

THE THINGS THAT BIND: HOW GEORGIA NICOLSON NEGOTIATES  
HER IDENTITY AS AN ADOLESCENT GIRL

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A Thesis Submitted to the  
University of North Carolina Wilmington in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters of English

Department of English  
University of North Carolina Wilmington

2007

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## ABSTRACT

In a series of novels by Louise Rennison, beginning with Angus, Thongs and Full-frontal Snogging, female protagonist Georgia Nicolson tries on various articles of clothing like thongs and bras and applies makeup like “lippy” and mascara, in an attempt to find acceptance from her peer group. The Georgia series falls within the framework of young adolescent literature, as well as in the category known as “chick lit jr.” This narrative addresses issues of negotiating identity and power; and it demonstrates the pervasive elements of both trying on gender and consumerism as females move out of adolescence. This means that Georgia merely reflects the culture she consumes; concurrently, however, she sees herself as a casualty of consumerism and gender roles, realizing the “tyranny” of elements of femininity. I argue that the emergence of chick lit and chick lit jr. uphold debilitating notions of femininity and masculinity; at the same time, however, chick lit succeeds in attracting many female readers by its humor and levity—allowing these readers to identify, at least in part, with the characters who are initiated into the role of female adolescent. Therefore the adolescent females can empathize with a protagonist who shaves, waxes, wears bras, or applies makeup, thus revealing the indoctrination of girls by a beauty culture glorified in magazines, movies, and television shows—spread by other girls and inherited often through mothers’ examples—into a world of consumerism and gender expectations. Like the protagonists, the readers of chick lit and chick lit jr. texts must also learn how to mediate their identity as young women. This means that when an adolescent girl reads such books, she must learn to use language to dissect, prod and constantly rewrite the existing constructs as it relates to her quest for acceptance by male and female peers and adults as a “perfect” female.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My thanks go to my committee, Dr. Reilly and Dr. Ashe, and my director, Dr. Sweeney who guided and pushed me through this process.

I would also like to thank my family, Kyle, Kristen, Joseph, Dad, and my friends, who have helped and supported me through the trials of getting my degree. From listening to me worry and stress over deadlines to talking me through the anguish of graduate work, I have been supported by numerous people.

I would especially like to thank my Mom who always stressed the importance of working hard and rising to challenges.

Solomon was right when he said in Ecclesiastes 12:12: “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is wearisome to the flesh.”

“Am I ever to be free from the tyranny of my basoomas?” (117).

Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging records the thoughts of a British adolescent protagonist, Georgia Nicolson. She experiences blunders, missteps and overall shock at the concept of leaving her prepubescent girlhood and entering an unknown realm of growing breasts and body hair. She fears her lineage as a female, worrying that she “may end up like the rest of the women in [her] family”(1)—big-breasted. She even tries on her mom’s thong, and feels “ridiculous” as it goes “right up her bum” (173). Georgia confronts the typical adolescent dilemmas of parental authority, friendship, romantic endeavors with the opposite sex, appearance and her morphing physiology. From accidentally removing her eyebrows to cutting her legs shaving to going to a boy’s house for kissing lessons, she approaches her “womanhood” with quite a bit of wit and sarcasm. Yet despite her tongue-in-cheek commentary, Georgia still learns to regulate her sexuality and femininity in order to fit in with and please those around her, including her peers and adults. Certain articles, as the pictures on the book covers suggest, symbolize womanhood to her, things like bras, thongs, makeup, silky nightgowns and, to use British slang, “snogging” boys. She attempts to negotiate her femininity with a corps of girl schoolmates and a cache of magazines and how-to books confiscated from her mother, trying to reconcile the various and conflicting notions and expectations placed upon her. British author Louise Rennison employs a mock-diary format. The titles show the books’ penchant for makeup, boys, bras and underwear: Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging; On the Bright Side, I’m Now the Girl Friend of a Sex God; Knocked Out by My Nunga-Nungas; Dancing in My Nuddy-Pants; Away Laughing on a Fast Camel; Then He Ate My Boy Entrancers; and

Startled by His Furry Shorts. This series belongs both within the categories of Young Adolescent Literature and chick lit, thus it fits snugly into the category Joanna Johnson, a Professor at the University of Texas who studies children's and adolescent literature, terms "chick lit jr." (141).

Understanding the history of chick lit is necessary in approaching and deciphering the Georgia series. Chick lit, a literary phenomena, has flooded the market in the past two decades, though as Johnson points out, it is hardly new: "because of their hip and trendy references, the genre is mistakenly seen as new" (143). "Chick lit" refers to a mutable (in the sense that it adjusts itself to current language and methods of communication as well as fashion trends) genre of literature geared toward, as the name would suggest, women. Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary receives credit for launching the genre in the 1990s with the sale of over 10 million copies in thirty different languages (Maddison 4). If Fielding's Bridget Jones is a precursor to Rennison's Georgia Nicholson, it leaves Louisa Alcott's Jo or Jane Austen's Emma to be (albeit a great grandmother several times removed) precursor to Bridget.<sup>1</sup> Bridget Jones's Diary, as Johnson explains, contains the perfunctory self-deprecating female protagonist who struggles with her self-image (focused mainly on her appearance, especially as it relates to being attractive to males) and seeks success in her work place and social sphere. "With backdrops of fashion and shopping, [chick lit] embraces, or at least acknowledges, the power of consumer culture" (142). If chick lit is about adult women who struggle with self-image but eventually find a way to self-actualization, chick lit jr. can be defined as follows:

Any novel where you have a smart, spunky, benighted female heroine who

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview, Rennison said she had not read Bridget Jones's Diary until after she had finished her first novel in the series: "Before I read it I thought, well, of course they're bound to be similar: They're both diaries. But when I read it I saw what they mean. And it's interesting: Helen Fielding is also from Yorkshire. It's a culture where anecdotes is important" (Anronik 34).

is anywhere between maybe 22 and 40ish, who will, in the course of the novel, have awful things happen to her but will persevere, usually with her cadre of eccentric friends, her semi-dysfunctional family and perhaps a pet [. . .] If we were to change the ages to between thirteen and seventeen, we would have a pretty solid description of chick lit junior. (Johnson 143)

So, adhering to the definition, Bridget Jones, a chick lit heroine, experiences foot-in-mouth disease, wardrobe malfunctions, make-up crises, and dating drama, yet, in the end, secures the rich and eligible Mark Darcy. Likewise, Georgia Nicolson, as an adolescent, experiences similar make-up missteps, boyfriend disappointments and failings, and familial embarrassments, yet each diary ends with her finding a Sex God (a Sex God being any attractive and dateable adolescent boy, and in her first diary, that boy is eighteen-year-old Robbie) of some sort to date. Chick lit jr. falls within the young adolescent literature framework (a framework that involves the ubiquitous coming-of-age story of self-absorption, sexual exploration, identity-crisis, conflict, and power struggle as a model in YA novels). This comprises the standard of chick lit and chick lit jr.

Chick lit, and by extension, chick lit jr., face two stigmas in the literary world: first, females almost exclusively author this form, and second, shortening literature to “lit” implies a diminished quality of writing (Johnson 141). Historically, women, including Jane Austen or Louisa May Alcott, struggled to attain stature and esteem as writers of literature. Often viewed, as Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, as a ‘damned mob of scribbling women,’ men critiqued their work as lacking depth, legitimacy and literary worth (qtd. in Frederick 231). Rather ironically, Hawthorne’s letter responded to the popularity of women’s work which he viewed as taking away from the sale of his own “literarily superior” work. Even still, some critics launch a similar

complaint about the popularity of chick lit today, arguing that women who read chick lit or chick lit jr. take away from the purchase of actual “literature.” While some women writers (Virginia Woolf or Zora Neal Hurston) have been granted literary respect—entering the canon and anthologies of literature around the 1980s—writers of chick lit experience a backlash reminiscent of earlier centuries. They have seemingly resurrected the disrespect of critics—such critiques as Hawthorne’s have re-emerged due to the pop culture phenomenon of “chick lit.” Many dismiss these novels as trashy or imbecilic, leaving some to coin the phrase, the “curse of the pink cover” to refer to the influx of such texts (Memmott 2). However, such a demeaning moniker has not created any slump in the billion-dollar market. Some almost-invisible force draws legions of women in as willing readers of this genre.

The readers of this genre can select from many titles and numerous authors. I will consider other examples of chick lit jr. and YA literature, both the works that preceded and have since followed Bridget Jones, to add texture to and deepen my analysis of the Georgia series. Other adolescent works, including Diary of Adrian Mole and The Rachel Papers, (often called dick lit or lad lit (Gill 4) because its mock-writer is a boy), as well as the diaries of young teenager girls like Emily (The Year my Life Went Down the Loo), Mia (Princess Diaries), Lucy (Mates, Dates and Inflatable Bras) create a broader understanding of the Georgia Nicholson series. As with the Georgia narrative, all of these texts address issues of negotiating identity and power, thus demonstrating pervasive elements of both trying on gender and moving out of adolescence that constitute the texts. Literature, in this way, serves as a barometer for culture and society, demonstrating the expectations and desires placed upon women and men, and the consumption of these expectations by readers. So then, texts such as these perpetuate an ideal of



femininity (and masculinity) by the way the characters act and the way in which the consumers reading the texts perceive gender roles through their reading.

Furthermore, I will argue that the emergence of chick lit and chick lit jr. uphold debilitating notions of femininity and masculinity; at the same time, however, chick lit succeeds in attracting many female readers by its humor and levity—allowing these readers to identify, at least in part, with the characters. The fact that adolescent females can empathize with a protagonist who shaves, waxes, wears bras, or applies makeup reveals the indoctrination of girls by a beauty culture glorified in magazines, movies, and television shows—spread by other girls and inherited often through mothers’ examples—into a world of consumerism and gender expectations. Such inculcation of adolescent girls creates a power paradigm that girls must learn to negotiate as they become women who would seek autonomy. That is, adolescent females must “learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function” (Trites 3). To complicate this power paradigm, the adult author of the novels adds her adult interpretation to the adolescent experience, making the text didactic. Amy Pattee, a Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, explains the Young Adolescent framework as such: “Young adult novels written by adults for young people are anthropological statements that reflect not only the conditions of their making but also authorial and social views of adolescent and the adolescent experience” (154).

If the adult author impacts the adolescent readers, the role of female friends influences the female protagonist. Therefore, I will consider the interactions between girls (like Georgia and her friends or Bridget and her friends), and their impact how girls and women arbitrate their identities within the text. Through slumber parties and conversations at work or school, girls and women teach each other how to dress, apply makeup, and “snog.” Chick lit and chick lit jr.

allow these all-important relationships take center stage. In this adolescent-chick lit series, Rennison uses her protagonist, Georgia, to explore how young girls see themselves as female, and how they mediate and try on their “femininity” in what Angela McRobbie, who has extensively studied pop culture and teen magazines, paradoxically calls “well-regulated liberty” (262). Here, the protagonists of chick (and dick lit) are able to reinvent, recreate or change their identities through clothing, make-up and dialogue, thus they purchase their identities, so rendering them manufactured and inauthentic. That is, what appears to be freedom of experimentation among girls (and boys) with clothing and make-up and economic freedom to purchase such goods, still entails elements of repression and regulation. Though young girls can achieve status and acceptance among friends by wearing certain clothes, kissing certain boys or applying certain makeup, the power is only obtained through a specific framework constructed by various forces and apparatuses—such as magazines, consumerism, family and school. In this way, a girl becomes a subject and object as Wendy Burns-Ardolino, a popular culture scholar, explains: “The girl experiences her body not as part of her, but as a separate entity which draws attention to her, exposes her, brings her out into the open, the public” (46). Georgia encapsulates this struggle and swings between the extremes of empowerment and repression—between liberty and regulation.

Finally, I will consider how females showcase the complexity of chick lit in their everyday lives as consumers, and the protagonists of the texts showcase how a clear interpretation of a feminine place is problematic for readers. On one hand, females have the power of money, being able to consume and occupying the largest sector of the buying population. On the other hand, however, they purchase those things which allow them to follow the societal norms of beauty: shaving, waxing, and cosmetics. So Georgia, and possibly females

in general, becomes a consumer, buying items that guarantee her acceptance (including makeup, clothing and undergarments). In this way, chick lit jr. in general, and the Georgia Nicholson series specifically, raises the question: “Without shopping, could chick lit exist?” (Wells 61). That is, to be successful as an adolescent girl who will eventually mature into a woman, Georgia must be successful as a shopper and consumer—inextricably intertwining economics with femininity. So consumerism complicates her notions of femininity and confuses her ideas of self as a woman who is both a commodity and consumer. This supports the idea that both Georgia, as the female protagonist, and potentially, the readers find themselves unsure of how to interpret the notion of female agency within a consumer culture.

If the portrayal of adolescents in chick lit jr. potentially unsettles readers and confuses notions of power and autonomy, and if young readers remain unable shift through opposing ideas of self as a social construction, then where is chick lit jr.’s place? It is important to analyze the implications of texts such as the Rennison series as a spring board to launch conversations about the female adolescent experience. Through such dialogue, an individual can decipher her role as a girl and how that role can be prescribed through books, magazines, peers and adults. That is, adolescent girls should see a variety of portrayals of females and males and then consider how the self can become a subject and an object. Pedagogically, chick lit jr. can function as a means by which readers, both adult and adolescent, can identify and discuss various social constructs and modes of powers. Though no author could create a book free from didacticism, social constructs or power paradigms, discussing the inadequacy of binary systems in establishing an individual’s identity allow such literature to have a new role even if its form patterns itself after an older style of writing.

## The Form and Style of Chick-Lit

“The first-person, confessional mode of chick lit further enhances readers’ identification”  
(Benstock 256)

Chick lit’s various forms have allowed multiple groups to adopt the genre: feminists, post-feminists, adolescents, Christians (“Censorship Roundup”). Each group, rather ironically, claims to employ this genre to empower its cause either by subverting the current view of women or adhering to certain notions of masculinity and femininity apparent in chick lit. Regardless of the reasons the genre may be embraced by its multiple groups of readers, the impact of chick lit is undeniable. A newspaper article published in June of 2006 claimed: “Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary, published in the UK in fall 1996, unleashed a battalion of Bridgets, launching one of the biggest tidal waves in publishing history [. . .] Women cried out for more funny, lighthearted novels about “singletons” like Bridget who were searching for love, job satisfaction and the perfect pair of shoes” (Memmott 3). The market, at this time, has been inundated with titles under the genre due to the current demand.

One of the most notable features of chick lit and chick lit jr. is the ubiquitous first-person confessional style of the genre. The Georgia diaries follow the pattern typical in chick lit, using humor to offset and unsettle typical and accepted ideas of women functioning in society: “[Chick lit and chick lit jr.] use humor to realistically portray emotionally difficult adolescent and preadolescent development and maturation, usually featuring a character whose search for identity is less than graceful, and thus, easily identifiable to the young reader” (Johnson 142). Previous works of literature could have arguably inspired such a diary format: “Although nineteenth-century popular novels probably do not immediately come to mind when one thinks of “chick lit jr.,” the twentieth- and twenty-first century phenomenon finds its roots in

the nineteenth-century precursors with the realistically flawed young female protagonist featured in most present-day YA novels” (Johnson 144). A shift in the voice of the narrator found in the diary or letter-form offers an inward and vulnerable view of the narrator and a disruption to the typical novel format. Fielding, like many other authors of this genre, presents her protagonist as a diarist, in what Morton calls a “mock-diary” (2). This format links Bridget Jones and the Confessions of Georgia series to the epistolary tradition of novels:

Chick lit’s use of the diary form, journals, letters, and e-mail links it to the epistolary tradition and to the novel that emerged out of private modes of writing commonly associated with women. It also links contemporary chick lit to the novel of psychological development that emerged in the early twentieth century. (Benstock 255)

Since the letter/diary format does not conform to the more formal and traditional third-person omniscient narrator, the epistolary novel was an acceptable form of writing for women throughout the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. Cook defines the typical characteristics of the epistolary form by pointing to “its paradoxical self-positioning between the private order of human experience and public world of print [and] its status as a peculiarly ‘feminine’ genre that brings into play [a] constellations of issues of gender and privacy linked with the public sphere” (22). The emotionality and overall candor of letter writing or diaries seems feminine in nature; or it shows what Favret observes as “interior spaces and female vulnerability” (5). Wells, in addition to linking the diary format to the epistolary form as Benstock does, also likens it to the stream-of-consciousness technique “pioneered by Virginia Woolf and other modernists, which gives the reader the sense of being inside the mind of the character” (Wells 67). Such first person narration and stream-of-consciousness confession

allows readers the impression that diarist is speaking directly to them; such technique, as Ferris argues, creates the appeal of chick lit, and chick lit jr., to its readers (Ferris 4).

The goal of the diary-confessional format of chick lit jr. texts, like the Georgia Nicolson series, appears to be to prepare adolescent readers for life as fashion-conscious, male-seeking, emotionally-charged young women. Rennison describes her process of entering the adolescent mind of her character as such: “[My] research for [the] books requires many hours hanging around with 14-year-olds which is ‘Brilliant - the best fun known to humanity. It’s all boys, make-up, laughing and, er, that’s it’” (“Confessions of Georgia Nicolson”). To make her books even more accessible, she includes a glossary of British slang as a stylistic feature to help her American readers. Louise Rennison, in her speaking engagements for her book series, interacts with adolescent boys and girls who often relate to and comment on her character as representing their experiences as adolescents. While the YA tradition usually features adult writers grappling with morality issues for adolescents—sex, pregnancy, death—Rennison claims to have a more whimsical approach to adolescence, dealing with kissing and makeup. This seemingly makes her more hip and in tune with the “real issues” among teen girls today, like dating and makeup. In that way, Georgia turns into an effigy of “modern” womanhood, displaying the common female adolescent rites of passage in the navigation to female adulthood. Not only females use this prototype of Georgia to “normalize” this movement from young girl to adult woman; males internalize the inadvertent lessons from Georgia’s diaries. Rennison remarks on her interaction with one young male reader as such: “I had a boy say to me about Angus, Thongs and Full-frontal Snogging, ‘I really wished I would have read this book years ago, because then I would have realized how mad girls were. I wouldn’t have wasted all this time thinking they were not’” (Confessions of Georgia Nicolson). This comment is disturbing in and of itself, as a blatant

scourge on the sanity and reason of women. Though the British slang “mad” does not refer to an individual who is diagnosed with a mental disorder, it does leave room to question the mental ability of an individual. In addition, the author seems to endorse such sentiment, including it on her webpage as if it compliments both her writing and her accurate representation of women.

However disturbing such a comment may be, and however little Rennison does to combat it, Juliette Wells argues in “Mothers of Chick Lit? Women Writers, Readers and Literary History”: “Because chick lit has no [moral] imperative, it can extract humor value from embarrassments and misunderstandings without belaboring them” (53). Here, Wells refers to adult women who read chick lit, and assumes that as adults, these women can discriminate between forms of entertainment and modes of indoctrination. In this way, such women can dismiss chick lit as superficial entertainment. Conversely, Roberta Trites, who broke new ground with her study of Young Adolescent literature, would view literature geared towards adolescents as having an implied moral imperative from the adult who authors it. The YA tradition, as Trites argues, includes books that can be “subversive—but sometimes only superficially so. In fact they are often quite didactic; the denouements of many Young Adult novels contain a direct message about what the narrator has learned” (ix). Whereas Wells dismisses a power dynamic, Trites claims two types exist within YA literature: “authority within the text and the authority of the author over the reader” (xii). In this way, chick lit jr. could be included in the tradition of YA books to which Trites refers; it includes books that “have many ideologies [and] spend much time manipulating the reader” (x). This manipulation, however, occurs seemingly unbeknown to the adolescent female reader.

Not only does the young reader remain largely unaware of the subtle indoctrination, often authors like Rennison want a pardon from exacting moral or social imperatives to the readers. It

also means a character such as Georgia Nicolson may be flaky, a little self-centered, or overly obsessed with her appearance, and in all of this the reader should “extract humor” rather than moral guidance, social awareness, or feminist ideology:

The main character Georgia is really based on my experiences of when I was fourteen. I wrote the book to make myself laugh. I always wrote what I remembered making me laugh when I was that age. I didn't attempt to teach. I didn't attempt to do anything except I wanted Georgia to be a decent person. I wanted her to be someone who is a bit stupid and self-obsessed and difficult and funny and rude, and a bit jealous and all those other things. But I wanted her to have a good heart. (Confessions of Georgia Nicolson)

Such sentiment for chick lit jr. on the author's part over-simplifies chick lit jr.'s place in the YA tradition and its ability to “interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual” (Trites 20). It is here where the frivolity of chick lit jr. disarms the reader: Is it lighthearted fun for teen and adult women to read these books and identify with the protagonists? Or do the texts make a larger statement about what it means to be a successful female who acts and dresses in a certain manner? If the text does make such a statement, how does that message impact adolescent girls? Georgia and her diary series, despite attempts to escape any accountability, cannot be merely dismissed as comedic or trivial.

Seemingly, the form and style of chick lit jr. remains, at a surface level, lighthearted, humorous, and blithe. The books attempt to claim to be nothing more than capricious representations of typical women and adolescents in their everyday lives. That is, as an author, Rennison denies that she might attempt to use Georgia to make statements about finding agency in and through womanhood, or to critique society's current projection of femininity. But as readers look beyond the surface level (so disregarding the authors' immunity) into the



implications of such fanciful representations of females as fashion-istas and make-up artists who can deftly snag Sex Gods if they play their cards right, they will realize much more exists than merely making the reader laugh. Instead, an aware reader should realize the problematic nature of dismissing the characters as merely flaky and whimsical, or fodder for mindless and leisurely entertainment. Adult and adolescent readers should be roused to “disturb” (Trites) the power-repression dynamic engaged by the author and the culture in which she lives, even if they do so between laughs and chuckles. However, such an idealistic approach to reading chick lit and chick lit jr. requires self-awareness that could potentially be beyond an adolescent. The disparity between laughing at tragic representations of femininity and yet identifying with the female protagonist as if her experiences are every woman’s is difficult to maneuver. The first place that evidences the struggle between these two forces is the cover of the book.

## The Marketing and Cover Art

“Many industry people argue that the cover is the foremost aspect of the book [. . .] The cover of the book is often the reader’s first interaction with it—the consumer’s initial reading of the text” (Yampbell 347).

The first and most noticeable aspect of chick lit and chick lit jr. is the cover art. In her analysis of the chick lit genre, Suzanne Ferris, in Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction, begins with an observation of the cosmetology of chick lit by noting the “genre’s ubiquitous pink, fashion-conscious covers” (1). Novels in the realm of “chick lit” make themselves obvious with their unmistakably “chick-litty” cover art designed to appeal to women and adolescent girls. The covers of the books display pastel, or otherwise feminine, colors—pink, yellow, purple, light blue, light green. In addition to the coloring, the books’ covers are bent toward female fashion and make-up. They have images of bras, underwear, make-up, mini-skirts, high heels and other “girly” things. A mere glance at a book usually determines with accuracy whether or not the book fits under “chick lit”: “Somehow chick lit has morphed into books flaunting pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels” (Mazza 18). As Stephanie Harzewski observes, the “kitschy covers” of the novels offer “snack-food literature” to women and teen girls for quick and easy consumption (30).

Cat Yampbell analyzes the YA book industry by examining covers of various books on the market, and how the covers often undergo regular transformation to increase sales. While she focuses on YA literature in general, the application to chick lit jr. is obvious. The marketers of YA literature, and by extension chick lit jr., seem to understand quite well that “teens, particularly teen girls, are smart savvy shoppers and they want the look of what they read to reflect the current trends. Hence, the covers that have bold single images or use the most popular

colors of the season tend to fare very well” (Yampbell 357). Rennison’s books have been released as hardback books and paper back books with various covers, some of which have actual people and other which have cartoon images. Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging, first published in Britain in 2001 with a cover that is not available in American stores, has several variations of covers—the pink one with cartoon green, lacy underwear (2003) and the hardback cover with an arm and leg of a girl (no face, of course) on a sofa with a cat (2006). The hardback cover less explicitly demonstrates its chick lit jr. nature since it lacks the typical make-up or fashion bent—it shows a more neutral image of anatomy that is not sexually charged. On the Bright Side (2003) has a white cover, and only a cartoon tube of lipstick in its center, almost as if a girl will have everything she needs for a Sex God if she has lipstick. The re-released cover shows a more sexual image of a boy and girl kissing. Knocked Out (2004) has a yellow cover with a cartoon blue and red polka-dotted bra. The hardback cover (2003) has a girl with noticeable breasts on the phone. Dancing (2004) has a cartoon picture of bare legs crossed in front of an Eiffel tower image on a sky blue background—here sexuality is “exoticized” by becoming international. The hardback (2004) has a pair of high heels near the bare crossed legs of a girl. Another series of covers shows various sets of cartoon legs on each of the early covers with a young girl in a short skirt and knee socks, so as to perpetuate a school girl image. The most recent three books published do not follow the typical cartoon image of feminine products and body parts of the first four. Away Laughing (2004) has a hardback cover of a plaid mini-skirt with legs covered in knee socks. Another version of the cover (2005) has a non-cartoon picture of the back of two girls in halter tops and tight jeans dancing. Then He Ate (2005) has the purple cartoon cover of a mini-skirted girl in front of a scooter. The new cover has a girl in a short, tight skirt with a tank top, her face is not visible, and she’s wearing heels and swinging her

purse behind her. Startled (2006) only has one cover; it shows a girl in bed with a face mask and cucumbers on her eyes, implying that adolescent girls must go through such beauty rituals to be normalized. Rennison's most recent book in the series will be called Love is a Many Trousered Thing and will be released July 2007. It is clear by looking at the covers and titles of the Georgia series that the books set the precedent for beauty products, fashion and shopping. Through these covers, girls begin their indoctrination with the idea that underwear, lipstick, tight jeans, short skirts and breasts make for a feminine and fun read. The covers of the books for other chick lit jr. titles have similar features and display similar ideologies, as well.

As an additional marketing technique for selling chick lit and chick lit jr., many websites have been created by authors and publishing houses to accommodate the influx of readers and to promote the genre as easily consumable and highly fashionable. Chicklitbooks.com offers book snippets of new releases, chat rooms for discussions with authors, and a database with chick lit. The site proclaims to be authentic in its love for chick lit, and therefore a legitimate resource for other women who love chick lit. According to the site, any reader with any variety of interest can find books that cater to her fantasies. The British companion to the American website, chicklit.co.uk, offers similar information replete with dating tips for British readers and links to online dating services. Some authors create websites specific to their own books. Following suit, Louise Rennison has a website for Georgia Nicolson: [www.Confessions of Georgia Nicolson](http://www.Confessions of Georgia Nicolson). This site includes both an American and British site, and shows the different book covers and slightly different titles for each country's series.<sup>2</sup> Here, Rennison's character, Georgia, leaves notes to readers, an author biography appears, and a dictionary to British slang for the Americans is included. Girls can even join a Georgia club or download ringtones. One

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<sup>2</sup>According to the website, the titles for the British series are as follows: Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging, It's O.K., I'm Wearing Really Big Knickers, Knocked Out By My Nunga-Nungas, Dancing in My Nuddy Pants, And That's When It Fell Off in My Hand, And Then He Ate My Boy Entrancers, Startled by His Furry Shorts.

of the Georgia Nicolson books ([Then He Ate My Boy Entrancers](#)) has a companion cd that has an author interview, screen savers, and a link to the website.

For many women, the marketing method that most effectively sells books is the camaraderie they feel with the protagonists—that is, they have the ability to say, “Oh, I have felt that way before!” or “I know exactly how that is!” Women and teens reading chick lit can find gratification in the ability to identify with the personalities, insecurities, or circumstances of the characters they read about. Althusser calls the ability of a person (or the reader) to see her self in another person (the protagonists) “interpellation” or “hailing.” Perry Nodelman uses the theories of Althusser to show how a text in the YA genre has cultural assumptions about identity and authenticity embedded within it. According to the theories of Althusser, ideologies sway people by providing them with sense of who or what they are: “Assuming that the theoretical scene [of a person saying ‘Hey, you there’ to another on the street] takes place, the hailed individual will turn around [so] by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree conversation he becomes a subject” (177). Nodelman sees this interpellation as particularly relevant in the study of children’s and adolescent literature because of they are easily influenced and swayed by media, adults and culture ideologies—children and adolescents have a strong desire to “fit in” and find approval. That is, a reader, especially a young girl, willingly subjugates herself to the author and text so as to ensure the feeling of “Yes, that’s me,” and, as Nodelman observes the logical conclusion being, “tell me what I need to own [or do or say or wear] to keep on being it!” (178).

A character like Bridget Jones, therefore, potentially legitimizes the struggles of single (white) women in their careers and love life:

The genre’s aim of eliciting a response of “I’m exactly like that” or “That just happened to me!” has really struck a chord with women in their twenties and

thirties who want to be reassured that they are not alone in screwing up their lives—or that screwing up doesn't preclude a happy ending. (Vnuk 42)

As book critic Catherine Andronik says of Rennison's Georgia, "Her language may be pure British, but her experiences, emotions, and humor are universal" (Andronik 33). Though the concept of universality may be a farce, the idea that a woman or teen reader of chick lit may be able to "normalize" her experience by seeing it as something all women must endure offers comfort. In this way, many female readers can enjoy reading a book because, though it promotes consumerism, makeup, and waxing, it still gives the readers a sense of community and legitimacy—and therefore an element of power—vis-à-vis the female protagonist who might be in a place similar to them. This sets the stage for the Rennison series to draw in young female readers and perpetuate such ideas among adolescent girls by sustaining the conflicting power and repression dynamic of femininity. On one hand, Georgia wants to wear lipstick, mascara, and short skirts, while on the other hand she criticizes a school mate, "Wet Lindsay," for wearing thongs that go up her bum. Georgia at the same time she embraces creating "a snogging scale" to record her kisses with Sex Gods, she rejects Peter, the boy who gives kissing lessons, because she becomes uncomfortable with his overt sexual passes. This leaves the reader and the protagonist in an ambiguous position as Georgia seeks her happy ending.

The problem then becomes: what makes life have a happy ending? Unfortunately, the characters within the novels usually find their happy ending by procuring an eligible male after re-organizing and revamping their career, personality, and/or appearance. In some way, the female protagonist finds herself in some capacity deficient, so she attempts to take herself up to a new level, thus becoming adequate enough to secure a man, get a better job, or secure a faithful group of friends. Bridget Jones begins working on television journalism and dating Mark Darcy;

Lucy (Dates, Mates and Inflatable Bras) gets a new haircut and highlights, solidifies her friendship with Izzie and Nesta, and gets to kiss Tony; Georgia applies her make up, wears the latest clothes, and finally gets a date with a Sex God. This is reminiscent of the Austen era of literature in which happy ending was synonymous with marriage. In Pride and Prejudice, Fielding's acknowledged exemplar for Bridget Jones, both Jane and Elizabeth get married to well-off men, thus securing not only their own happiness, but the well-being of their family. As Ferris observes, "anyone familiar with Jane Austen's oeuvre will immediately recognize in chick lit a kindred wit, the same obsession with choosing a mate, a shared attention to the dailiness of women's lives" (5). These are the happy endings that faithful female chick lit readers seemingly want for their own lives, just as the women readers of the nineteenth-century English novel did. Though Georgia is only a teenager not yet seeking marriage, a similar dogma exists in both eras of literature—females need males and clothing to feel a sense of fulfillment.

Even more problematic, however, than the male-dependent, material-dependent, fabricated happiness condoned by chick lit novels is the conspicuous consumption promoted among both the readers of and characters in the books, as Mica Nava alleges: "The consumer society, as a distinctive form of advanced capitalism, relies to an unprecedented degree for its perpetuation upon the media, advertising spectacle, fashion and the image" (162). Authors use the desires of the majority of people to act as consumers of goods and services, thus creating a consumer culture as a part of their settings in the novel. Rather than mass consumption of beauty products, magazines and clothing being a fictitious tool used to propel a story line, it reflects the current society which continues to consume even these books themselves in mass quantities. Publishing companies have not been blind to the current trends, thus fully capitalizing on this

feverish fashion and makeup consumption that has turned into an obsession of chick lit for many women and teens:

Simon and Schuster/Pocket Books' Downtown Press imprint logo is a shopping bag, while the imprint titles Strapless and Red Dress Ink reflect their protagonists' typically strong penchant for apparel. Avon Trade, an imprint of HarperCollins, features a tote purse as its logo, the imprint slogan—"because every great bag deserves a great book!"—exclaims a marriage between accessories and reading" (Harzewski 35).

In this way, chick lit. jr. inextricably intertwines itself with comodification and consumerism. Cat Yampbell notes of the YA literature enterprise: "The publishing industry is a product of its culture as a producer as well as a site of cultural creation and meaning" (365). So it seems the publishing companies manipulate readers of all ages and genders—but apparently with more success among teen girls and women—into viewing reading and books as yet another accessory to buy. In this way, the culture engenders the publishing industry that can both reflect and create culture. This gives females power to write and create novels as a site of cultural production, as well as offer the publishing industry something to market. In turn, however, the publishing industry exercises their power by subjecting women to certain mandates through images and advertisements that command women to "Buy this" or "Read this" or "Wear this" or "Remove this." The command to "Remove this" leads many females to the often painful art of removing body hair.



### **De-orangutan-ing: The Art and Necessity of Hair Removal**

“My eyebrows are so hairy that they are now approaching the ‘It’s a mustache! It’s a hedgehog!!! No, no, it’s GEORGIA’S EYEBROWS!’ stage. It doesn’t even stop at the head, this rogue hair business. I’ve just inspected my legs. I look like I have got hairy trousers on. Dad’s razor is lying there calling to me, ‘Come on, use me. Just a few little strokes and you could look almost human.’” (Knocked Out 41)

Just like males, female’s bodies have hair follicles in many places; some women have more than other women. At some point, however, visible and abundant hair on a woman’s body became undesirable, so women began defying biology. Teresa Riordan associates the cultural disdain for female body hair with the emergence of the Gillette razor as she explores the inventions used to create feminine beauty, again marrying femininity with consumerism:

Whether Gillette’s company hatched the new market of women on its own or whether it was merely responding to a strong consumer demand is one of the many vexing chicken-or-egg riddles in the history of advertising [. . .] as a business strategy, it was a stroke of genius. While some women are genetically predisposed to sport facial hair, not all do [. . .] but underarm hair is common to all women and it grows perpetually from adolescence [. . .] since a razor does not permanently eliminate hair, a teenager who habituates herself to shaving her armpits acquires a habit that requires a steady investment in new razor blades.

(138)

But even more than shaving underarm hair, women must shape their eyebrows, shave their legs, manicure their bikini region and ensure that no facial hair is visible in order to be deemed acceptable by males. Georgia Nicolson has many humorous hair removal incidents that she

describes in her diaries, as if she attempts to make light of what she views as the arduous process of making her body “hairlessly” acceptable to males.

First, with great irony, Georgia considers herself a “real woman” (20) because she has body hair, yet she must in turn make sure to remove all of the hair that guarantees her womanhood in what she describes as painful plucking and waxing efforts. She chronicles her emerging body hair in this way:

I'll be left lonely and looking out to sea at the end [. . .] possibly with a beard.

I've just found out I've got hairs growing out of my armpits. How did they get there? They weren't there yesterday. I've got some on my legs as well. I'd

better distract myself by getting rid of them with Mum's razor. Oh God! Oh

God! I'm hemorrhaging. My legs are running with blood—I had to staunch the

flow with Mum's dressing gown. (Angus157)

While the image of hemorrhaging after shaving offers a humorous element, Georgia as a young adolescent already begins experiencing the pressure to tame her body hair. She does not experience such pressure, though, unless she knows she will be seeing a boy, more specifically a Sex God named Robbie. She correlates the possibility of loneliness (and her consuming fear of being so) with having a beard and armpit hair—the logical reverse being that she won't be lonely if she removes the offending hair. The fact that she makes herself bleed, then uses her mother's robe to stop the blood points to the hereditary nature of femininity—Georgia follows her mother's example in beautifying herself by removing her hair. In a subconscious way, she seems to resent her mother for having to be female. So she uses her mother's razor, so sustaining injury, and her mother's robe, for stopping the blood. Her body is marked by her desire to fit in with other females and find acceptance from males.

The connection between hair removal and dating to avoid loneliness also is also evident in Bridget Jones's Diary and Mates, Dates, and Inflatable Bras, as Bridget and Lucy share the same process of overall shock as they see and remove body hair. Bridget Jones begins an entire beauty routine once Daniel Cleaver agrees to take her on date:

I have nearly slipped a disc, wheezing through a step aerobics class, scratched my naked body for seven minutes with a stiff brush; cleaned the flat; filled the fridge, plucked my eyebrows, skimmed the papers and the *Ultimate Sex Guide*, put the washing in and waxed my own legs [. . .] kneeling on towel trying to pull of a wax strip firmly stuck to the back of my calf while watching *Newsnight* in an effort to drum up some interesting opinions about things [...] I am a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture [...] and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices. (52)

Though this may paint a laughable picture—wheezing through exercise and then resigning to lying on the sofa eating doughnuts in an egg-cardigan after not seeing immediate results—the element of pathos outweighs the humor. Bridget, like Georgia, feels inadequate and unappealing as she is (leaving her body “to its own devices”); so, she scratches her naked body into submission. Even still, she admits she cannot take the pressure of a Cosmopolitan culture that demands super-model looks. A similar scene ensues for Lucy as she prepares for a “girls’ (let’s scope out the boys) night out.” Of course, she must begin getting ready early with a bath, so noticing her mom’s jar of wax “for removing unwanted hair” (Hopkins 30). She recounts a story of Julia Roberts being publicly crucified at a London film premiere when she revealed her hairy underarms. Lucy sees such a moment as this as repulsive and repugnant to a potential prince charming, so she seeks to avoid such a scene for herself:

Heat up, apply to the area, and then pull off. Sounded simple enough [. . .] I took the spatula and smoothed it on liberally under both of my arm. *Rip it off, in one firm upward motion*, the packet directed [. . .] Ohmigod. OHMIGOD.

Argggghhhh!!! Agony. My eyes began to water and my face flushed red [. . .] I didn't want to be Julia Roberts. Welcome to the world of you have to suffer to be beautiful" (34).

Here Lucy associates hair on females with unattractiveness and the pain of removing said hair with beauty—either way, she must suffer. For Emily (The Day My Life Went Down the Loo) on her way to Devon's party remarks, "It was really impressive, and I was glad I'd shaved earlier, because it was the sort of place that you don't want to go into with hairy armpits" (Maxwell 149). For her, Bridget, Emily and Georgia the pain of possible singleness and embarrassment from unsightly body hair outweighs physical pain found in making a female body beautiful.

Both Lucy and Georgia use their mom's or dad's supplies without permission in an attempt to gain their hairless states. Georgia, like Lucy, does not discuss her hair concerns with her mom; instead she takes matters, or the razor, into her own hands and demonstrates her inability to wield it effectively, thus hemorrhaging from razor nicks. She fails to understand the physiology of hair, questioning why she has it at all. Emily, in The Year My Life Went Down the Loo, feels terror at the thought of not being able to shave her legs before going to her first day at a new school: "Right now I'm in full crisis mode, and if I have to go to my new school with hairy legs, I am going to fall right over and die. Razor, please?" (Maxwell 43).

Georgia views such un-removed body hair as the link between humans and primates, likening herself to an orangutan and blaming her mother for it: "Sadly I did get the orangutan eyebrow gene. She has to do a lot of plucking to keep her eyebrows apart and she has selfishly

passed it on to me. Since I shaved mine off by mistake last term they seem to have gone even more haywire and akimbo” (On the Bright Side 12). Hair symbolizes an animal to Georgia, and the unattractiveness of a woman who does not remove hair is animalistic and savage. To be human and female, Georgia undergoes the torment of hair abstraction.

Mia, in the movie version of Princess Diaries, has a similar eyebrow experience in her transformation into princess under the watchful eye of her queen grandmother (movie). She goes through painful plucking to obtain acceptable eyebrows.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the haywire and akimbo eyebrows of Mia and Georgia emblemize an internal struggle as they attempt to negotiate their femininity. Georgia inherits this struggle from her mother, who also must pluck continuously to keep her eyebrows separate. What Georgia’s mother passes on to her daughter, however, is not only genetic, but also societal. Women’s and teens’ magazines that offer how-to advice and beauty tips; also, these females may also access similar advice on line that gives them pointers on perfecting their physical appearance Georgia learns not only to remove her body hair like her mother, but to also judge and critique those women who may choose not to remove such “rogue” and offensive female body hair: “She isn’t wearing mohair tights. The mohair tights ARE her legs. I have never seen the orangutan gene so rampant [ . . . ] ‘Run way, run away. It’s a manlady, the manlady is coming’ (Rennison 135). Here, social pressure is exerted by girls towards other girls to uphold traditions of hairless beauty among females.

Georgia does refuse to remove, at least at this point in her adolescent life, the hair in her pubic region. She reveals this in her diary when she writes about Lindsay in the locker room: “Lindsay [wearing a thong] didn’t have any hair on her womanly parts! What had she done with it? She couldn’t have shaved it off, could she?” (173). Here Georgia finds herself flabbergasted

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<sup>3</sup>As a site for women’s beautification, Women-Girlpower, claims, “Eyebrows are like picture frames for your eyes - the prettiest eyes can be ruined if they are framed by eyebrows with are badly shaped or not a good match [for the face shape]” (<<http://women.rediff.com/women/girlpower/glamour/eyebrow.phtml>>).

by the lack of pubic hair on her female peer. As a middle school female, she lacks the full understanding of the implication of shaving the pubic area—Lindsay removes the naturally growing hair in her genital region so that she might be more sexually alluring in her thong to her would-be voyeurs. This image of a shaved pubic region also makes Lindsay look childlike since the growing hair symbolizes a movement from childhood to puberty and eventually to adulthood—in other words, the hair should represent sexual maturity. It is as if a female who shaves her pubic hair regresses to a childhood state to perceivably please males. Not to mention, such upkeep of that region adds one more task to the laundry list of things females do to tame their bodies. While Georgia disapproves of this hair removal as seemingly unnatural and grotesque, she fails to verbalize why—it happens on an instinctual and surface level. But she does not identify what makes it problematic; therefore, Georgia does not take ownership of her body as a site of personal autonomy or self-empowerment.

In The Diary of Adrian Mole and The Rachel Papers, two adolescent males approach their body hair in quite a different manner than female adolescents showing the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. On the occasions when Charles arranges to meet with a girl, he goes through his own elaborate grooming process which involves readying his pubic hair for a possible sexual encounter: “With a comb and fingertips I styled my pubic hairs. It was a good idea to spruce myself up for Rachel [. . .] I dried myself, showered in talc” (Avis 43). The adolescent boys do not delve into the realm of physical pain in their efforts to ready themselves for a female, nor do they find shame in body hair. Rather, Charles has a proud fascination with his, wanting to display it in a certain manner for Rachel.

Thus, the desire to remove body hair—a compulsion belonging almost solely to the female gender—signifies a bigger struggle in Georgia than merely fighting a biological (or

genetic) disposition. The problem with the hair removal is not the desire of removing body hair in and of itself; but rather, the problem is that Georgia's (or Bridget's, Mia's or Lucy's) identity and worth as a woman depend on her success in removing the undesirable body hair. She, then, presumably can procure a boyfriend because of this, so avoiding the terrible scrutiny from her peer group at school and the solitary life it promises to bring. The how-to quizzes, techniques and photographs in Cosmopolitan and other magazines, as well as the creams and waxes in her mother's bathroom, have taught Georgia, like the others, that if her body "is left to her own devices," there will be terrible consequences. Burns-Ardolino proposes that such a beauty culture, "[encourages] women to treat their bodies as objects to be controlled, maintained and prodded along" (43). Ariel Levy studies the current beauty and sex trends that impact and influence women (especially in America), and ultimately seem to be reversing the feminist movement in her book Female Chauvinist Pigs. Such social pressures to remove body hair, as Levy notes, shows how female physiques can be sexualized to please others: "Instead of hairy legs, we have waxed vaginas" (87). Georgia and the other teens do not accept their bodies as they are, but must modify and alter it to gain approval—if the hair were to remain in place, Georgia would lose her woman-ness. However, her "woman-ness" involves not only removing hair, but adding the proper makeup. Georgia must learn to entrance boys with the properly adorned face.

### **“Lippy” and “Boy Entrancers”: Make-up and cosmetics the “Natural Way”**

“The well-dressed woman would no longer think of being without several shades of lipstick to provide makeup harmonious with any of her costumes.” (qtd. in Riordan 37)

Pick up a women’s magazine or even a celebrity magazine and you’ll find make-up advertisements and tips. As Teresa Riordan points out in Inventing Beauty, this has been the case for nearly a century:

In 1936, a Ladies Home Journal ad offered: “Powder, rouge and lipstick blended in subtle color harmony is the secret that can transform you into a radiant new being. It doesn’t matter if you’re twenty or forty . . . there is a color harmony make-up that will bring you new loveliness [. . .] The well-dressed woman would no longer think of being without several shades of lipstick to provide makeup harmonious with any of her costumes (37, 41)

Here, Riordan shows how women try to harness identity through purchasing makeup, thus transforming themselves into “radiant beings.” Such a power of creation, as the companies want women to believe, should be a source of power for women—they have the “freedom” and capacity to be lovely and maintain that loveliness as they age. Kathy Piess offers an analysis of the paradox of cosmetics for women in her book Hope in a Jar. She, like Riordan, notes the magazines and cosmetic companies incite women to consume:

Cosmetics today seem quintessential products of a consumer culture dominated by large corporations, national advertising, and widely circulated images of ideal beauty. The origins of American beauty culture lie elsewhere, however, in a spider’s web of business—beauty parlors, druggists, department stores, patent cosmetic companies, perfumes, mail-order houses, and women’s magazines that



thrived at the turn of the century and formed the nascent infrastructure of the beauty industry. (61)

She further notes that “the act of beautifying often becomes a lightning rod for larger conflicts over female autonomy and social roles” (7). She continues to explain that in what was initially termed a “liberation from the fetters of the past,” women gained freedom to buy cosmetics with money they earned from the jobs they worked, so showing a movement toward female empowerment and autonomy (135). In that respect, women traded in corsets and hoop skirts for mascara and lipstick, but they gained no actual agency. Instead, such female consumers of beauty products only feed the mass market as consumers of commodities used to create a certain picture of womanhood: “Ironically, a period that began with cosmetics signaling women’s freedom and individuality ended in binding feminine identity to manufactured beauty, self-portrayal to acts of consumption” (Peiss 135). It is with great pride that Georgia writes in her diary: “I got two new eye shadows and a flavored lip gloss. I wonder if Masimo likes strawberry flavor. I’ve got raspberry as well. Maybe I should mix them for the fruit cocktail-type snogging experience” (Then He Ate 86). Georgia encapsulates this link between her identity as a female and purchasing makeup. Also, makeup ensures that her boyfriend will have a fruit-cocktail kiss, and therefore could not possibly be dissatisfied.

Ironically, when Georgia applies her makeup, she is on a quest to make it “natural:” “It has taken most of the day to achieve my natural makeup look. I wanted the just-tumbled-out-of-bed look, so I only used undercover concealer, foundation, hint of bronzer, eye pencil, eight layers of mascara, lip liner, lippy and lip-gloss, and I left it at that” (On the Bright Side 52). Though an element of tongue-in-cheek is imbedded here by Rennison as a sort of critique on the female obsession with makeup and appearance, there is also present an element of resignation

among the teen girls who seem to willingly acquiesce to the pressure to wear make up to look “naturally” beautiful. She includes this culture of makeup and beauty as if it’s commonplace and prevalent, therefore a necessary initiation into the “cult” of adolescence and adulthood. Georgia goes to great lengths to look as if she’s done nothing to beautify herself. But her beauty is manufactured, and therefore a sham. Furthermore, she attaches her ability to impress and gain acceptance from males and females alike with her ability to create a “natural” beauty through artificial means. Peiss continues with the weight of appearance on female success as it translates to adolescents:

For young women, makeup declared adult status—social and sexual maturity—often before parents were ready to grant it [. . .] the sudden appearance of rouge and lipstick on a teenage girl’s face often accompanied a demand to keep more of her wages, to choose her boyfriends, and to enjoy greater autonomy in leisure activities” (188).

Of course, such “maturity” is relative and artificial. Georgia has moments of maturity, of course, but any teenage girl adorning herself with makeup does not guarantee herself autonomy or maturity. What becomes problematic is not the act of wearing makeup, itself, but believing it makes her more “natural” as a woman, even after it takes the entire day to accomplish. Though Ferris focuses on adult chick lit in her analysis, applications to Georgia can be gleaned from her observation: “Chick lit has emphasized women’s appearance [. . .] The intimate connection between a woman’s appearance and the chances of her (real or perceived) success in bedrooms and boardrooms is an issue that has long been central to discussions of feminism (11). So what complicates the consumption of makeup for feminists is that the inability or lack of desire to wear makeup makes a woman less of a woman because her success with men and careers is tied

to her ability to manufacture acceptable forms of beauty. Or that a woman's appearance can never be authentic because she always alters it with makeup to become the image of something else.

This manufactured beauty is a rite of passage shared among the girls at their slumber parties and gatherings in the girls' bathrooms. Georgia spends hours with her "mates" from school, like Jas or Rosie. Together they gather and apply makeup. As Georgia helps Jas flirt with Tom, applying makeup to look natural is a matter-of-course. Georgia's mother plays a rarely vocal but otherwise pivotal role in Georgia's use of makeup. Usually, Georgia learns by example from her mother—borrowing her tweezers or lipstick. But, Georgia shares a conversation she has with her mother on how makeup can make her nose appear smaller:

Life is so fab. Lalala. I even managed to put mascara on without sticking the brush in my eye. Also I tried out my new lipliner and I think the effect definitely makes my nose look smaller. In a rare moment I shared my nose anxiety with Mum. She said, "We used to use 'shaders.' You know, light highlights and darker bits to create shadow—you could put a light line of foundation down the middle and then darker bits at the sides to sort of narrow it down. (Angus 41)

Makeup, for Georgia, seems an inherited art passed from mothers to daughters. This lineage between women does not depend primarily on verbal communication for its transfer—the magazines, tools, and cosmetics belonging to mothers lying around the houses of teenage girls speak loudly for themselves. Language only supplements the model and example of her mother.

Georgia sees two options as a female adolescent: to wear make up and cute clothes as a means of obtaining a Sex God or to be an academic and career girl, so relinquishing her ability to get a boyfriend. When Robbie, the Sex God, begins kissing Lindsay, Georgia gets depressed: "I

didn't even bother to put makeup on today, it doesn't matter—I'm not trying to impress boys anymore [. . .] I'm just going to take my time to grow up and concentrate on my work so I can get a good job, and so on" (126). Here Georgia makes several conclusions about her role as a female; either she can have a boyfriend and wear make-up and look pretty or she can forget about her looks and boys and pursue a career and education. These become mutually exclusive in her world. Georgia's binary thinking is problematic since these stable binaries cannot be consistently maintained. Obviously, women can have a boyfriend and a job; or, women who chose to forgo wearing make up can still get a boyfriend. In this way, the two categories Georgia wants to create for women cannot be conserved. As the school year draws to a close, Georgia finds herself truly and overwhelmingly happy to make the claim "I'm now the girlfriend of a Sex God!" She then abandons her focus on work to focus on her clothing, make-up and hair. By being a in the position of dating a Sex God, Georgia's life is subsumed with being his girlfriend: "So all is well that ends well . . . I'm Robbie's girlfriend, hahahaha" (222).

One of the most humorous incidents Georgia experiences is her night with Masimo, the Italian-American new lead singer for the Stiff Dylans, at the club watching him perform. She goes through hours of preparation and carefully attaches false eyelashes (boy entrancers) and layers of mascara to achieve her perfect look:

I should buy some more false eyelashes, otherwise known as boy entrancers. You can get some with sparkly bits in them. Or is that going a bit too far? I don't want to blind him, merely mesmerize him [. . .] I can hardly move my eyelids for mascara and false eyelashes. I wonder if they look natural [. . .] Unfortunately when I tried to look up again, I couldn't because my boy entrancers had suck to my bottom lashes. So my eyes stayed shut. (*Away Laughing* 199).

Georgia realizes that she had inadvertently glued her eyes shut as she is conversing with Masimo. So she dances off in a conga line with her friends, waving a hand over her head in hopes of running blindly into the bathroom. Here again, the reader laughs at this image—it’s hugely funny to picture a line of adolescent girls with a blinded one waving her hand over her head because her false eyelashes are stuck to one another. Georgia explains that it took “five million years [to break] free from the conga line since the whole club had joined in” (Away Laughing 200). Such a scene also shows a destructive element amidst the humor to which the indiscriminate adolescent reader may not be attuned. Symbolically, the line of dancers represent the pressures—magazines, mass media, adult women—which the girls follow behind blindly. All at once, a whole room full of girls falls in line with the standard, which symbolically would be dressing a certain way, wearing a certain type of makeup and having false eyelashes.

For Bridget Jones, an adult woman, makeup still holds a prominent position in her ability to snag an eligible bachelor like Daniel Cleaver: “Hmmm. Think will go inspect makeup in case he does come in” (Fielding 38). Bridget does not make the “to-do” that Georgia does about being “natural” with her eight applications of mascara, but she does acknowledge its pivotal role by refusing to be seen by Daniel without makeup properly applied. Emily emails her friend Dru about her preparations for her first day of school: “I wore Kiss Me Mauve lipstick, Moonlit Teal eyeliner, Nautical Navy shadow (highlighted with Crisp Linen shadow), Raven mascara (I know you think I’m too blond for Raven, but I’m thinking of coloring my hair darker), and Glamora blush, with just a really light dusting of bronzing powder. Tasteful and yet subdued” (Maxwell 46). Emily admittedly expects her makeup to make her “feel good” (46) and ensure her popularity with boys and girls. She attempts to create a beauty that appears natural, but ends up revolting her British peers, “You look like an American. Could you *have* on more makeup?”

(47). The British girl, Lucy, wears “kohl on her eyes” and lipstick so she appears sixteen (Hopkins 35). Here Susan Douglas’s (Where the Girls Are) views on makeup would apply: “The makeup kits and dolls [train] little girls to be sex objects and/or moms, the overall message is about regarding yourself and everyone else you know as a commodity to be bought and sold” (Douglass 299). All of these females have in common the fact that they want to buy their beauty at a store and use a magazine and the guidance of their friends and mothers to apply makeup that will legitimize their identity through their appearance. This idea also carries over to the clothing and costumes that girls wear.

### **Olive Costumes and Too-Small Shoes: How to Dress Like a Woman To Get a Man**

“Looks are a form of currency that aid not only one’s search for a mate but also one’s ability to secure that promotion, get that next job, and become a fully realized human being” (Umminger 240)

Clothing and costumes play an often undeniable role in shaping and changing many females’ identities and self-perceptions. Joan Brumberg studied extensively the self-perception of female bodies among American girls through journal entries and interviews spanning the past seventy years. Despite her focus on adolescents in the United States, application can be made to a range of girls across many nationalities, including British girls like Georgia. Brumberg noticed that girls seem to evaluate their success or failure in dressing rooms (128). That is, because “the body is a proxy for the self, selecting clothes for it is always of vital concern” (128). She concludes from her study:

What a girl wears and how she looks in it determine her level of self-acceptance, as well as her relations with her peers. Adolescents are incredibly intuitive about social meaning of clothes, so they understandably invest a great deal of time and energy into selecting and trying on clothing. (128)

Clearly, manufacturers and corporations have picked up on this adolescent need to please and “fit in” with their appearances, so using fashion magazines and store displays to entice teens to buy. However, clothing and costumes can play a dual role—not only as an agent of conformity where girls can look like other girls but also as a agent of empowerment where girls can set themselves apart from others. But, as Naomi Wolf posits in The Beauty Myth: “Costumes and disguises will be lighthearted and fun when women are granted rock-solid identities [. . .] women will be able thoughtlessly to adorn [themselves] with pretty objects when there is no question

that [*they*] are not objects [choosing to use their] faces and clothes and bodies as simply one form of self-expression out of a full range of others” (274). Young adolescent girls, like Georgia, do not always delineate between a rock-solid identity and a less-stable, more fluid identity that depends on others’ perceptions for security.

Georgia and Jas have spent the preadolescent and adolescent years together, creating many memories and stories about their experiences dressing up and applying makeup. This use of clothing allows the girls, at least in part, to form their identity as females. They go to a fancy party and Jas dresses as a cat while Georgia goes as a stuffed olive. Here, they move from merely clothing to costumes, wherein they choose another persona to display. The way in which they choose to disguise themselves reveals important facets of their identity as adolescent women:

I told her about the Cosmo article and so we spent a few hours recalling the fancy-dress party (i.e. the painful incident) and experiencing the emotions in order to heal them. I blame Jas entirely. It may have been my idea to go as a stuffed olive, but she didn’t stop me like a pal should do. In fact, she encouraged me. We made the stuffed olive costume out of chicken wire and green crepe paper—that was for the “olive” bit. It had little shoulder straps to keep it up and I wore a green T-shirt and green tights underneath. It was the “stuffed” bit that Jas helped with mostly. As I recall, it was she who suggested I use a crazy color to dye my hair and head and face and neck red [. . .] like sort of pimento. It was, I have to say, quite funny at the time. Well, when we were in my room. [...] Jas came round. She said it took her ages to get out of her cat suit after the fancy-dress party. I wasn’t very interested, but asked her why out of politeness. She said, “Well, the boy behind the counter in the fancy-dress shop was really good-looking” “Yes,



so?” “Well, so I lied about my size—I got a size ten catsuit instead of twelve.” She showed me the marks around her neck and waist; they were quite deep. I said, “Your head looks a bit swollen up. (Angus, 5)

While the scene between the two girls is framed as an emotional healing from the scars of costumes-gone-awry, this is a very convoluted interaction between Jas and Georgia: is it a power struggle between girls vying for male attention or a “girly” moment of laughter after a painful memory?

First, Georgia and Jas discuss their embarrassing costume situations as they read Cosmo, a magazine filled images of thin models in perfect designer clothes and finely applied make-up. Then, in what would appear to be girls reminiscing about dressing up for a party, Georgia remembers how Jas encouraged her to dye her hair and skin red, which later embarrasses her, and to dress like a shapeless round olive. Georgia submits to the pressure of Jas, and then blames Jas for using such a “crazy” color that humiliates her. She also chooses to dress like a vegetable—a blob of a form that does not reveal any feminine curves or sways when she walks. The olive, after being hollowed out, is then stuffed with a pimento. This, symbolically, represents the hollowness she experiences with her inauthentic identity; the pimento would then be the items (make up, clothing) that she stuffs into her life to find fullness. Georgia laughs as she attempts to blame and fault Jas with her fashion tragedy. Clearly she expects her friend to keep her from being embarrassed, but does not undertake the responsibility upon herself for her friends.

Furthermore, she admits to feigning interest as Jas recounts her experience at the same party dressed in a too-small costume which causes her bodily harm, leaving marks around her neck and waist. Why did Jas lie about her clothing size? To impress the-boy-behind-the-

counter. Georgia is unwilling to show compassion or reprimand her friend for hurting herself by wearing something too small; instead, she insults Jas and tells her she has a swollen head. Here the influential role of males in female clothing may be assessed as a force that often drives many women's choices in clothing and impacts their female friendships.

Often the perception that Georgia, with other adolescent girls, most considers is that of the males. The role of the male in the adolescent girl's world is both salient and convoluted: "These girls believe that boys hold the key to success, whether it is in overall popularity; access to resources and power; or a sense of belonging" (Williams 37). Georgia and Jas, to prove their appeal to males and their social acceptances, wear short skirts in an effort to see how many cars they can get to honk at them: "Me and Jas walked up and down to the main road [in our short skirts]. We wanted to see how many cars with boys in them hooted at us. Ten!! (We had to walk up and down for four hours . . . still, ten is ten!!!)" (Angus 147). Like many adolescent girls, Georgia's mood and happiness are contingent on her social relations, especially with boys. Each social engagement results in fashion consultations and numerous wardrobe changes, each outfit is a group decision: "Clotheswise we decided on a turtle-necked crop top (implies that I am mature for my years, on the brink of womanhood, but doesn't go as far as saying 'I'm desperate for a snog'). In the leg department it was the tight Capri trousers" (On the Bright Side 51). She garnishes the social interactions with her clothing in hopes of presenting a certain image to males. She speaks of "little blue skirt [looking] vair fab" (Then He Ate 189) before she goes to watch Masimo play with his band. She willingly buys a pair of shoes she knows is too small since they match her little blue skirt. In what is reminiscent of Chinese foot binding, Georgia purchases a size four shoe when she wears a size seven, saying as she walks in them for the first time, "Ouch ouch and double merede and ouch" (Then He Ate 186). However, she accepts the

pain on this condition, “I looked in the mirror. They looked fab. I must have them; I must go through the pain for him” (Then He Ate 187). Here she, like Jas, sacrifices her comfort and physical well-being to impress a male with clothing. The shoes impact her ability to walk, and after a night of dancing in them and falling asleep before taking the shoes off, they become embedded in her skin. In fact, she describes, “My skin has been cut by the straps and then in the night everything has swollen up. You can’t even see the straps because the flesh has covered them” (Then He Ate 213). After the doctor came to her house, he had to numb her legs, cut off the shoes, and give her stitches for the deep cuts. The humor of this event is lost in the tragedy of a girl who mutilated her body to impress a boy and her friends with the perfect outfit. But still, the reader wants to laugh as if such a thing is so ridiculous it could never happen to her. Or, possibly the reader laughs with uncomfortable recognition of what may have been her own stupidity in hurting her body to impress someone.

The importance of clothing in YA literature has been evident since books have been written for adolescent girls. As Joanna Johnson points out, Little Women, arguably one of the first YA texts, shows the “laments about not having the right dress” (143). Dress and fashion captivate the March sisters. Before Meg goes to Vanity Fair, the sisters have a discussion about what the girls should wear: “Now, let me see, there’s my new gray walking suit—just curl up the feather in my hat—then my poplin for Sunday [. . .] the violet silk would be so nice; oh dear!” (87). Unfortunately for the March girls, their father does not have the financial resources to support four daughters’ desires for fashion and accessories, like Meg explains: “My blue housedress looks so well, turned and freshly trimmed, that I feel as if I’d got a new one. My silk sacque isn’t a bit the fashion, and my bonnet doesn’t look like Sallie’s” (87). These girls want to increase their acceptance by high society by their fashion and impress possible suitors. While

the March girls learn lessons about vanity and the frivolity of high fashion, they still tie part of their identity into finding a proper husband, and this depends, at least in part, on their appearance.

Lucy, in Dates, Mates and Inflatable Bras, often sews her own clothes adorned with feathers and fancy beads. Still, she feels pressure, as does Georgia, if not to shop for clothing, to dress appropriately before going anywhere, saying, “What am I going to wear? Nesta and Izzie always look fab so I’d better make an effort” (Hopkins 27). As she rummages through her closet, she remarks, “All that stared back at me were last year’s oddments, worn out, boring and babyish. I had a pink phase for a while but it looks too girlie now. I really need new clothes” (28). But after making new clothes, another girl critiques her fashion, “‘Ah, the midget,’ she said, then looked me up and down and laughed. ‘What have you got on? The Eastern look was out years ago. You look like an advert for curry in a hurry’” (157). The confidence she acquired from her clothing diminishes in the criticism of other females.

Emily, in The Day My Life Went Down the Loo, obsesses over going to the mall and shopping. When she moves to England and finds out she must wear a uniform, she decides that her parents “can kill [her] now” (Maxwell 27). But, as a sort of silver lining to the cloud, a cute British boy, Aidan, agrees to take her shopping, but not before she receives some advice from her friend Dru: “If [Aidan] saw you in sweats yesterday, you’ll want to show him that you don’t look like a slob all of the time. I think the batik skirt and halter will say just what you want it to say” (33). As seems typical, Emily goes through the rigmarole of finding perfect outfits, consulting friends, enduring criticism from other girls, and often experiencing either emotional pain (embarrassment) or physical pain (embedded shoes).

For boys like Adrian Mole and Charles, clothing is likewise important in defining their confidence and social acceptance. The pressure they feel to master their appearance is not too unlike the pressure Georgia, Emily and Lucy experience. However, clothing for males represents something other than what it does for girls. For males, clothing becomes a means by which they project power and authority. Adrian makes a shopping list for his father, including a blazer, gray pants, and white shirts. It is because he had tried on his old school uniform, and he had “outgrown it so badly that [his] father is being forced to buy [him] a new one” (82). Adrian is highly embarrassed to wear ill-fitting clothing because it will impact the way others perceive him. What shows his dependence on his appearance for acceptance is his comment about his girlfriend, Pandora: “Pandora admired me in my new uniform. She says she thinks I stand a good chance of being made a prefect”<sup>4</sup> (83). That is, Adrian advances himself to a hall monitor in school by appearing well-groomed and well-dressed. Rather than becoming a sex object valued merely for his appearance, though he does want to impress girls by his looks and clothing, Adrian instead desires to promote himself to a place of “power” through his well-fitting uniform. Here his clothing equals credibility and influence. Charles worries over his appearance in a similar way. Every time he has a date with Rachel, he pays acute attention to his clothing: “What clothes should I wear? Blue madras shirt, black boots, and the old black cord suit with those touching leather elbow-patches” (42). Charles wants to project himself as viable and complete as an individual via his clothing. Adolescents desire clothing that will ensure their acceptance and approval socially by both the opposite and same sex peer groups. This desire to adhere to certain fashion expectations seems particularly prevalent among females. Where males

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<sup>4</sup>A prefect is, in the context of schools, a pupil who has been given limited, trustee-type authority over other pupils in the school, such as a hall monitor or safety patrol. (American Heritage Dictionary, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.)

can use clothing to flaunt authority and esteem, females use their attire to capture and maintain the attention of the other females and males around them.

## Mammary Glands and Their Containers

“A bra is one of your most functional garments, but never forget that it can also be your most enticing. Besides the obvious sex appeal of a push-up, details like embroidery, lace and feminine colors and appliqués can make your bra a tool of seduction that won’t be denied” (Burns-Ardolino 53).

Clothing can accentuate a particularly appealing female area to males—the breasts, which often occupy males’ attention. The decades of the fifties and sixties, according to Susan Douglas, should be called “mammary mania” (259). At this time, massive ad campaigns attempted to sell “bust creams, exercisers, and padded bras” so that women could “compensate for what nature forgot” (259) when it came to endowing them with voluptuous breasts. However, Teresa Riordan, as if from the perspective of an evolutionist, says breasts were a focal point long before the advertising campaigns and bra inventions of the 1950s: “Women’s breasts came into being because a perky, prominent bosom served as a sort of built-in advertisement for female humans” (63). That is, breasts, according to Riordan, become a veritable billboard or flashing neon sign that announces, on behalf of women, “Hi, I’m a healthy fertile female!” (63). Then, she travels with Douglas to the current century and to the new inventions (creams, bras and exercisers), that like Douglas argues during “breast mania,” have allowed women of today to “transform their breasts at a breathtaking pace” (64). Caresse Crosby credits herself the architect of the bra, making it in 1913 out of handkerchiefs and pink ribbon to hide her nipples in her eyelet embroidered dress. And, the technologies have continued at a rapid pace since then, each one claiming so to speak, to “prevent the objectionable sagging and hanging of the breasts and at the same time assist the breast in their natural growth” (93). Breasts are an object of desire among males and females alike, and size and shape are paramount in a female’s identity.

Georgia also associates being an adult female with developing breasts and wearing undergarments to prove such: “I’m bursting with womanhood, I wear a bra!” (Angus 1). Georgia doesn’t even consider herself a woman until she has developed sexual anatomy that will capture the attention of men. However, breasts create a curious dilemma for Georgia. First she beams with pride over arriving at “womanhood,” then she prays that her breasts will not be as large as her mother’s. Georgia critiques the size of her mother’s breast in tandem with the size of her brassiere, all the while desiring to have breasts of her own. It reverses the Freudian stage of penis envy to breast envy from daughter to mother. Melanie Klein, equating the breasts with Freud’s penis<sup>5</sup>, speaks of children idealizing the “mother, in the first place of her breasts”(348), thus the breast and the penis are the “primary objects of desire”(379) that begin in infancy and carry, to some extent, into adolescence. It is here that Klein argues that “biology is destiny,” that because females have breasts and vaginas, they will naturally perform their role of femininity. Georgia envies her mother’s breasts in the sense that she desires her own breast development as a sign of reaching womanhood, even while she resents the inconvenience and obstruction they create with their too-large size. She then defers, or projects, the resentment of her own body to her mother:

Over-the-shoulder-boulder-holder is a hilarious (to my mind) alternative name for a nunga-nunga holder. It originates from my mutti’s enormous basooma-capturers, which she keeps in her top drawer. They look as if they have been designed to support two gigantic boulders. Often when I am in a bored or reflective mood I will rifle through her underwear, marveling at the engineering work required to counteract the strain as she hurls herself around at aerobics and so on. I may suggest to her that she recycles her bras

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<sup>5</sup>Klein, in her essay “Oedipus Complex in the Light of Early Anxieties,” explains how “attitudes to the mother’s breasts are carried over into a new relation to the father’s penis” (379). She argues that “the breast relations [are] the starting point in the following description of the beginnings of the Oedipus complex in both sexes” (378).



and sends them to poor Brownie packs where they could be used on camping trips as tents for the smaller girls. (Confessions of Georgia Nicolson)

Boys, like Adrian (Diary of Adrian Mole) and Charles (The Rachel Papers) show an interest in their mothers' bodies in a somewhat Oedipal way. Adrian remarks of his mother: "My mother sat up in bed in a nightie that showed a lot of her chest" (Townsend 4). While Charles has a more critical view of his mother's body: "What a heap. The skin had shrunken over her skull [. . .] her breasts had long forsaken their native home and now flanked her navel and her buttocks, when she wore stretch-slacks, would dance behind her knees like punch-balls" (Amis 9). For these adolescent diarists, their mothers play a role in perception of sexuality and genitalia—for Georgia, it begins the standard by which she judges her body, and for Adrian and Charles it impacts the way they view female bodies in general. In this way, the mother-figure fills a Freudian role of establishing a sexual nature within her children.

This perception of Georgia degrades her mother's body and what may potentially be her own in the future. Through the intrigue that propels Georgia to explore her mother's undergarments, the belittling comments she makes about her "gigantic boulders" and the "enormous basooma's capturers," she shows disrespect for both her body and her mother's. Georgia explains in a diary entry that her mother claimed that she nearly knocked herself out in aerobics class because "her breasts got out of hand" (173). Though Georgia desires breasts to attract males and assert her womanhood, she does not want to be inconvenienced or slapped in the face by her breasts, so she vacillates between desire and resentment.

The terms used to describe breasts show the objectification and potential humiliation associated with having them. At the same time, the reader may find herself chuckling at the vivid description, almost despite herself, Georgia gives in her dictionary:

**nunga-nungas**—basoomas. Girls’ breasty business. Ellen’s brother calls them nunga-nungas because he says that if you get hold of a girl’s breast and pull it out and then let it go—it goes nunga-nunga-nunga. As I have said many, many times with great wisdomosity, there is something really wrong with boys. (Angus 292)

The very fact that a boy gives the name for breasts, rather than a girl/woman claiming a right to name them shows disempowerment. Furthermore, the breasts, or nunga-nungas, are merely objects for play and pleasure to boys, like Ellen’s brother. “Pull[ing]” a woman’s breast out and then “let[ting] it go” so it bounces in a “nunga-nunga-nunga” hardly seems appealing or complimentary to women. Though Georgia acknowledges, with great “wisdomosity” that something is “really wrong with boys,” she continues to use the very term she finds offensive to describe her breasts. Georgia, like many of the female readers of chick lit, adopts the discourse set up by males, thus explaining how a disempowering language can be humorous. Even though an element of humor exists, it only masks the underlying power struggle—it still remains a viable force. In this way, the power dynamic is always obscured in these humorous moments where Georgia is both subject and object.

A conflict develops within Georgia—she wants to embrace her sexuality and explore her body, yet she cannot reconcile that with her desire to secure a boyfriend, preferably a Sex God. “I lay on my arm until it went numb and then I lifted it (with the non-numb arm) onto my breasts. I wanted to see what it felt like to have a strange hand on them. It was quite nice, but what do I know? I’m too full of strange urges to think properly. Should I wear my bra to the party?” (64). She acknowledges her urges, but does not have the verbiage to deal with or identify the desires she has. Despite the presence of sexuality that hair removal, especially from the pubic region, implies and the use of breasts as sites of sexual stimulation, the Georgia series,

unlike Gossip Girl<sup>6</sup> or the Emily series, does not have overt or gratuitous sexual overtones.

Rather, the elements of sexuality remain in the background, which allows a younger audience to read the books. However, Georgia and her friends still grapple with the place of males in their world and how their physical bodies impact their interactions with the males.

To display her breasts, Bridget Jones purposely wears clothing to show them off in an effort to capture the attention of her boss, Daniel. Her efforts to show off her breasts are so successful, she receives the following email from him: “P.S. I like your tits in that top” (Fielding 26). Emily also attempts to capture the attention of Aidan, who compliments her as being hot: “I’m hot! He thinks I’m hot! Oh, I am so hot! [. . .] do you think he likes me just for my body?” (Maxwell 189). She also accentuates her breasts with jewelry and low-cut tops, wearing a “long, long rope of black shiny beads that were knotted just below [her] boobs,” (199) but gets offended when Aidan calls her a “bit of goods” (Maxwell 209). While she wants to attract a boy by using her body, presumably her breasts, she doesn’t want a boy to like her merely for her body. Here, Emily may object to unwanted attention for the same reason she seeks attention—she feels social pressures to exert herself as an empowered individual as well as to attract male attention and acceptance. Lucy (Dates, Mates and Inflatable Bras) struggles with the size of her breasts, feeling that they are too small especially compared to her friends Izzie and Nesta: “My bra doesn’t fit [...] it just seems nothing fits. Nothing. I don’t fit. And this stupid bra is just the last straw [...] I looked at the two of them, both gorgeous with long glossy hair and fabulous cleavages” (Hopkins 124). Lucy associates her social status with her bra size; since she sees her chest as inadequate, she views her friendships and boyfriend potential as inadequate.

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<sup>6</sup>Gossips Girl is a series written by Cecily von Ziegesar about teenage girls in the Upper East Side in New York. This series contains illicit drug use, overt sexuality, and under-age alcohol consumption. The stories are narrated by an unknown female who maintains a website with all the “gossip” of the girls attending Constance Billard private school.

Furthermore, she begins to feel more confident in her friendships and her appearance when Izzie and Nesta offer her something for her “chest problem”: “An inflatable bra. A perfect 34C. ‘Pamela Anderson eat your heart out. Baywatch here I come’” (134).

Where girls obsess over their breasts, boys seem similarly enamored by their penises and with females’ breasts. For example, Adrian realizes that he had never “seen a real female nipple,” then asks his girlfriend, Pandora, to “show [him] one of her nipples but she refused and buttoned her cardigan up to the neck and went home” (Townsend 155). While he can use language to express his desires to see nipples or engage in sexual “play” with Pandora, he experiences a similar confusion about his sexuality as Georgia despite his ability to verbalize. Pandora, rather than express her feelings back to Adrian, covers (or hides) herself and walks away. Their immaturity as adolescents is evidenced by their inability to communicate or express their desires and fears.

Adrian and Charles continually discuss the size and growth rate of their genitalia. Adrian regularly records the measurements he makes of his penis: “Just measured my thing. It has grown one centimeter. I might be needing it soon” (63). Adrian views his appendage, similarly to how Georgia views her breasts, as a sign of reaching adulthood. However, he only sees his penis as a tool useful when girls are around. Likewise, Charles views his penis as a monument to his masculine virility using “his sharp erection,” (153) “uncooked sausage,” (160) or “rig” (100) to “poke girls” (13). Here it seems that males have a fetish with naming sexual anatomy. The books with female protagonists do not discuss vulgar slang terms for penises, vaginas or breasts, as much as they use humorous slang terms to demean the female body. Georgia uses terms like “nunga-nunga” or “basoomas” almost in jest as if her humor will offset her discomfort with her own body. Conversely, the males in the chick lit jr. books and the male protagonists of dick lit

books often have somewhat derogatory “names” for these parts. In this way, the adolescent males in these novels use language as a tool to identify, either by belittling or inflating, sexual body parts in a way that puts them in a power-position as males where their bodies can have an element of superiority. Furthermore, Charles and Adrian see their penises as a way to self-gratification. After contracting an STD, the doctor tells Charles: “Don’t go sticking it up any pretty ladies for a bit, now will you?” (Avis 100). Where girls think their breasts might please a male, Charles uses his penis to please himself.

In addition to thinking of her own breasts, Georgia also comments on male genitalia, not having an equal fascination or adoration for male parts as males appear to have for female parts. This is most evident when Georgia speaks of her cat—Angus. She remarks on his testicles: “Angus is a king amongst cats. He walks tall with his trouser snake addendums proudly dangling. Naomi is yowling all of the time” (Knocked Out 63). Here, she again uses humor to define anatomy, this time it belongs to a male; her humor offsets her discomfort with male parts. Then, she still speaks with a certain reverence for his trouser snake addendums after Angus is neutered: “Och aye, they may have taken his trouser snake addendums, but they cannot take his freedom” (Knocked Out 131). She views Angus’ testicles as a sign of power and authority which he displays with feline pride. Such a display of his trouser snake (clearly a reference to a penis) addendums only serves to arouse the female cat, Naomi, to a yowling frenzy. She transfers this perception ostensibly to all males by calling them Sex Gods, thereby establishing her role as one who responds to male displays of testicular and penile power. While the sexuality in this series is neutralized to extend only to kissing, there is a strong undercurrent of possibly more existing with the use of the term “Sex God” because she uses it to refer to the mating habits of her cat that eventually impregnates Naomi. However, she views her breasts as a

hindrance that she must endure, that may warrant sometimes unwanted attention from males.

Here breasts are juxtaposed with penises, and Georgia idealizes “trouser snake addendums” more than “nunga-nungas” as a means to exert power, but at the same time, Georgia sees breasts as a means to find her identity as a woman. So in wearing a bra, Georgia asserts her female-ness; this is similar to the role of the thong—an undergarment that makes femininity more viable.

## Thongs and What You Wear Under There

Women are encouraged to wear thongs because they are sexy, they eliminate panty lines and they can help to solve body problems (Burns-Ardolino 52).

Neil Dressel compiled a “History of the Thong” paper in 2001 in an attempt to explain the fashion industry’s success in selling the undergarment. InStyle Magazine, with other fashion industry experts, like Gina Cooper and Regina Little, credit Brazil with popularizing thongs. Brazilian women wore thong bathing suits to the beach often to the chagrin of American women tourists and the enjoyment of their male companions. Cooper, however, notes that long before the Brazilian thong bathing suits, male athletes in Ancient Greece sported a thong-like garment in their athletic events for “ease and comfort” (Dressel 1). After all, the female thong is a close relative to the male jock-strap (1). At the World’s Fair, thongs became a matter of legislation, as a way women could be nearly nude without breaking the law. Eventually, in the 1980s, Fredericks of Hollywood began selling the panties, and then Victoria’s Secret joined the market, making the thong a 2-billion dollar industry within twenty years of its inception (2). In this past decade, an artist named Sisqo released a song, “The Thong Song,” clinching the popularity of the small piece of fabric for males and females alike. To show the prevalence of the thong, even pop culture icons and television shows discuss thongs. In an episode of a popular television series Friends Joey remarks in the episode entitled “The One with All the Thanksgivings” that he is thankful for the thong because “it’s not so much an underpant as a feat of engineering; it’s amazing how much they can do with so little material. And the way they play with your mind: Is it there? Is it not there?” This seems to echo the general sentiment of men and explain the consequent willingness many women have in wearing thongs including adolescent girls.

Thongs have become a symbol of female sexuality, and girls as young as twelve- or thirteen-years old are buying them. Ariel Levy spent some time in a mall talking to adolescent girls about clothing, and more specifically underwear:

Two of them said they were twelve, the third was thirteen. Everybody said they wore thongs. (The thong is a literal byproduct of the sex industry. In 1939, New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia insisted that the city's exotic dancers cover their genitals for the World's Fair, and the thong was born to placate his decree while exposing the maximum amount of skin. Now they are the underpants of choice for pubescent girls.) I saw Hello Kitty thongs for sale at the mall; Abercrombie & Fitch—which markets to seven- to fourteen-year-olds—makes a thong that says 'wink wink' and another that declares 'eye candy'" (143).

Hello Kitty and Abercrombie and Fitch appeal to pubescent girls, indicating that such businesses purposely push sexuality and exhibitionism on seven- to fourteen-year-old girls. All at once, females become a source of money and the center of male exotic desire. As Alissa Quart remarks on the Abercrombie and Fitch marketing of thongs: "I haven't seen a more blatant example of a rich corporation's exploiting teen horniness, as if an adolescent need only buy underwear to instantly attract partners" (11). In this way, they stop being consumers who exercise an element of power and control, and instead become consumed by capitalism and the desire for male acceptance: "Hot means two things in particular: fuckable and salable [. . .] hotness doesn't just *yield* approval. Proof that a woman actively *seeks* approval is a crucial criterion for hotness is the first place" (Levy 33). In order to be the girlfriend of a Sex God, or even a Sex God's brother, Georgia, or any girl, must wear attractive underwear. She shows her viability as a girlfriend with both a willingness to buy and wear things such as thongs. In this



way, as Burns-Ardolino explains, “these bras, bustiers, slimmers, shapers, microfiber underwear, thongs, powerslips, and push-up bras *work on* the feminine body not only to shape, mould, sculpt, and decorate, thus facilitating the feminine body as object, but these garments also *work for* the feminine body, keeping it separated and enclosed, confined and protected, thus facilitating the feminine body as subject” (49). Thongs, then, complicate notions of power and expression for adolescent girls, enabling them to be both subject and object. That is, thongs are used to display the female body as a decorated object, as well as, more metaphorically, enclose the body as if it is a subject under scrutiny.

Georgia, herself, is not quite sure how to feel about thongs; she experiments with wearing them and then draws a conclusion: “I don’t understand thongs—what is the point of them? I tried one of Mum’s that she uses for aerobics [. . .] I tried her thongs on and it felt ridiculous . . . they just go up your bum as far as I can tell” (Angus 173). The sight of Lindsay in a thong, as Jas and Georgia spy on her to find out if she’s dating Sex God, sparks Georgia’s memory of her experience with her mother’s thongs. She also remarks of the locker room of the opposing hockey team, “I had a sneaky look in their changing-room when I pretended to be fastening up my boots. It was a nightmare of thongs (On the Bright Side 176). Through her spying and nightmare locker fiasco, she negotiates her own place in the underwear industry; she will reject thongs and embrace “normal” underwear. In this way, she chooses her comfort over potentially impressing a boy by wearing a thong:

Jas was OK because she had her holiday knickers on (same gigantic ones as her day wear in England, but with a frilly bit round the gusset). I, however, had normals on, and so I tried to walk up the stairs with my legs together, which is not

easy. Every time I looked behind me I could see the little boys ogling like ogles  
on ogle tablets (Dancing 116)

Still, she criticizes Jas's underwear as old-fashioned—she finds both Lindsay's thong and Jas's huge knickers equally repulsive. So, there is a medium in which Georgia is happy and she questions Jas for choosing something else. "Jas, do you always wear those huge knickers? A small dog could creep up a knicker leg and you wouldn't know" (Dancing 103). To this, Jas replies, "Well I like to be comfy" (103). Then Georgia retorts, "They're not very sexy, are they?" (103) Georgia's goal is still sexiness with underwear, so she mocks the lack of sexual appeal in Jas's big nappies. Jas, conversely, thinks underwear, which, in theory, remains virtually unseen, should provide comfort. However, even though underwear should be sexy, Georgia does not think she needs to wear a thong to achieve it (as she states in her critique of Wet Lindsay's thong).

So far as adolescent male protagonists deal with underwear, Charles claims that he donned his "most daring underpants" to meet Rachel and looked "not half bad" (Avis 43). For Emily, in What They Wear Under Their Kilts, she writes to her friend Dru about Scottish males and their underwear: "Do you know what guys wear under their kilts? I'll give you a hint—it starts with N and ends with G and othin in the middle! Holly almost fainted when she saw the kilt guy slip" (Maxwell 131). Where the girls wear their underwear to feel as if they fit in and appear feminine, boys, either by not wearing underwear at all or by wearing "daring underwear" seem to feed their own desires rather than fulfilling the fantasies of others. Furthermore, Charles, like other males, has an interest not so much in the look of women's underwear as much as envisioning what it covers. Here underwear plays a similar role to makeup, costumes and bras—it is used to tame and shape the body. In so doing, identity becomes phony and mutable,

depending on which underwear you wear or do not wear. It allows boys, like Charles, to create an identity or image for the girls they are with—thus making them an object. Or it allows some, like Bridget Jones or Georgia, to shape their own identity in others' eyes—thus making them a subject. Georgia could choose wear a thong—if she did not hate them—or the boys seeing Georgia could imagine her wearing a thong. Underwear, then, serves little utilitarian purpose—it becomes an expression of “individuality” or lack of individuality. Either way, the notion of self-determination is contestable since the identity of the individuals wearing the undergarments is problematic and fragmented.

## **A Lesbian Barrier of Pillows: How Girls Relate to Girls**

[Among girls] three consistent themes emerge from the [trying on gender process]—attractiveness, attachment to men, and compliance—that represent selected culturally prescribed feminine ideals. These traits do not represent a total femininity but are used to demonstrate how the trying-on process adopts gender normative behaviors that often result in an emphasized femininity [. . .] these girls began to adopt feminine standards of thinness and attractiveness and to base their own worth relative to those standards. (Williams 36)

The interaction of Georgia with her female friends serves as an incubator to her consumption of beauty supplies and alteration of her body, and more importantly, to the foundation of her identity. The formation of identity and authenticity is paramount in Young Adolescent literature, and this most often occurs in the presence of peer groups. In this way, the text shows how “the social power that constructs [young adolescent identities] bestows upon them a power from which they generate their own sense of subjectivity” (Trites 7). The fact that Georgia claims, more than once, to be a “facsimile of a sham of a fax of a person” shows the conflicting and indeterminate nature of identity, and the sense of subjectivity under which Georgia functions. This is a redundant litany Georgia gives of her identity: facsimile is an exact copy or reproduction, sham is an imitation of, and fax is a shortened version of facsimile. Georgia peels back these layers to show that her life is merely an imitation or reproduction of the things she perceives around her. Only, her imitation is an imitation of an imitation—her identity as a woman has no authenticity.

Such a lack of “authenticity” echoes Judith Butler’s concept of “performative identity,” and the post-structuralist idea that a core identity, or fixed identity, does not exist. Nodelman explores the way Butler’s Foucaultian ideas relate to YA literature—identity is such a pivotal issue in the YA tradition. He asserts Butler’s argument that gender and sexual identities are “regulatory fictions, categories produced within the field of discourse and the system of

power/knowledge” (242). More specifically, the idea of being a facsimile of a sham of a fax mirrors Butler’s abstraction: “[Gender] is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gender stylization of the body [. . .] we anticipate and produce [gender identity] through certain bodily acts [. . .] what we take to be real is in fact a changeable and revisable reality” (242). In her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Judith Butler offers “because gender [identity] is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (522). That is, adolescents perform their identity as a male or female through clothing and makeup; this identity constantly shifts and rewrites itself. This plight with authenticity plagues Charles in The Rachel Papers as well: “What clothes would I wear? Blue madras shirt, black boots, and the old black cord suit with those touching leather elbow-patches. What persona would I wear? On the two occasions I had seen her last August, I underwent several complete identity-reorganizations, settling finally somewhere between the pained, laconic, inscrutable type and the knowing, garrulous, cynical, laugh a minute [type]. Revamp those or start again?” (Avis 42). Charles feels as if he can choose his identity as he chooses his clothing, and he attempts to make his identity fit with the expectations of the girls he will be around. Rather than having a stable or constant self, Charles tries to write himself as many different persons. This means the acts shown by the body are also practiced and rehearsed among or in front of peer groups

The relationship between Georgia and the girls at her school takes preeminence over her as an individual. That is, the ritual of group make-up applications, snogging discussions and gossip sessions impacts Georgia’s identity—she is a part of a whole. Girls’ freedom extends only as far as their mothers or other girls allow it. As Vasquez notes of Georgia: “[She] is a complex character who simply assesses and lives in her environment, as she always has, without

questioning the social structure but doing what is necessary to achieve the status she desires” (791). In this way, she does not seek to develop her own interests and desires. However, such relationships between girls of the same age create the ground on which they may try on gender. As Williams suggests in her article “Trying on Gender: Regimes, and the Process of Becoming Women,” girls “experiment with what they [think] to be “womanly” ways but in a more temporary and non-threatening fashion” (30). That is, the interactions of girls with their female peers serve as a sort of “breeding ground” for experimenting with femininity and gender norms. Playing dress up, trying on pantyhose, wearing high heels, and, putting on make-up allowed adolescent girls to “experiment with what they consider women’s ways of doing gender” (30). In this way, Williams identifies the processes of “trying on gender” she observed among adolescent girls of being one of “anticipating, experimenting, retreating, and resisting” (30). She delineates three “themes” that consistently occur in the “trying-on process of gender”: “attractiveness, attachment to men, and compliance” (36). Georgia and her friends, as Lucy and Emily do with their friends, demonstrate this process; they gather to talk about thongs and bras, but they resist wearing thongs. Instead, Georgia mocks “Wet Lindsay” because she shaves her womanly parts and wears a thong. They read magazines and buy the latest styles of make-up and clothing as a form of experimentation with gender, they therefore base their attractiveness on makeup and clothing. They create “snogging” scales<sup>7</sup> to measure their attractiveness to males, assuming that

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<sup>7</sup>Snogging Scale according to Georgia  
.5 Sticky Eyes  
1 Holding Hands  
2 Arm Around  
3 Goodnight Kiss  
4 Kiss lasting over 3 mins. w/out a breath  
5 Open Mouth Kissing  
6 Tongues  
6.5 Ear Snogging  
6.75 Neck Nuzzling  
7 Upper body fondling: outdoors

being able to kiss boys makes them viable as women. The girls show compliance in many ways—buying makeup and wearing it to fit in with the magazines or wearing a uniform at school to please the school and wearing short skirts outside of school to please their friends and boys.

Though the female friendship is paramount to developing identity, in this intimate quest for womanhood shared among adolescent girls, lesbianism is taboo and fodder for mockery: “Oh God, please, please don’t make me have to be a lesbian like Hairy Kate or Miss Stamp” (10). Or she comments, “I want my boyfriend (provided, God willing, I am not a lesbian) to be emotional . . . but only about me” (Angus 16). The thought of same-sex attraction is reprehensible to Georgia and Bridget, who comments herself, “Suddenly think I might love Perpetua, though not in a lesbian way” (Fielding 177). Georgia addresses this idea throughout her diary entries, deciding that she had two alternatives: lesbianism or heterosexual marriage. “If I marry, or, as is more likely, become a high-flying executive lesbian, I am never going to do housework” (24). When Georgia decides she doesn’t really like her first boyfriend, Peter, she has her friend Jas mediate the breakup: “I got Jas to dump Peter for me [ . . . ] I said for her to let him down gently [ . . . ] she said that I thought I was a lesbian. Cheers, Jas” (82). Georgia views any intimacy with other girls as taboo and indicative of lesbianism. Furthermore, the lack of heterosexual relationships demonstrates homosexual tendencies. This stems from a lack of confidence on the part of the females who fear their identity is determined by their sexuality and appearance, so that if their appearance and sexuality do not measure up appropriately, their identity is shaken.

Georgia learns to temper herself because her female friends remind her to, remembering that “Jas [has] said, ‘Georgia, you thought it was funny and I thought it was funny, but you have

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8 Upper body fondling: indoors (in bed)

9 Below Waist Activity (b.w.a.)

10 The Full Monty!!

to remember that boys don't think girls are for funniness'" (Angus 9). Again, here Rennison speaks tongue-in-cheek through Georgia, but her sarcasm would most likely be lost on an adolescent audience. Rather, they would probably see this as advice to "dumb down" to attract a Sex God. That is, women, adhering to the old adage to be seen and not heard, should display themselves as physically appealing to males before they develop intelligence or a sense of humor. Susan Douglas remarks on this idea, saying that a girl makes herself desirable by "[being] able to sing and smile admiringly at boys," however, "being smart, brave, or assertive" isn't desirable (299). This demonstrates how self-temperance is an inherited trait; becoming a woman is "habituated and routinized process wherein it is the primary responsibility of mothers, aunts, teachers and other women who are role models to prepare, train, and initiate a girl into womanhood" (Burns-Ardolino 43). Georgia, Bridget, Lucy, and the other female protagonists reveal the influence of their mothers and other adult women in their beauty rituals. Much of their "equipment" (thongs, makeup, bras) come from their mothers' bathrooms and closets. Their training occurs in two ways: the physical training that occurs on the body via bras, pantyhose, and underwear, as well as the social training that happens as women learn to police themselves by hanging out with other females. Such policing occurs when Georgia has a rating session with her schoolmates:

Anyway, Jackie said we should mark each other out of ten for physical attractiveness. The list was skin, hair, eyes, nose, figure, mouth, teeth. You had to write out the list and put your name on the top of the paper and then pass it round to everyone to give you a mark [. . .] all of the marks were given anonymously. Then we got our papers back with the marks listed. My list was:  
skin 7887887 hair 8888888 eyes 7888888 nose 43304 4¼ 4 figure 7677777 ½ 7



mouth 6666561/36 teeth 8899899 Someone gave me a zero for my nose!!!! I got the lowest marks out of anyone. My best feature was my teeth! (Angus 96)

Here Georgia learns to find her worth in the way others view her. The girls critique and pressure one another to adhere to standards of beauty and physical appearance. This has devastating effects on adolescent girls, who when they cannot measure up with others appearance-wise, do not know how to formulate a new identity.

In what Johnson defines as a baseless system, young girls learn to temper themselves according to others' views: "In inner dialogues and conversations with their peers, they obsess about and speculate on potential interactions with boys. They question logistics, impose rules and rating systems, and offer advice to each other that stems from no real experience" (150). Contrary to popular feminists' views, Steven Pinker offers this evolutionary view on the drive to be beautiful among females: "The hoopla about thinness [or other standards of beauty] applies more to women who pose for other women than to women who pose for men. [Kate Moss] is a fashion model, not a pinup; Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield were pinups, not fashion models" (486). This concept is intriguing because it points to the pressure for beauty among females, like Georgia or Bridget, proceeds from women themselves rather than men or other social forces. Females pressure one another to wear thongs or 8 layers of mascara. This is not to say that men and manufacturers might not capitalize on women's self regulation. Georgia's group of girls inflicts and perpetuates standards of beauty and acceptability among themselves more than male comments impact her. However, boys seem to enjoy the displays that she puts on through her clothing and makeup. In fact, feminist writers, like Ariel Levy, would argue that women internalize the patriarchal structure that demands certain female appearances. If women

do pressure each other to maintain their bodies as objects, males cause them to do so. Therefore, males do not merely enjoy these displays, they foster and cultivate them.

After Georgia stands up to two bullies in the girls' bathroom, Georgia feels conflicted between a sense of power and uncertainty about her agency as an individual adolescent girl. A telling diary entry states: "I am cock of the walk. [I don't know what the girl equivalent of "cock" is . . . surely it can't be vagina. I am vagina of the walk doesn't have the same ring to it somehow (. . .)]" (194). As an adolescent girl, Georgia does not have an avenue of agency or self-promotion without using a masculine anatomical term (or rather, slang) to define such power. Even more tragic, she sees this as commonplace, acknowledging that "vagina" doesn't have the same ring as "cock" and then moves on accepting the implied inferiority of female genitalia. This sort of "debasement" appears in the conversations the girls have with one another about boys and fashion, as well as in the journal entries Georgia writes of her own thoughts and fears. Of course, these are completely humorous statements, because a sense of knowing the reality found in advice like Jas's "boys don't think girls are for funniness" (Angus 9), juxtaposes with the tragedy of knowing adolescent and adult women often forgo intelligence and wit so as to seem appealing and more approachable to males. So the humor in these instances comes from a sense of uncomfortable recognition. Underlying the statements are implications for the role of women as sexual fantasies for men who relinquish power (as represented by the cock/phallus); Georgia and her girlfriends all too quickly fall into these unwritten codes and mores: "Such a definition of power acknowledges both the external and internal forces that compete to empower and repress individual power, but it also allows for the individual's acknowledgement of one's power as a necessary function of subjectivity" (Trites 6).

Often the girls in chick lit jr. have a counterfeit and unstable identity. Whereas female friends have the potential to create an infrastructure of support and provide a secure place to develop as a female, instead they become competition for one another, enforcing certain expectations. Even more, they categorize female friendships as possible lesbian interactions as if it will keep them in a power position in which they can remove themselves from interdependence on other females. Girl friends are safe if the friendship focuses on tips for getting and keeping Sex Gods and dressing appropriately with the proper makeup—this keeps them from mistakenly being called lesbians.

## How to Purchase Feminine Identity

Today's teens are victims of the contemporary luxury economy. They have grown up in the age of the brand, bombarded and defined by name products and intrusive and clever advertising strategies. Raised by a commodity culture from the cradle, teens' dependably fragile self-images and their need to belong to groups are perfect qualities for advertisers to exploit. (Quart xvi)

Shopping is an activity that Georgia and her group of girl friends enjoy since it helps them dress and look the "right way." Though Georgia, as a fourteen-year-old girl, does not spend the bulk of her time as a consumer, continuously flooding the market with her income, she does play an important role as a consumer. Such emphasis perpetuates the idea of mass market capitalism. Levy's Female Chauvinist Pigs explores the idea of teenage consumerism and its ramifications on feminine appearance and sexuality: "If you remove the human factor from sex and make it about stuff—big fake boobs, bleached blonde hair, long nails, poles, thongs—then you can sell it. Suddenly sex requires shopping" (184). Georgia, Jas and the rest of the school girls obsess over Glamour magazines, lippy, mascara, and, girls that wear thongs—all things commoditized. As Harzewski observes, "In its triumvirate embrace of shopping, femininity, and mass culture, the genre of chick lit greets the novel's closet skeletons in a new marketplace" (43). On two fronts, consumerism reveals its power and influence: within the texts themselves and among the women who choose to read the books.

More than just purchasing goods comprises consumerism, as Nava explains: "Consumerism is far more than just economic activity: it is also about dreams and consolation, communication and confrontation, image and identity" (167). This becomes evident for the protagonists in chick lit and chick lit jr. "Consumer goods are essential to chick-lit heroines' self-conception and self-presentation, and writers commonly give as much attention to the

obtaining and assembling of outfits as to the maintenance of faces and bodies” (Wells 62).

Georgia regularly discusses her plight to get money from her father for her purchases:

Vati yelled at me, “Go on, then. Go and waste the money, just don’t give a second thought to the hours it takes me to make the stuff.’ I went out of the door to go and spendies my squids. (Then He Ate 86)

Georgia receives money, then instantly pours it into her makeup that she uses to impress Masimo and fit in with her friends. Her father acknowledges that he sees spending the money on these things is wasteful, yet he still gives her the money, thereby encouraging her to spend it. But there are times when Georgia is unable to get money out of her dad: “It’s pointless asking for money. I can’t even get a fiver out of Dad for some decent lip gloss. He would never give me the money. Even if my breasts were so big that I had to have two servants called Carlos and Juan carry them around for me” (Knocked Out 28).

Whether her father agrees to supply her with money or not, Georgia depends on her parents for money, since she has no job by which she may earn it. However, in her study of American teens in Branded: the Buying and Selling of Teenagers, Alissa Quart found that adolescents are able to levy a spending capacity of \$155 billion for buying clothing, CDs, and makeup. (xvii). Such consumerism makes teens believe, at least in part, that their social standing depends on buying and selling goods and products. What publishers of chick lit jr. and YA literature have then done, as Patte explains, is to create “literature for young people, conceived initially as a conceptual commodity [then becoming] a serendipitous product of capital venture, the goal of which is to sell products—any product” (155). This makes teens a gold mine for industry, and a playing field for power and repression for adolescents.

Consumerism is a discourse through which disciplinary power is both exercised and contested” (Nava 168). That is, teens have power to spend money at their leisure. However, as Quart asserts, they do not “fully [understand] that they are being used” by the industries that supply the items which they consume. Malls and magazines use “adjacent attraction to conflate the material and symbolic aspects of ‘needing,’ where deep desires for beauty, for solidarity with others, or for friendships, for instance are equated with purchasing clothing or perfume [. . .] nonsaleable items and activities [are] routinely juxtaposed with goods that are for sale” (27). Whereas the magazines and malls only make money if teenagers buy, teenagers buy because the magazines and malls and commercials on television manipulate them into believing that these items must be purchased to secure one’s identity, procure a boyfriend, and maintain a stable group of friends. This dueling dynamic of power leaves Georgia in a place where she can realize the futility of consumer culture: “I can’t believe that after all the time it has taken to trap the SG, all the makeup I have had to buy, the trailing about, popping up unexpectedly when he was out anywhere . . . all that planning has gone to waste” (On the Bright Side 3). Even though Georgia bought the correct items, it still did not guarantee her success or happiness. As Nava asserts:

If this is the case, then contemporary preoccupations with imagery and the buying of things can be understood not only as part of this new technology of power, but as, variably (sometimes simultaneously), both a form of subjection to it and a form of resistance. They are not inherently one thing or the other, since, if consuming objects and images is potentially subversive, this potential is countered always by its potential reappropriation and transformation into yet another model of regulation. (165)

That is, individuals both feed the market with money and are fed by the market acceptable images and identities formed by clothing, makeup and other commodities. The industries thrive on individuals spending money, thus giving the individual a position of power. Yet, the individual does not make purchases from a position of power, but rather from one of compulsion to fit in with her social circle. Furthermore, the items purchased are in constant flux (remember Pattee's diagnosis that venture capital's goal is to sell products—any product), so that the paradigms of power and subversion constantly shift.

Consumerism and commodification create a culminating crisis of identity for adolescents everywhere. It is the market place which most shows their vulnerability and fragile and inauthentic identity. Smith explains it as this: "While the protagonists [of chick lit] are often drawn to the goods and skills marketed to them by [magazines and how-to manuals], they also exhibit great anxiety about what these goods and skills represent [...] [these characters] feel pressured to buy into these ideologies yet [are] also skeptical about how fitting these models are to their lives" (675). Levy asserts that through consumerism, teens give up "the most private part of their being for public consumption" (179). Further, Levy adds, "Adolescents are not inventing this culture of exhibitionism and conformity with their own fledgling creative powers. Teens are reflecting back our slobbering culture in miniature" (146). Nava attempts to remove ideas of masculinity and femininity from this discussion of consumerism, saying:

We can attribute no inherent meanings to fashions or to particular styles of masculinity and femininity. Codes are immensely plastic and are constantly being reworked. Whether make-up renders women respectable or deviant, whether muscular bodies are in or out, whether streamlining is good or bad design, indeed whether form is considered relevant at all—and here I am talking not only about

appearances and commodities but also about fashions in language, ideas and morality—is to a large extent consequent upon combinations of existing meanings and the historical moment in which they come into being. (164)

It is plausible that the focus of critics on chick lit and chick lit jr. is secondary to the larger force of consumption and how it fits with existing meanings and historical context. Using money and commerce to vie for power has more weight than maintaining notions of femininity and masculinity. However, notions of gender identity are inextricably tied to consumerism; this leaves adolescents unable to distinguish their identity as females from their identity as consumers. What is more, using makeup, thongs, bras and clothing as necessities for women is far too lucrative to be abandoned, as is writing novels for women and teens about other women and teens who buy these items to feel feminine, successful, and accepted.



## Caught Between Two Worlds

In short, [women] are caught between competing demands to be strong and independent while retaining their femininity. Is chick lit advancing the cause of feminism by appealing to female audiences and featuring empowered, professional women? Or does it rehearse the same patriarchal narrative of romance and performance of femininity the feminists once rejected? (Ferriss 9)

Susan Ferriss questions the link between chick lit and romance novels by asking whether they both practice the same disempowering patriarchal setup for the readers that exacerbate feminists. Ferriss alludes to the work of Janice Radway, who studies the popularity of romance novels and their appeal to many female readers. However, Radway sees romance novels as more than mere patriarchal novels and this possibly offers a new framework by which chick lit and chick lit jr. could be judged. She upholds the idea that a text has no “fixed verbal structure” or “socially situated reader that makes sense of the verbal structure by referring to previously learned aesthetic and cultural codes” (55); rather the individual constructs the meaning of a text on the basis “of a specific constellation of attitudes and beliefs” (55). That is, a woman reading a romance novel or chick lit can construct her meaning in the text so that it “addresses the problems and desires [she] deems to be characteristic of [her life]” (55). The reader, then, plays a more prominent role than the female protagonist. But even more, many women who read romance novels purposely choose to read about characters and events that “do not resemble the people and occurrences they must deal with in their daily lives” (59). This allows the reading of a romance novel to become a form of escapism for many female readers. Within this context, chick lit can be viewed as a genre with an ambiguous power paradigm that some readers use to find empowerment and independence, where other readers rehearse patriarchy. Some readers can read the text as a humorous or tongue-in-cheek commentary on the problems innate in

femininity, where other readers would take it as a “normalizer” of the female beauty rites and expectations that dictate their behavior. Such a narrative meaning cannot be fixed; its power and/or repression vary with the reader.

This leaves the readers to search out their place in chick lit and chick lit jr.; similarly the protagonists must negotiate their identities within the text. A telling diary entry by Bridget Jones shows the gamut of rituals she must undergo before her date and the struggle she faces in mediating her identity as a female: “Being a woman is worse than being a farmer—there is so much harvesting and crop spraying to be done: legs to be waxed, underarms shaved, eyebrows plucked, feet pumiced, skin exfoliated and moisturized, spots cleansed, roots dyed, eyelashes tinted, nails filed, cellulite massaged [and] stomach muscles exercised” (Fielding 27). These same pressures Bridget feels likewise impact adolescent girls like Georgia, Emily, Lucy and Mia. So do Bridget’s insecurities: “Sometimes I wonder what I would be like if left to revert to nature—with a full beard and handlebar moustache on each shin, Dennis Healy eyebrows, face a graveyard of dead skin cells spots erupting, long curly fingernails like Struwwelpeter, flabby body flobbering around” (27). The adolescent girls therefore struggle with the possible horror of leaving their bodies unchecked, and its likely result of loneliness and the single life. Bridget notes, “Ugh, ugh. Is it any wonder girls have no confidence?” (27). Therefore the struggle with such a false notion of an artificial beauty that complicates the readings of chick lit and chick lit jr. is the conflicting realization that both the female protagonists and many female readers have, and that Bridget Jones attempts to make her mantra: “However, one must not live one’s life through men but must be complete in oneself as a woman of substance” (27). This leaves adolescent readers of chick lit jr. and adult women readers of chick lit to negotiate and navigate through various avenues of power/repression, expression and identity.

Trites uses another theorist to reemphasize the point that individuals vacillate between positions of power and repression; borrowing Foucaultian theory, she suggests, “power can be simultaneously repressive and enabling because those who are complacent are often less empowered than those who gain power by struggling” (16). Georgia’s desires and ambitions change as the people around her change; by becoming Robbie’s girlfriend, Georgia again redefines herself. “Women are caught in an unchanging, predetermined existence, always, it seems, one defined by others” (Lehnert 113). Georgia shows the dichotomy of her situation—she seeks agency while at once acquiescing to pressures for both male and female acceptance. Georgia, like the other female protagonists and often the female readers themselves, experiences this competition between those things that may empower (wit, intelligence, humor) and those things that may repress, if treated as necessities (thongs, bras, make-up). This leaves Georgia, like many female readers, in a position where she assumes many identities and operates on different levels of power and repression.

Such a performative identity for Georgia means her choices, as a young teenage girl, do not necessarily correspond to self-empowerment. Consumerism and cultural expectations create ambivalence in Georgia as a female character. In fact, Georgia’s identity is subsumed with the consumer culture that asks her to buy the magazines, “lippy,” underwear and other such things. Caroline Smith comments on chick lit’s obsession with consumer culture:

While these heroine-centered novels notably emerge from a larger tradition of women’s writing, they expound on this tradition by commenting specifically upon the twentieth-century consumer culture mediums—from domestic-advice manuals to women’s magazines to romantic comedies—that bombarded and affect their heroines [...] chick lit [engages its readers] with consumer culture mediums and

[it has] complicated representations of women as both readers and consumers.

(673)

This means that Georgia merely reflects the culture she consumes; on the other hand, she sees herself as a casualty of consumerism, realizing the “tyranny” of elements of femininity. Or rather, she is able to try on her femininity at the same time she seeks to escape it. She both questions and submits to what magazines, friends, family and society tell her to do—she rejects things but embraces lipply and shaving. These opposing forces of power and repression may be unsettling to both the reader and the protagonist. The reader, also a consumer, may not be sure how to feel, since the humorous nature of chick lit makes it difficult to either sympathize fully with the characters or to criticize them. As her diary explains of her coming-of-age, Georgia begins to grapple with “gradations between power and powerlessness” as an adolescent woman (Trites x). In this struggle, the stable binaries are destroyed, and prescriptive behavior is both subverted and upheld, showing both the adolescent’s “need to feel empowered and the culture’s simultaneous need to repress the adolescent [making way for] discursive representations of adolescents’ power and repression [to be] integrated in all YA novels” including chick lit jr. (Trites 142).

Within the Rennison series, Georgia must carve a place for herself as both an adolescent and a female consumer, while adults and the marketplace attempt to shape and mold her image into cooperation and submission. This likewise holds for the readers, for whom the text itself can act as a shaping agent asking girls to conform to certain adolescent and feminine ideologies, as set out by an adult author, all the while the readers seek autonomy as buyers and consumers of the text. Most strikingly, as Susan Douglas points out, media images and texts create a conflict within the individual reading or viewing the items: “When I open Vogue, for example, I am

simultaneously infuriated and seduced, grateful to escape temporarily into a narcissistic paradise where I'm the center of the universe, outraged that completely unattainable standards of wealth and beauty exclude me and women I know from the promised land" (9). Douglas points to the conflicting and unsettling reaction she has to portrayals of females, which is similar to some reactions to chick lit and chick lit jr. This simultaneous seduction and infuriation is akin to Georgia's experience, as the protagonist, within the text where she is seduced by "lippy" and "boy entrancers" but infuriated by thongs. But, according to Trites, what is more important than the dynamics of identity of self or power, is the "degree of dialogue" (152). She further upholds: "Nothing has greater potential for the disturbing the universe of literary criticism for the good of ourselves, our students, and their students [than such dialogue]" (152). So when Georgia asks "Will I ever be free from the tyranny of my basoomas;" the answer is: Yes, but only when language is used to dissect, prod and constantly rewrite the existing constructs that shape the adolescent experience.

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