film reviews, and on the 1938 box office poison list that signaled the need for some rehab to the star’s good name, or at least to her “good” performance of gender.

In *Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist*, Andrew Britton recounts the public perception of Hepburn’s gender performance during her early Hollywood career of the 1930s. Given that this period was still long before West and Zimmerman’s *Doing Gender* and most other landmark literature on gender construction from the mid to late 20th century, it follows that interpretation of Hepburn’s gender was, for the most part, conflated with her sexuality, which, Britton writes, audiences found to be “problematic and potentially contradictory.” In support of this assertion, Britton presents an analysis of two articles about the young Hepburn in fan magazine

Picturegoer from 1933 and 1937.⁴⁵ Both of the articles in question feature distinctly similar juxtapositions of photographs that strategically place one “feminine,” image of Hepburn across the page from an obviously more “assertive,” masculine image of her. The article from 1933, by Alice Tildesly, most prominently displays a picture of a smiling Hepburn in a swimsuit on the beach at Santa Monica, supported by the strong shoulder of actor Joel McCrea. Astride it lurks two smaller photos: a solo portrait of Hepburn in her signature slacks, made more threatening by an ostentatious fur coat and a “challenging” gaze directly into the camera; and below it a “lyrical” photo of the actor which “appears to be looking up...at the picture of herself and Joel McCrea.” This composition is more or less recreated in the 1937 article titled ‘The Screen’s *Real* Mystery Woman,’ where a “lyrical” photo of Hepburn sits across from one of her as Sylvester Scarlett, and the caption reads: ‘Feminine Katie and her masculine self of *Sylvia Scarlett* contemplate each other — and don’t seem very much impressed.’⁴⁶

As Britton observes, the 1937 article reveals a “crystallization” of something already at work in the one from 1933. Although the latter, earlier article makes note of the actor’s “already notorious unconventionality,” the lyrical photo of Hepburn looking up at herself and Joel McCrea, a picturesque, glowing, “healthy American couple,” indicates a pervading hopefulness on the part of the author, and by extension the readers, that she might eventually choose conventionality instead. The “lyrical” photo, in that sense, is the point of audience suture, where the fans become the star themselves and project their wishes and concerns onto her. Thus, the 1937 lyrical photo of an unimpressed “feminine Katie” (note the extra-dainty, diminutive moniker), is also a symbol of public sentiment; that what crystallized between 1933 and 1937

⁴⁵ See Appendix, figures 1 & 2.

⁴⁶ Britton, 91

was a distinct distaste for Hepburn's disjointed sexuality, her continued embrace of unconventionality.

The perceived contradictory nature of Hepburn's gender identity was not accidental. From childhood, Hepburn herself felt conflicted in her gender. Before her two younger sisters were born, Hepburn was surrounded by boys, her brothers: Tom, Dick, and Bob. In her autobiography, *Me: Stories of My Life*, Hepburn writes: "Being a girl was a torment. I'd always wanted to be a boy. Jimmy was my name, if you want to know."⁴⁷ Indeed, for a time in her youth, Hepburn ran around with cropped hair, calling herself "Jimmy," desperate to be one of the boys. Years later, as a young stage actor in New York, Hepburn would find a kindred spirit in the previously mentioned Hope Williams.

Born ten years prior to Hepburn in August of 1897, Williams was the daughter of prominent Manhattan lawyer, Waldron Williams. As daughters of well-respected and well-financed families, Hepburn and Williams had similarly privileged upbringings; although Williams never studied at the University level and had only amateur acting experience when she made her Broadway debut in Phillip Barry's 1927 *Paris Bound*—a role understudied by Hepburn. Williams was remembered by *The New York Times* as "a debutante with a carefree manner, boyishly clipped blond hair and a humorous walk."⁴⁸ It was while working with her on *Paris Bound* that Hepburn became enamored with the way Williams confidently performed a "ludicrous contrast" of gender. Undoubtedly, Hepburn saw herself in Williams' "slim figure"

⁴⁷ Hepburn, *Me*, 39.

⁴⁸ Peter B. Flint, "Hope Williams, 92, Actress, Dies; Starred in Philip Barry Comedies," *The New York Times*, May 4, 1990.

and “boy’s haircut,” and, in her book, admiringly attributes to Williams the birth of the “half-boy, half-girl.”⁴⁹

Indeed, Hepburn writes quite plainly that Williams “obviously had a tremendous influence on [her] career.”⁵⁰ But this influence was not limited to appearance or physicality—in fact, on the list of traits Hepburn claims she incorporated from Williams, voice is the very first. Educated at Miss Porter’s school, the prestigious Transatlantic accent was another key to Williams’ gender defying performances.⁵¹ Although Williams’ own voice never made it big on the silver screen, Hepburn, in a way, made it big for her, namely in the 1938 screen adaptation of Philip Barry’s *Holiday* (another Cukor, Grant, and Hepburn collaboration). In the film, Hepburn plays Linda Seton, a character written for and originated by Hope Williams at the Plymouth Theatre in 1928. By the time the film ran in the cinema, though, Williams’ career was effectively over. It is no wonder that Hepburn commented in Williams’ obituary that she “stole a lot from Miss Hope.” Well before taking her role of Linda Seton to the screen, Hepburn also took over Williams’ original stage role of Antiope in *The Warrior’s Husband*—a gender-bending performance that earned Hepburn her career-making invitation to Los Angeles.

Like Viola of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Hepburn found herself washed upon the shores of Hollywood, relying on her strength of playing the half-boy, half-girl in order to win the love of producers and picture-goers. However, the Hope Williams-inspired act that launched Hepburn’s career could only last so long. Flops like *Sylvia Scarlett*, which showcased Hepburn’s gender fluidity all too literally, pushed the public beyond its limit insofar as finding Hepburn’s

⁴⁹ See Appendix, fig. 3, “Androgynous Inspiration,” for a photographic comparison of Williams and Hepburn.

⁵⁰ Hepburn, *Me*, 122

⁵¹ Flint, “Hope Williams...”

performances to be “the personification of sincerity,” as was the case with her portrayal of Jo March.⁵² After a slew of films placing Hepburn in similarly tomboyish roles, the critics at *Picturegoer* were not the only ones left “unimpressed,” and the sentiment would only be further crystallized by the “box office poison” moniker declared once and for all by 1938. Considering the circumstances, it seems well justified to conclude that Hepburn’s poisonous status was in no small part an indictment of her denial to conform with gender expectations.

Though no single film should be blamed for landing Hepburn on the box office poison list, a closer look at the reception of *Sylvia Scarlett* is key to understanding how *The Philadelphia Story* works as an antidote for a public looking to tame the notoriously unconventional Hepburn. Although the film was by all accounts abhorred by producer Pandro S. Berman, problematic to the PCA, and, according to Britton, the cause of “something akin to a riot” at its preview, Hepburn herself was not so much individually attacked by film columnists as may be expected. In the cases of *Variety*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and even *The Hollywood Reporter*, Hepburn’s acting is for the most part taken well, though the latter two publications sound more convinced of Hepburn’s ability to play an “engaging lad.”⁵³ Nonetheless, all four reviews are sure to highlight the scene where Sylvia/Sylvester returns to female attire as one of the best in the entire film. For *The New York Times*, this moment is truly when Hepburn is “at her best.”⁵⁴ *The Los Angeles Times* calls it “delightful, particularly.”⁵⁵ Most

⁵² Mordaunt Hall, “Katharine Hepburn as Jo in the Film Version of “Little Women,” Now at the Radio City Music Hall,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1933.

⁵³ W. R. Wilkerson, editor and publisher, “‘Sylvia Scarlett’ Held Down Through Weakness of Story,” *The Hollywood Reporter*. December 9, 1935.

⁵⁴ Andre Sennwald, “Katharine Hepburn and Edmund Gwenn in ‘Sylvia Scarlett,’ at the Radio City Music Hall,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 1936.

⁵⁵ Philip K. Scheuer, “New Hepburn Acting Feat Chronicled,” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 1935.

important, though, is *Variety*'s telling turn of phrase, which tells us that Hepburn "shines brightest and is *most likable* in the transition into womanhood."⁵⁶

Aside from making it perfectly clear that what viewers wanted most was to watch Hepburn "transition" into a more "likable" woman, the same four articles affirm that while Hepburn's performance is adequately "delightful" (at times), Cary Grant is the one who "steals the picture out from under some very fine noses."⁵⁷ Already well-known as a "charm merchant," critics were impressed with Grant's ability to pull off a role as rugged and comically low-brow as Jimmy Monkley— as well as his ability to pull off a new accent.⁵⁸ Like Hepburn, part of Grant's trademark is his Transatlantic style of speech; but in *Sylvia Scarlett*, he abandons all posh pretense for a Cockney drawl, and magically "makes the picture worthwhile." *The Hollywood Reporter* further notes: "as long as [Monkley's] around, everything is all right."⁵⁹

In the same way Hepburn is "contained by the presence of the male," Joel McCrea, in the 1933 *Picturegoer* article, the reviews of *Sylvia Scarlett* reveal that Grant's performance is exceptional because in his Cockney masquerade, he provides the stability of gender and sexuality needed to rein in Hepburn's non-traditional performance.⁶⁰ Such an achievement would have been impossible had Grant utilized the Transatlantic in creating the character of Monkley because while it carries prestige, it also carries ambiguity. Just as the Cockney accent anchors Monkley to one particular geographic origin, so does it bolster his unidimensional performance of a masculine gender. So, while the critics weren't dismissive or overly cruel to Hepburn's performance of Sylvia/Sylvester, their high praise of Grant's thoroughly male performance

⁵⁶ Land, "Sylvia Scarlet," *Variety*, January 15, 1936, (my emphasis).

⁵⁷ Wilkerson, *The Hollywood Reporter*.

⁵⁸ Sennewald, *NYT*

⁵⁹ Wilkerson, *The Hollywood Reporter*.

⁶⁰ Britton, 91.

speaks volumes about their preference for clear cut gender identities, and that voice is a crucial part of that identity.

If Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett* is more or less the perfect example of Haskell's superwoman typology, following in the tradition of Shakespeare's Viola, then Hepburn in *The Philadelphia Story* is something more akin to Katharina in *Taming of the Shrew*, where the superwoman will learn to be a superfemale; or at least, that is the function the film fulfills for a public hoping to see a "more feminine Katie."⁶¹ Just as journalism is what drove Hepburn to the brink of her career in 1938, journalism is what drives the plot of the 1940 screen adaptation of Philip Barry's play, *The Philadelphia Story*: a comedy of remarriage in which the "hard" Main Line socialite Tracy Lord (Hepburn) learns to soften up. On the eve of Tracy's wedding to second husband-to-be George Kittredge (John Howard), ex-husband C.K. Dexter Haven, or "Dex" (Grant), agrees to help *Spy Magazine* get an inside scoop on the nuptials. Introducing them as "dear friends" of his and Tracy's brother Julius (away on Safari), Dex sneaks undercover reporters Macaulay "Mike" Connor (Jimmy Stewart) and Elizabeth Imbrie (Ruth Hussey) into the Lord manor as guests for the wedding, all the while knowing Tracy's complete disdain for the press. Hijinx and love triangles ensue.

While equating *The Philadelphia Story* to *The Taming of the Shrew* is an important metaphor in my mind for understanding the film's role in progressing Hepburn's career, still others have written about it in context of different Shakespearian comedies – the discussion of which illuminates, or foreshadows in this case, other key aspects of the film's commentary on gender, sexuality, and class. Most relevant here is Stanley Cavell's 1981 text *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* in which Cavell imagines *The Philadelphia*

⁶¹ Britton, 91

Story as A Midsummer Night's Dream.⁶² Rather than focusing on a single player, Hepburn, and understanding the film as a metaphor for or symbol of importance for her own career, Cavell's focus on the film's ensemble, as well as its setting at the birthplace of the United States, draws him to conclusions about potentially wider metaphors for society on whole. After dismissing other potential associations with *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, Cavell asserts the following:

“it is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that more closely anticipates the conjunction of dreaming and waking, and of apparent fickleness, disgust, jealousy, compacted of imagination, with a collision of social classes and the presence of the whole of society at a concluding wedding ceremony, a presence unique among members of our genre in *The Philadelphia Story*.”⁶³

Imagining Tracy and Dex as Titania and Oberon, privileged members of the faery class, and the journalists and Kittredge as mere mortals who have stumbled into the forest of Main Line Philadelphia, Cavell observes how unlike *It Happened One Night*, which “invokes the fantasy of the perfected human community,” *The Philadelphia Story* questions whether America has really been successful in its mission for a new type of humanity, freedom, and happiness. In more direct terms, while the union of disparate classes in *It Happened One Night* affirms a key element of the “American dream,” Tracy's love triangle with three men from three different social classes, and her ultimate return to Dex, provides a more skeptical critiqued of American class relations. Moreover, given Cavell's observation that the comedy of remarriage “emphasizes the mystery of marriage by finding that neither law nor sexuality” can “ensure true marriage,” it follows that Tracy and Dex's privileged class, highlighted by their prestige accents, specifically

⁶² Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, 1981.

⁶³ Cavell, 142.

privileges them to ignore conventionalities of gender performance, as further close-reading and close-listening will make clear.⁶⁴ Another emphasis of the genre that Cavell explores is that of father and daughter dynamics, an aspect which influences my own connections to *The Taming of the Shrew*, and furthermore solidifies the oddly parallel yet reverse nature of *The Philadelphia Story* and *Sylvia Scarlett*, whose main characters' exigency in speech and gender performance both rely on relations to the father.

Unlike *Sylvia Scarlett*, where we first find the hero/ine trying to fulfil the role of mother/wife and later the role of son, *The Philadelphia Story* begins with Tracy in the shoes of her father, who is at present off philandering with a showgirl. In his absence, we see Tracy presiding over the wedding arrangements, the grand house, and the many people inside it with a confidence and candor that is wholly unlike the "awkward, imaginative, tremulously frustrated" Sylvia/Sylvester.⁶⁵ Neither overly treble nor falsely bass, the range of Tracy's voice sounds unbothered, totally comfortable where it rests. Part of its naturalism may be in its avoidance of overly musical or theatrical vocal variety. Instead of constant, dramatic shifts of intonation, Tracy delivers her lines in the opening scene relatively deadpan. One imagines that this might be the same "charming...beguiling tonelessness" the playwright Noel Coward once said of Hope Williams' own "charming speaking voice."⁶⁶

Amazingly, though the voice of Tracy Lord is in so many ways different from that of Sylvia/Sylvester, both are carried on the same Transatlantic accent, and so both characters, however different, each convey through their voices a dynamic range of gender subjectivities as well as a distinct marker of class. Although Hepburn's voice may never be as consistently deep

⁶⁴ Cavell, 142.

⁶⁵ Sennewald, *NYT*.

⁶⁶ Flint, *NYT*

as Marlene Dietrich's or any of the other actors whose voices, Silverman claims, "exceed the gender of the body from which it proceeds," the subtext of the Transatlantic accent, patriarchally imposed first upon the schoolboy and then the debutante, psychoanalytically composed of both rigid enunciative syntax and choric "pure vowels," provides another route for gender "excess."⁶⁷ By hitching her scope of voice to Barthes' "grain of voice," Silverman also hitches voice to body, and thereby a biological binary of sex; indeed, in Silverman's words, there is a "'male' rather than a 'female' body deposited in the [voices]" of Dietrich, Stanwyck, etc.⁶⁸ Instead of considering how the tonal and linguistic features of a voice may reflect and transcend a variety of subjectivities (race, class, region, age, *gender*), Silverman is concerned only with how women's voices can reflect and transcend their biological form.

As recorded in her autobiography, Hepburn did at first try to transcend her biological form by forcing her voice into the lower, masculine registers popular with the aforementioned actors of her time.⁶⁹ However, the result of such an attempt to replace her authentic grain-of-voice with that of a man's was temporary loss of her ability to speak, and eventually vocal nodules which threatened to damage her most precious instrument forever. Although this was a blow to Hepburn when starting out as a stage actor, it now seems quite poetic that rather than having her voice robbed by a distinctly masculine sound, she would ultimately express her multifaceted gender experience through the Transatlantic's complex codes. For the character of Tracy Lord especially, Hepburn's voice is a most authentic medium, given the character's

⁶⁷ Silverman, 61.

⁶⁸ Silverman, 61.

⁶⁹ When discussing her early stage career as Antiope in *The Warrior's Husband*, Hepburn writes, "I was using a low pitch, trying to be masculine. Finally, it got so bad that it was nip and tuck whether I'd begin to miss performances." (*Me*, 360).

proximity to Hepburn's own alma mater, Bryn Mawr, where she studied speech under Samuel Arthur King.

Indeed, compared to *Sylvia Scarlett*, Hepburn's use of the Transatlantic accent in *The Philadelphia Story* is much more fitting. Logically, that an American socialite would speak with such a distinguished manner makes far more sense than a half French, half English, half starving youth like Sylvia/Sylvester. In retrospect, what may be most disingenuous, or "puzzling" (as *Variety* wrote), about Sylvia Scarlett, is not Hepburn's believability as either boy or girl, but that she plays across them in her Transatlantic tongue so effortlessly despite the character's relative lack of wealth and power. As the genteel Jo March or high-class Tracy Lord, the Transatlantic accent and the variously gendered connotations it brings to bear are inherent to the characters' social positions; although their relatively masculine characteristics may threaten their ability to be "ladylike," their privilege affords and potentially forgives their transgressions. Certainly, it should be remembered that the real-life Hepburn's ability to subvert and play with gender performance, through voice, fashion, and career, was a privileged feature of her wealthy, white status.⁷⁰ While modern generations might thank her for pioneering popular depictions of independent womanhood or even queer womanhood, going against the grain relatively unscathed was, and in many ways still is, reserved for those of the dominant class. In discussing *The Philadelphia Story*, social power, in speech and finances, are absolutely key to the way in which Tracy and Dex navigate their rather progressive relationship.

⁷⁰ In her autobiography, Hepburn herself often cites "good luck" for all her success and ability to live life as she please; well aware of her unique position in a most well-to-do and progressive family, Hepburn would be the first to acknowledge that any thanks to her is in fact owed to the parents, institutions, and privileged social connections that gave her her start.

The Lord Ladies: Power, Sex, and Speech in *The Philadelphia Story*

With Tracy at the helm in her father's absence, power over the house is left entirely in the hands and words of the "Lord ladies;" whose oxymoronic title intentionally draws attention to the gender-defying agency attached to their noble name. Visually, Tracy and her tomboyish little sister Dinah (Virginia Weilder) demonstrate an unladylike authority by wearing slacks and making themselves more than comfortable in their palatial drawing room (Tracy slouches over on the couch writing; Dinah walks about carelessly with a yo-yo); but the ongoing metalinguistic exchange that accompanies this visual is just as important, as it reinforces the relationship between speech, power, and sex. Not only do the Lord women manage people and objects, whether they be clothes, wedding gifts, or servants, but words, too. The first spoken lines of the film are Tracy asking her mother: "how do you spell omelet?" To which Dinah returns the punny jab "oh you," before her mother can answer. Even Dinah's name, as Cavell points out, has been altered from the original "Diana" by Tracy as a show of her linguistic authority and, perhaps more tellingly, a demonstration of her feeling that "the name of the goddess of chastity belonged to *her*."⁷¹ Unlike her mother and Tracy, whose Transatlantic accents affirm their complete mastery of syntax, Dinah primarily speaks with a plainly American accent. Her constant verbal faux pas, quickly corrected by Tracy or mother, are a result of her precociousness: her desire to wield the same sexual/verbal agency as her older sister, who easily inhabits both masculine and feminine at will.

Especially on the topic of her sister's remarriage, the opinionated Dinah hopes to stay informed and in control. Holding up an enormous and gaudy necklace set among Tracy's many wedding gifts, Dinah announces flatly, "this stinks." It is as much a comment on the hideously

⁷¹ Cavell, 150.

feminine jewelry (after all, Dinah, like a young Hepburn, is very much a tomboy), as it is on the prospect of her sister marrying the boring, nouveau riche George Kittredge. Her diction is quickly corrected by “mother Lord” (Mary Nash): “don’t say stinks, dear, smells is bad enough.” In her attempt to tame Dinah’s speech, it seems Mrs. Lord not only hopes to groom her into a lady, but perhaps prevent her becoming a bit too much like Tracy, whose brash, masculine qualities seem to have cost her marriage to Dex. Indeed, in the preamble to the opening scene in the Lord’s drawing room, we see Tracy and Dex’s marriage come to a violent end, as Tracy snaps one of Dex’s golf clubs in half and chucks the pieces at him, and he shoves her backwards across the threshold of their house in return. Dinah herself read about the incident in the papers, which, as she tells her mother confidently, are full of “innundo” (innuendo). Still, Dinah maintains that Tracy probably had it coming to her and does all she can to encourage Tracy and Dex to get back together.

Part of Dinah’s disdain for Kittredge doubtlessly comes for the way his presence affects the normally cool “tonelessness” of her sister’s voice and behavior altogether. In verbal spars with Dinah or Dex, Tracy’s Transatlantic accent accommodates the sort of wisecracking lockjaw that Tracy, and Hepburn herself, use most frequently and naturally. However, it also accommodates the more dynamic, lithe articulation Tracy slips into the moment her fiancé appears for the first time at the horse stables. On a dime, Tracy turns from Dinah (“can Tracy pick ‘em, or can she?”) to Kittredge (“Hello...I adore you”) with completely different subjectivities. In one moment a boyish brag, and in the next a doe-eyed bride-to-be, Tracy hardly bats an eye— a subtle lift in pitch and switch from harsh contractive consonance to soft, vowel-heavy diction the only thing necessary to take her from one facet of her gender identity to another.

As in *Sylvia Scarlett*, the widening and loosening up of the Transatlantic's "pure vowel sounds" accompanies the main character's movement towards a more traditionally feminine positionality. When performing an ultra-feminine masquerade to put tabloid journalists Mike and Ruth off their scent, Tracy dons a dress in place of trousers, but keeps the Transatlantic accent the same—albeit through a false smile and an extra saccharine drip. While other Classical Hollywood films play-up gendered code-switching as a joke involving a drastic alteration to a character's dialect, Hepburn's characters always slip through gendered speech borders with only minor shifts within a uniform vocal aesthetic. For instance, compare Hepburn's aforementioned masquerade to Jane Russell's in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks, 1953). In order to buy time for fellow showgirl, Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe), the normally more subdued, level-headed Dorothy (Russell) goes to court on her pal's behalf. Transforming herself into a believable Lorelei requires not only a change of dress and blonde wig, but an entirely new manner of speech to mimic Monroe's signature sort of purr. For the superwoman half of their dynamic duo to fully embody the superfemale, vocal style is just as important as dress, as both the aural and visual components of Dorothy and Lorelei's respective gender performances exist in near complete opposition. In Hepburn's characters, though, the superwoman and superfemale are unified in body and voice. With its entangled masculine and feminine implications, Hepburn's Transatlantic needn't be abandoned nor adopted, but constantly facilitates fluid gender movement.

The Language of Love (and Privilege)

Fluid navigation of the gender binary, made possible in part by the ambiguous Transatlantic accent, is a quality shared by Tracy and “Dex” in *The Philadelphia Story* that ultimately allows for their happy (re)union. While Grant’s authenticity as Jimmy Monkley in *Sylvia Scarlett* was predicated upon his clear-cut Cockney accent, which matched his clear-cut class and clear-cut gender, as Dex, Grant resumes his usual posh manner, and his character enjoys a power to explore non-traditional gender performance as a result. At face value, this may seem a perfectly obtuse claim. After all, isn’t Dex the one who critiques Tracy’s masculine rigidity and inability to forgive? Doesn’t Dex say she’ll never make a “first-class woman or first-class human being” until she learns how? It is true; but it is also true, that unlike the more patriarchally minded Kittredge or even Mike, Dex is willing to forgive Tracy’s transgressions as well.

On the morning of Tracy and Kittredge’s wedding, Dex and Kittredge witness the return of Mike, still drunk from the night before, carrying a hungover Tracy back from the pool in a man’s robe. The implication seems clear; and yet, Dex urges Kittredge to give Tracy the benefit of the doubt, as he would. Kittredge, however, being a “self-made man” from the “so-called lower class,” has starkly old-fashioned morals. He speaks with a deep, plainly rhotic American dialect. The unforgivingly hard, postvocalic “R” sound of Kittredge’s first key line, “don’t you mean *our* house,” gives it the sound of something ripped straight from *Father Knows Best*, an ad for a craftsmen toolkit, or some other voice of the unembellished, mid-century, mid-continent manhood. He hasn’t had the privileged education or upbringing of Tracy or Dex, and so he cannot afford (so he claims to Dex) to have the same “high ideals.” In other words, he cannot afford to have his masculine authority made vulnerable by Tracy. As Dex warned Tracy in an

earlier poolside scene, Kittredge is “no tower of strength,” but “just a tower.” The phallic metaphor implies that Kittredge is not suitable for Tracy because he’s just a man, not a man with “strength,” or power, like Dex: a privileged power that allows him to be man and somehow more or other than man. Kittredge’s vanity ultimately gets the best of him, and he offers to marry Tracy again only at the last minute, salivating at the thought of having his name in the society column; but Tracy knows better, finally. “I’d make you most unhappy, most,” she says. “At least, I’d try my best to.”

Even Mike (Stewart), however poetic and obviously infatuated with Tracy by the end of the film, is all too set in his ways, and his gender, to make a suitable match. Like Monkley in *Sylvia Scarlett*, Mike’s masculinity is bound up in his clearly regional accent: that of Jimmy Stewart’s own unique, rural Pennsylvanian drawl. To put an even finer point on it, although nearly all the main cast of *The Philadelphia Story* earned Academy Award nominations, Stewart is the only one who took one home, much like Grant “stole the picture” out from under his *Sylvia Scarlett* castmates (though he never won any physical trophy). While Stewart himself has said he believes his win was more of a delayed reaction to his performance in Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the similarity to Grant’s high praise as Monkley begs us to contemplate how conventional portrayals of gender and sexuality may be rewarded over unconventional ones; but I digress.

Although as a writer, Mike (Stewart) might share more “high ideals,” with Tracy and Dex than Kittredge does, his masculinity is also rigid and therefore easily threatened. A bit slow on the uptake, until Tracy’s attempt to sabotage Mike and Liz’s story for *Spy* (and consequently, their relationship), Mike was totally unaware that Liz had previously been married to one “Joe Smith” of the “hardware” industry. Tracy’s prying, however, forces Mike’s realization that Liz

has been around the block, so to speak, and his reaction is less than understanding. In fact, it may well be his disillusionment with this development that drives him away from Liz and towards Tracy. If he's going to be with a previously married woman anyway— why not let it be her? And when Tracy and Mike's whirlwind romance seems to be the cause of Tracy and Kittredge's breakup, Mike takes the most traditional route possible: offering to marry Tracy, despite hardly knowing her, in Kittredge's stead. But Tracy knows better than to accept this offer, too, which leaves her, as we all knew it would, with Dex once more.

If read outside the full, robust context of Hepburn's unique performance of gender, *The Philadelphia Story* can indeed be seen as a mere taming of the shrew-type tale. The once "hard" Tracy learns to be "soft," learns to be forgiving, learns to be a "first class woman," and gives her ex-husband a second chance. However, by refusing to marry the petty and ultra-traditional Kittredge or Mike, Tracy also refuses the terms of a rigidly gendered marriage; and by returning to Dex, Tracy embraces a compromise with an "old friend," who will love her unconditionally. The recurring nautical theme revolving around the couple's boat, "The True Love," might at times be a metaphor for Tracy herself (an easy read given ships' traditionally feminine appellations) but is on whole a metaphor for partnership. As Dex reminds Tracy, The True Love is only comfortable for two, and should one of those two aboard not be "yar" ("quick to the helm, easy to handle"), the union will go down with the ship. Moreover, at the very end of the film, although Tracy does make amends with Dex as well as her father, who had both previously accused her of lacking the softness and forgiveness necessary in a woman, she pointedly avoids using their gendered language. When Tracy's father, full of pride for a daughter choosing to give love a second chance, asks how she feels, her answer is: "like a *human*, like a human being."

Just as Michael Fane and Sylvia/Sylvester Scarlett are a perfect match because of their mutual wish to be less masculine or feminine, respectively, Dex and Tracy are a perfect match because their shared sophisticated accents match their sophisticated ideas about gender. If visuals are left to dominate the discourse of Hepburn's gender performance in *Sylvia Scarlett* or *The Philadelphia Story*, the discourse is only half there. It might be said that in *Sylvia Scarlett*, Hepburn starts the film in a dress and ends in a pair of pants, while in *The Philadelphia Story*, she begins in pants and ends in a dress; that the former is the story of a superwoman and the latter one of a superfemale. This basic interpretation seemed to appease the films' first audiences well enough. It is my hope though, that in centering a practice of listening, we avoid an appearance-based reduction of Hepburn's identity, and hear instead a more complicated set of stories where femininity and masculinity are not simply exchanged one for the other, but are constantly in flux; and furthermore that we appreciate Hepburn's Transatlantic accent not only for its posh connotation, but for the way in which its historical and psychoanalytic connotations mirror a fluid navigation of gender.

With *The Philadelphia Story*, Hepburn's box office marketability was saved, and a new era of her career was ushered in: not that of the Hope Williamsian half-boy, half-girl, but that of the trademark Hepburn/Tracy woman (of *Woman of the Year* [Stevens, 1942], *Adam's Rib* [Cukor, 1949], or *Pat & Mike* [Cukor, 1952], for example), who, according to Molly Haskell, is able to "bargain" variously masculine and feminine traits with her partner in order to achieve a balance while retaining the couple's respective individuality.⁷² Although Spencer Tracy isn't the male star of *The Philadelphia Story*, as Britton argues, it is still "as much the first Hepburn/Tracy film...as a reactionary appendage to Hepburn's films with Grant," given the nature of Tracy Lord

⁷² Haskell, 229-230.

and C.K. Dexter Haven's gender compromising relationship.⁷³ On the surface level, Tracy compromises on her expectations for Dex to give up his "disgusting" drinking, while Dex is willing to ignore any sexual transgressions on Tracy's part. What these specific compromises relate to in a grander sense though, is a marriage arrangement post gender-norms. Dex doesn't have to be the "good man" Tracy saw in Kittredge, nor does Tracy need to be a chaste, virginal "goddess." In the Katharine Hepburn/Spencer Tracy films to come, a compromise of gender norms is mirrored, only often more specifically in the context of the working woman rather than the sexually "enlightened" elite. Perhaps this sneakier form of gender fluidity, couched in heterosexuality, also compromises the more obviously androgynous projects of Hepburn's early career, but it is a compromise that kept Hepburn and her voice in business longer than most female actors of her time could ever dream.

⁷³ Britton, 183.

AFTERWORD

Just after Katharine Hepburn passed away in the spring of 2003, Martin Scorsese's 2004 Howard Hughes biopic, *The Aviator*, was put into production. Cast in the role of the original, great "Kate" herself was another androgynous actor, Cate Blanchett, who would go on to receive an Academy Award for the performance.⁷⁴ Pressed for details on her preparation in an interview for *The New York Times*, Blanchett made it clear that mastering Hepburn's manner of Transatlantic speech was crucial to her undertaking. Luckily, she was able to study under Hollywood's current vocal guru, Tim Monich, who is also quoted in the interview (cleverly titled "The Cate who would be Kate") as saying:

"There are a handful of historical figures, including J.F.K., F.D.R. and Katharine Hepburn, who are chiefly associated with their voices, and if you're going to play any of them, you really have to go for the voice...She didn't sound like any of the ingénues at the time, with their shy, trilling voices...Kate really created a whole new style of American actress — of American woman — with her voice and mannerisms."⁷⁵

A former student of Edith Skinner, Monich's expertise in "Good Speech" translates clearly into Blanchett's spot-on Hepburn impersonation.⁷⁶ Impersonation is a key distinction here. Not to diminish Blanchett's acting chops, but her performance as Hepburn in *The Aviator* is so uncanny that on a spectrum of style, it feels closer to caricature than to dramatic interpretation. Of course, despite painstakingly applying freckles (which she describes in the same interview), Blanchett doesn't look that much like Hepburn, so it is chiefly her dedication to capturing Hepburn's voice down to the elided diphthongs, singsong pacing, and birdlike laugh

⁷⁴ Incidentally, Blanchett would also go on to play a man, Bob Dylan, in Todd Haynes' 2007 biopic *I'm Not There*.

⁷⁵ Hilary De Vries, "The Cate Who Would be Kate," *The New York Times*, December 14, 2004.

⁷⁶ Alec Wilkinson, "Talk this Way," *The New Yorker*, November 2, 2009.

that accomplishes the impressive, if eerie portrayal. It is the laugh especially, as Blanchett plays Hepburn on the golf course, that rings hollow against her incredibly well studied gesturing. Her exchange with Howard Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) along the green forces you to wonder if she hasn't simply memorized a similar scene from *Bringing up Baby* (Hawks, 1938) line for line. Even Scorsese's set design surrounding the first encounter of Hughes/DiCaprio and Hepburn/Blanchett while shooting *Sylvia Scarlett* seems to confirm an attempt to replicate rather than recreate history—and yet the choice not to shoot in black and white, but in an oddly stylized technicolor, alerts us again to something just a little “off.” In the scene, Hepburn/Blanchett is poised upon her beach blanket behind Cukor's director's chair in a manner so familiar that I convinced myself I had seen it as an original photo from the *Sylvia Scarlett* set. After looking for it online though, it seems the image simply triggered my memory of Hepburn in a very similar pose on the set of, again, *Bringing Up Baby*, where she's planted squarely on the seat of her pants, legs wide with bent knees, leaning over to pet Skippy the dog. It is impossible to avoid using the word “pastiche” here to describe Blanchett's performance – it is precisely, as Fredric Jameson writes, an “imitation” of “speech in a dead language” – but it isn't entirely “neutral.”⁷⁷ However viscerally eerie the performance hits you initially, *The Aviator's* treatment of Hepburn and her voice is still loving.

Of course, not all contemporary performances of Hepburn's iconic Transatlantic accent exist as strict impersonations of the actor herself. For example, in the Coen Brother's 1998 neo-noir *The Big Lebowski*, Julianne Moore is unmistakably Hepburnesque in her portrayal of feisty feminist redhead Maude Lebowski, whose comically antiquated Transatlantic accent puts the audience in stitches each time she urges “The Dude” to see her personal doctor (“he's a good

⁷⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern* (Verso: 1998), 4.

man...and thorough”). Like Tracy Lord, Maude is the proverbial pants-wearer of the family estate, managing business and putting out fires while a morally (and in Maude’s case a literally) bankrupt father kills time and money with a younger, extra-feminine mistress. Moreover, like Hepburn the actor, Maude chooses a life of independence over one of holy matrimony. It’s easy to imagine Maude reciting Hepburn’s biting witticism: “if you want to sacrifice the admiration of many men for the criticism of one, go ahead, get married.”⁷⁸

More recently in the history of the Transatlantic accent is the wildly eccentric Moira Rose of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s binge-worthy series *Schitt’s Creek*. Played by Catherine O’Hara, Moira Rose has become a pop culture phenom iconic for her over-the-top, often botched Transatlantic accent. As a washed-up former soap opera star, Moira’s sense of vanity is perhaps not the expression of empowered womanhood we might expect from a Hepburn-type, but her disregard of the norm most certainly is. Unafraid to stand out in loud designer clothing and a variety of dramatically styled wigs, Moira’s aristocratic manner of speech is yet another exaggerated aspect of her gender performance that earns her attention as “other” in the small, po-dunk town of Schitt’s Creek. Although primarily intended for comedic effect, the accent is a crucial element of a character ultimately out of line with traditional feminine expectations, namely motherliness. However “old timey” or out of touch the Transatlantic accent may seem to some, it is consistently linked to progressive women living outside the boundaries of a binary gender construct.

Indeed, since the mid-century, the Transatlantic accent seems to make all its appearances in either period-pieces or farce. Without a doubt, the accent now seems to many as medieval as the idea of “finishing school,” a moniker with which even the still standing Miss Porter’s no

⁷⁸ Hepburn, *Me*.

longer identifies. Unless you want to try one of the few dusty Swiss academies still brandishing themselves as such, your best bet to study the Transatlantic accent in a formal setting today is in a class at one of the country's leading performing arts universities, such as Julliard, where Kelsey Grammar, famous for his farcical and pretentious "Frasier Crane," once studied under Edith Skinner herself. But even Frasier's college years are well behind us now, and many modern speech professors, such as UC Irvine's Dudley Knight, are distinctly opposed to the universal "Good Speech" project of Skinner and her peers, encouraging his students instead to embrace the "quest to find their own way of speaking."⁷⁹ Hopefully, the démodé status of an accent so associated with posh-ness and privilege signals the ever increasing agency of people from all walks of life to define their unique performance of gender as part of their unique voice.

Even as it becomes the stuff of pastiche, postmodern productions, Hepburn's voice is – as Tim Monich suggests – responsible for creating a new brand of American woman: a woman who pushes against tradition and strives for independence from "feminine" expectations, just as Hepburn did in the 51 year acting career that her father once told her could only last for five.⁸⁰ Although the Transatlantic accent was in many cases throughout history a means of taming a woman's tongue, of anchoring her in the space of gender, the grand irony of Katharine Hepburn's Transatlantic accent is that it instead contributes to her androgynous agency. Rather than allowing the Transatlantic accent to make a lady of her as it might make a lady of a Miss Porter's debutante, Hepburn exploited the accent's own disavowal of place to mirror her own disavowal of traditional gender performance. At one time, such an exploitation may have been limited to those with money and power, but thanks to the democratic powers of cinema,

⁷⁹ Boehm, "In the Cause of Freer Speech."

⁸⁰ Katharine Hepburn, *Clive James Meets Katharine Hepburn*, interview by Clive James, aired April 13, 1985 on BBC.

Hepburn's voice has and will be there to encourage those without such privileges as well. My mother heard that voice, and I am forever grateful that she did.

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Appendix

Figure 1: *Picturegoer*, 1933



Figure 2: *Picturegoer*, 1937



Figure 3: Androgynous Inspiration



Left: Hope Williams, portrait by Edward Steichen, *Vogue* photos, 1930.

Right: Katharine Hepburn in costume for *Sylvia Scarlett*, by Ernest A. Bachrach, 1935.