INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESES AND PRIZE ESSAYS

AUTHOR Elissa Kohen

TITLE From Yidl Mitn Fidl to Yentl: Gender Roles and Modernity in Jewish Film

TYPE OF THESIS: Ph.D. [ ] D.H.L. [ ] Rabbinic [✓]

Master's [ ] Prize Essay [ ]

1. May circulate [✓]) Not necessary
2. Is restricted [ ] for ___ years.) for Ph.D.) thesis

Note: The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses or prize essays for a period of no more than ten years.

I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.

3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis. ✓ yes ___ no

March 1, 1999
Date

Elissa Kohen
Signature of Author

Library Record

Microfilmed 7.23.99
Date

R. Goldberg
Signature of Library Staff Member

From Yidl Mitn Fidl to Yentl: Gender Roles and Modernity in Jewish Film

Elissa Kohen
Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for Ordination
Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion 1999
Referees: Dr. Karla Goldman and Dr. Gila Safan-Naveh

Gender is the most basic identity characteristic normally identifiable by clothing. Upon meeting a new person or seeing a new character in a film, gender is quite possibly the first identifying factor one notes about the person. Cross-dressing challenges this initial understanding of a person's identity. Male and female are the most obvious categories challenged by the presence of a cross-dressed character. They are not, however, the only ones. In addition to confronting the binary categories of "male" and "female," cross-dressing also calls into question other assumed identities, identities that would otherwise be understood to be stable and concrete. By questioning one set of categories that are understood to be distinct, the cross-dresser makes other categories of identity less certain.

In each of these three Jewish films: *East and West* (1923), *Yidl Mitn Fidl* (1936), and *Yentl* (1983), a female character dresses as a male. In each case the female character has a different reason for her cross-dressing. In *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, Maidl has an economic need. In *Yentl*, Yentl has a passionate desire to follow a life path from which women are excluded. In *East and West*, Mollie wishes to rebel against traditional culture, displaying her 'modern' sensibility. In each of the films, regardless of the narrative reason for the character's cross-dressing, issues of gender and the Jewish community's confrontation with modernity are indicated by the cross-dresser's presence.

In this thesis I will analyze each of the films, focusing on the cross-dresser's function within the narrative itself, the milieu from which the film emerges, and attitudes about gender and modernity indicated by the cross-dresser's function in the film. I will begin with the earliest film and move to the most recent, tracing the progression of themes through the various time periods.

Table of Contents

Introduction

"Don't you see? I'm a girl," declares Molly Picon's character in the 1936 Yiddish film *Yidl Mitn Fidl* as she shakes loose her hair from the boyish cap she has worn throughout the film. Until this moment in the narrative, she has traveled the Polish countryside as an itinerant musician with her father and two other musicians. All the while she has been dressed as a boy named Yidl. During their travels, she has fallen in love with one of the other musicians, a handsome young man named Froim who is completely unaware of her masquerade, and therefore, of her feelings for him.

In the revelation scene, Maidl (the character's name as a woman) finds herself on the stage of a crowded theater, wearing a dress instead of boys' clothing. She wants to reveal herself to Froim who plays in the orchestra, to show him that she is really a woman, not the bothersome young boy he thought she was. While Froim seems confused, but willing to listen, the audience takes her revelation as a comedy act and roars with laughter. The theater producers prompt her from backstage to continue her act, so Maidl proceeds to tell the story of her adventures dressed as Yidl. She cavorts around the stage in an impish monologue/dance/comedy routine to the delight of the audience.

Despite the audience's laughter, Maidl's monologue is not entirely happy. She admits that while she enjoyed the freedom her cross-dressing[1] afforded, when she fell in love with Froim she was heartbroken that he did not see her as the women she was. He did not love her as she loved him, and her disguise began to feel oppressive. As she

---

[1] I will use the term cross-dressing as Rebecca Bell-Metereau defines it in Hollywood Androgyny. NY: Columbia University Press, 1985: 'According to the Indiana University Institute for Sex Research, the term 'cross-dressing' applies to any case in which a male wears female clothing or vice versa, for whatever purposes. Transvestism usually refers to heterosexual, fetishistic use of clothing of the opposite sex.

recounts, "Somebody came along and the men's clothes started to feel tight on me." Despite the distress Maidl expresses about her cross-dressing, the revelation scene is light-hearted. Both the audience in the film and the audience of the film could enjoy the humor in Maidl/Yidl's situation.

In Barbra Streisand's *Yentl*, the revelation scene is fraught with many emotions, but humor is not one of them. Throughout the majority of the narrative, Yentl has pretended to be a young man named Anshel, an alter ego she created so that she could pursue her passion for study. She, like Maidl, falls in love with a man who does not know that she is a woman. For Yentl, however, the revelation of her true identity is frightening and potentially destructive because so many lies have been built around her charade. The pure delight and humor of the revelation in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* is in sharp contrast to the tension and anxiety in the corresponding scene from *Yentl*.

In the scene from *Yentl*, Anshel shares a room in an inn with Avigdor, the man she secretly loves. The scene is darkly lit and Anshel extinguishes the one remaining lamp before she begins revealing herself. Having cut her hair to look more male, she cannot simply take off her hat and shake her hair at him, as Yidl did. In addition, she does not expect Avigdor to be amused by her charade and the complexity of the situation requires some explanation. Anshel asks Avigdor what he would do if he were not allowed to study. "If some crazy law said that men named Avigdor were not allowed to study?" "I would study anyway." She tells him that she has done what he says he would have done, that she has studied in secret. She tells him that her name is Yentl, that she is a woman.

Avigdor continues to joke, not believing that she is a woman until she takes off her vest, her tallit, and then unbuttons her shirt so that he can see her breasts. Finally he

believes her and as the realization sinks in, he becomes more and more enraged. Yentl pursues him around the room, trying to reason with him, to make him understand why she did what she did. Avigdor turns on her, prodding her physically and verbally, asking "Why? Why? You're a man, answer me like a man." He rages at her until finally she confesses that she wanted to be near him because she loved him. With this declaration, they fall together to their knees, embracing. He admits that he has loved her too, although he could never understand the feeling when he thought she was a boy. The scene is filled with complex emotions, yet no one in it finds humor in the situation.

A third Jewish film[2] that includes female to male cross-dressing, *East and West* (1923) is different from the first two because the character does not spend the majority of the film in full male clothing, nor does anyone in the film believe for any significant amount of time that she is a man. It is included in this study, however, because it explores the same themes as *Yentl* and *Yidl Mitn Fidl* and because the cross-dressing presence is significant, even though it occupies less film time than in the others. Despite its differences from the other films, *East and West* does include a type of revelation scene.

In the film, the thoroughly modern Mollie, played by Molly Picon (of *Yidl Mitn Fidl*), and her newly rich immigrant father have come to Poland from America for her cousin's wedding. Mollie takes great delight in mocking the Old World customs of her relatives and breaking their traditional rules. In a scene prefaced by the intertitle "The evening before the wedding," a room full of traditionally dressed men, some seated around a table, others standing behind, sing in honor of the bride and groom. As the camera

---

[2] All three are 'Jewish films,' either because they are created by Jewish directors/writers/producers, they deal with specifically Jewish themes, they are intended for primarily Jewish audiences, the language they use (either spoken or in printed subtitles) is Yiddish or some combination of the aforementioned.

focuses on various men around the room, it stops on one particular young man. Soon it becomes clear that this one man is in fact Mollie. Dressed in the full garb of a traditionally observant Jewish man she wears a cap, a full suit with a tallit katan underneath. Without payes or a beard, Mollie looks to the rest of the participants like an eager young boy joining in the singing with his elders. Mollie sings with the men, mirroring their movements while her eyes reveal her delight at mocking them.

When Mollie's father comes looking for her, he asks various groups in the room if they have seen her. Seeing him enter, Mollie turns her back to the camera and surreptitiously glances over her shoulder to keep track of him. One group of women, who apparently have been present the whole time, giggle when he approaches them. They know that Mollie is there, dressed as a boy, but they do not tell. Finally, Mollie's nemesis from previous confrontations, the housekeeper Shabse, reveals her charade. While her uncle holds her back, the indignant Mollie tries to punch and kick Shabse for ruining her game. The scene is humorous, playing with Mollie's irreverence for the traditional culture. It contains none of the underlying pain or anxiety found in either of the revelation scenes from the other two films.

In each of these three Jewish films, a female character dresses as a male character. In each, the female character has a different reason for her cross-dressing. In *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, she has an economic need. In *Yentl*, she has a passionate desire to follow a life path from which women are excluded. In *East and West*, she wishes to challenge the traditional culture with her 'modern' sensibility. From the revelation scenes we get a glimpse of the tone of each film. *East and West* is a lighthearted romp. *Yidl Mitn Fidl* is fun-loving while

acknowledging that the cross-dressing also brings some distress. *Yentl* is passionate and complex, with moments of humor.

The films seem at first glance to be quite different. And yet the narrative device they employ, a woman dressing as a man, provides a common thread and common thematic issues. Each of the films reflects and/or challenges their contemporaneous society's understandings of gender and gender roles. Each reveals something about that society's Jewish identity in the face of modernity and change.

Cross-dressing, the act of wearing clothes usually associated with the opposite gender, is present in movies from the early silent films to the present day. It is used in a variety of ways, from the comic to the tragic and everything in between. Men wear women's clothing and women wear men's clothing in a variety of film genres: Cabaret, Historical, Comedic, Western, and so on. A long film tradition belies the usual notion that cross-dressing is a rarity. Writing in 1985, Rebecca Bell-Metereau fixed the number of Hollywood films that "employ the motif either as a key feature in a crucial sense of as the pivotal element of the narrative,"[3] at more than 200.

What, then, does cross-dressing signify, both generally and in these specific films? Clothing indicates something about the identity of the person wearing it. Especially in film and other visual arts (theater or painting) we recognize who the person is by what he or she is wearing. Fringed leather pants and jacket, ten-gallon hat and boots immediately tell the observer that the person is a cowboy. Ragged clothes, gloves without fingers, and shoes with no soles let us know that the person is destitute. An all white dress and a veil let us know that the person is a bride.

Clothing is usually coded by society to belong to one gender or the other. Even today, in 1999, when women frequently wear pants, jackets, and suits, many items of clothing still hold very distinguishable gender connotations. A tie, for instance, is considered an article of male clothing. And although it may seem obvious, a dress or skirt is connected with female gender. It is important to remember that gender signifiers can change. In Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, Marjorie Garber notes that in earlier centuries, the color pink was coded by society to relate to male babies[4]. In this century, however, pink is clearly associated with little girls. Although the particular clothing-gender combination may change, the association of gender with clothing is consistent throughout history.

Gender is, in fact, the most basic identity characteristic normally identifiable by clothing. Upon meeting a new person or seeing a new character on screen, gender is quite possibly the first identifying factor one notes about the person, as Sigmund Freud wrote, "When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is 'male or female?' and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty."[5] Cross-dressing challenges this initial understanding of a person's identity. A man wearing women's clothing is still a man. He is not a woman. Yet the association between clothing and gender is so strong that his identity becomes unclear. He is suddenly in a position of not-entirely-male and not-entirely-female. When a man wears clothing that is societally coded as female, or when a woman wears clothes the society recognizes as male, the effect disrupts the normal order. The identity of the cross-dresser is in question. Is it a man or is

---

[3] Rebecca Bell-Metereau,, Hollywood Androgyny, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 1.
[4] Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety, (NY: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.

a woman? If a person can be either male or female, and is not easily recognizable as either, the categories that define identity are also called into question.

In IB Singer's short story Yentl, upon which Streisand's movie is based, Yentl tells Avigdor "I am neither one nor the other,"[6] implying that the perception of her identity, based on her clothing, has an effect on the reality of her identity. She has been perceived as male, and although beneath her clothes is a woman's body, she feels that she no longer belongs to either gender category. The implication is that these categories which do not encompass Yentl's new reality, are therefore not adequate to describe human reality. If she is neither male nor female because of the clothes she wears and the activities she chooses to pursue (in this case, study of sacred texts), then perhaps it is the categories which are wrong, not her choices or her clothing.

Male and female are the most obvious categories challenged by the presence of a cross-dressed character. They are not, however, the only ones. Garber points out that in addition to confronting the binary categories of "male" and "female," cross-dressing also calls into question other assumed identities, identities that would otherwise be understood to be stable and concrete. Garber calls this a "category crisis," and defines it in the following manner: "a failure of distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, etc."[7] By questioning one set of categories that are understood to be distinct, the cross-dresser makes other categories of identity less certain.

---

[5] Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, Trans. James Strachey, (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965, orig. 1933), p. 141.
[6] Singer, Isaac Bashevis, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), p. 44.

Within each of these films, the presence of a cross-dressed figure indicates a struggle with Jewish identity as it relates to tradition and modernity. In the two Yiddish films (1923 and 1936), Jewish identity is called into question by immigration, industrialization, Zionism and racial anti-Semitism, all products of the modern world. Mollie's cross-dressing in *East and West* pokes fun at the traditional customs of her Eastern European relatives, indicating that her modern American Jewish identity is more desirable than theirs. And yet at the same time, her total lack of Jewish knowledge and her extended family's disdain of the way that she has assimilated would suggest that Jewish identity cannot co-exist with modernity. Yidl's cross-dressing in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* calls into question then current racial stereotypes about Jews in general and Jewish men in particular. As Eve Sicular writes of Molly Picon's cross-dressing roles, from *East and West* to *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, "...the shifting presentation of Molly's tomboy antics reflects first the *zeitgeist* of the Jazz Age, then the Great Depression; the specifically Jewish experiences of an immigration boom followed by restrictive American quotas; and, finally, the issues of ethnic identity as affected by the pressures of assimilation and anti-semitism."[8]

The Jewish world from which the film *Yentl* emerged was by contrast already modern, highly assimilated, very much integrated into non-Jewish America.

---

[7] Garber, p. 16.
[8] Eve Sicular, "Gender Rebellion in Yiddish Film," Lilith, 20:4 (Winter 1995-96), p. 14.

Although the challenge of modernity was not a relevant category in *Yentl* the same way that it was in the first two films, the radically changing conceptions of women's roles and rights can be seen as a modernizing innovation with which both the Jewish and the non-Jewish world continued to contend. The rise of feminism and Jewish women's active participation in that movement generated re-evaluation of women's lives both in Jewish society and the larger non-Jewish world.

Within the context of cross-dressing films, the struggle between modernity and traditionalism cannot be entirely separated from the issue of gender. The questions raised in these films are not only "What does it mean to be Jewish in a modern world" but also "What does it mean to be a modern Jewish woman?" "What does it mean to be a modern Jewish man?" The conflict with modernity, especially in the earlier films, has different ramifications for men and women. Both men and women would be changed by the new ways in which gender would be conceived. In order to fully grasp the challenge modernity presented to Jews from traditional societies, it is important to understand the gender divisions of that traditional society.

In her book Jewish Women/Jewish Men, Aviva Cantor argues that a major factor in the development of Jewish male/female roles and gender definitions is the fact that the Jewish community, for much of its history, has been in exile, often in hostile environments.[9]

---

[9] Cantor, Aviva, Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life, (SanFrancisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), see also: Daniel Boyarin, Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

In order to maintain group cohesion and to protect themselves from the majority cultures in which they lived, Jews idealized and developed traits in their society generally and in Jewish men specifically, that other societies (including our own) would characterize as feminine and eschewed others that would be considered masculine. The Jewish community's adaptation to life in exile meant that Jewish men had to avoid character traits that would be threatening to the general society. "These include... nonviolence; emotionalism; empathy and compassion for the unfortunate...recognition of the importance of relationships; altruism; cooperation; and mutuality and interdependence."[10] They relinquished the power that they would have had, as men, in patriarchal society in order to maintain the Jewish community as a cohesive entity.

This lack of power vis-à-vis the outside world was balanced by Jewish men's preponderance of power within the Jewish world. The classic definition of "man-as-macho fighter," was replaced with the "alternative definition of man-as-scholar,"[11] and the role of the scholar became the most important in the society. The rabbis "defined learning Torah not only as the Jewish man's work but also as...the work necessary for survival."[12] Torah study was therefore placed at the center of the Jewish community and was considered the most valuable work. Jewish women were excluded from that study, and from the public religious observance that accompanied it, giving Jewish men exclusive access to that which the community valued most highly. "When study and the performance of ritual—the components of spiritual resistance—came to be regarded as the most important endeavors in the Jewish struggle for survival, and the ones that defined masculinity, the role of the

---

[10] Cantor, p. 53.
[11] Cantor, p. 92.
[12] Ibid.

Jewish woman as enabler became to facilitate these pursuits *and* to accept/endure exclusion from them."[13]

Women's roles, then, in Jewish society revolved around making it possible for men to do the important communal work – Torah study. To do so, women focused on maintaining the domestic realm as did women in many other patriarchal cultures. "If the woman was an efficient and skillful housekeeper, if she maintained a *Yiddishe hoyz* (Jewish home) with a warm Jewish atmosphere, where children absorbed much of the experience of and the feelings about what it meant to be Jewish, if, in addition, she kept harmony in the family, then she was known, they said, as a real *baleboosta* (Yiddish, from the Hebrew for householder), a complimentary term meaning a woman in total control of every aspect of home life."[14]

Jewish women's religious lives were also centered in the home because they were excluded not only from study (which was itself a religious practice for men) but also from the vast majority of mitzvot or commandments, such as daily public worship, Shabbat and holiday rituals. Women were also not included in the ritual quorum necessary for public prayer, nor were they eligible to serve as legal witnesses. Somewhat surprisingly, Jewish women did participate in the economic maintenance of the family. In contrast to many patriarchal societies, working to provide for her family was an accepted role for the married Jewish woman.

---

[13] Cantor, p. 99.
[14] Cantor, p. 101.

The gender distinctions mentioned above, for the most part, were socially reinforced but also legally encoded in the Halacha (the system of Jewish law concerning virtually every aspect of life – both private and public). The fact that women are not required to observe commandments that have specifically appointed times, such as daily worship, for instance, is found in the Mishnah. "All positive commandments which are time-bound: men are obligated and women are exempt."[15] Rachel Biale, in Women and Jewish Law, argues that the Halachic exemptions for women probably evolved out of the real situation in which women's domestic responsibilities prevented them from performing all the mitzvot: "Rather than an a priori rule about exemptions of women from certain mitzvot, what probably occurred historically was a gradual evolution of daily practice and customs which allowed women not to perform certain mitzvot. Eventually the customs acquired the force of law and the halachic justification probably emerged initially on a case-by-case basis."[16] Whether the laws came about because of the social reality or the laws created the social reality, what is important here is that each reinforced the other in creating gender distinctions.

Biale also notes the Biblical roots of Jewish society's gender distinctions. She writes, "The division between males and females in their role and place in society is best summarized in a law which pertains to both sexes: a man may not wear women's clothes nor a woman men's clothes [Deuteronomy 22:5]"[17] The essential element in the Biblical injunction is that men and women's roles remain separate. Obviously the law against wearing the clothing of the opposite gender is significant to our discussion of cross-

---

[15] Kiddushin 33b
[16] Biale, Rachel, Women and Jewish Law, (NY: Basic Books, 1984), p. 17.
[17] Biale, p. 11.

dressing films. An in-depth study of the ways in which the rule has been applied or ignored throughout history would itself be an excellent topic for a thesis. It is not, however, the focus of this study. It may be helpful to note, however that exceptions to the rule have been documented historically, included male to female cross-dressing for Purimshpiels, although women were typically not permitted to dress as men. Aviva Cantor also notes that in some cases, women were permitted to dress as men and even to wear false beards to avoid 'molestation' on journeys.[18]

In each of the films I have studied, a Jewish woman dresses in the clothing of a Jewish male, as a boy or young man. The reasons each woman has for donning male clothing are different, but in each case her choices challenge the roles played by women either in the society within the film or in that of the film's audience. Whether the cross-dressing is the character's means to freedom of movement without harassment or an entree into restricted areas of thought, the character's choices are rooted both in the particular society from which the film emerges and the world created within the film itself. The cross-dressing in *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, made by and for a primarily Jewish, newly modernizing audience is of a different character than the cross-dressing in *Yentl*, made for a mixed Jewish and non-Jewish audience in the early 1980's, several years after the height of the radical feminist movement. In addition, by portraying a society that is radically different from the one in which the film is made, Barbra Streisand brings her own historical moment's gender conventions to bear on the film's depiction of an earlier age. In all of the films it is instructive to notice how the characters deal with the opportunities that cross-dressing affords; opportunities to experience life from another perspective.

---

[18] Cantor, p. 87.

The opportunity to see new possibilities, to break out of the strict categories that society usually imposes, to venture into ways of living that are different, even forbidden; these are elements of cross-dressing that appeal to audiences. Rebecca Bell-Metereau comments, "The androgynous figure gives audiences a sense of hidden possibilities, of the potential for change and renewal. Films allow us to enter into forbidden worlds of the imagination."[19] The audience of *East and West* could identify with Mollie's feisty breaking of rules, her challenges to the gender status quo, her attempt to modernize the traditional society of her relatives. Audiences of *Yidl Mitn Fidl* could enjoy the freedom of movement Yidl's cross-dressing allowed, her fearless prevention of a loveless marriage, and her comedic confusion while trying to reveal her true identity. For its American audience in 1983,the pleasure in watching *Yentl* came at least in part from her rebellion against traditional societal structures; a rebellion that the audience would not find threatening since its contemporaneous society took as natural the rights Yentl sought for herself.

There is also, most strikingly in *Yentl* but in the other two films as well, pleasure for the audience in the uncertain sexuality of the cross-dressed characters and those with whom they interact. As Allison Fernley and Paula Maloof write in their critical essay on *Yentl*, "Because we are in on the deception, we are titillated by the prospect that a woman is in love with a man who is actually a woman, [Hadass falling love with Yentl]."[20] They go on to describe a situation in which both Yentl and Yidl find themselves, "or by the possibility that a character who is experiencing what we know to be a heterosexual

---

[19] Bell-Metereau, p. 237.
[20] Allison Fernley and Paula Maloof, "*Yentl,*" Film Quarterly 3, (Spring, 1985), p. 41.

attraction feels confused by what he/she believes are 'homosexual' urges. [Avigdor feeling attraction for Yentl, Froim feeling attraction for Yidl]."[21]

Although the sexual ambivalence created by the cross-dresser is titillating for the audience, seeming to question rigid societal taboos, in all three cases, the resolution of the film serves to reinforce traditional understandings of heterosexuality as the norm. The audience is able to enjoy the hints of illicit sexuality because there is an assumption throughout that deviance (ie. homosexuality or bisexuality) will not win out. "...what makes this genre acceptable and no doubt accounts for its popularity is its demand that this 'chaos' be dispelled in a thoroughly conservative conclusion in which disguises are removed and heterosexual pairs are bonded together. The social order, then, is called into question for the better part of the film only so that it can be reaffirmed by the ending."[22] In *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, Maidl herself repudiates the possibility of true homosexual attraction "*A yingl mit a yingl hot epes a tam*?" [A guy with a guy – what sense does that make?]. And as Eve Sicular concludes "perhaps implying too, with tam as a double entendre, that such a thing would be in very strange taste."[23]

The assumed conventional closure that allows the audience to engage with the cross-dresser's questionable sexuality is not as certain in the other categories of identity with which cross-dressing plays. It is not clear what the acceptable position on personal freedom and modern identity is in each of the films from the outset, nor is there a consistent message to be gleaned from them as a group. What is clear is that all three engage with the issues in both straightforward and indirect ways through the vehicle of

---

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Sicular, p. 17.

cross-dressing. In Movies and Mass Culture, John Belton describes movies as "an integral part of mass culture and...embedded within it. One does not produce the other; rather, each interacts with the other, and they mutually determine one another."[24] Whether the binary categories being challenged are eventually shown to be constant or variable, these films each represent a window into the questions being posed in each historical period of Jewish society. The answers are perhaps not as important as the questions.

[24] Belton, John (ed), Movies and Mass Culture. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

East and West

In the opening scene of *East and West* we are introduced to Mollie and her father Morris Brown. We are told that he is a successful American businessman who has changed his name from Brownstein. The action begins when Morris tells Mollie that they will be traveling to Poland to celebrate her cousin's wedding. The scene shifts to Poland where Morris's brother, Mottel Brownstein is seen welcoming a young yeshiva student (Jacob) into his home. Mollie and her father travel to Poland and during their stay, Mollie continually gets into trouble. Her adventurous, mischievous nature clearly does not mesh with the traditional surroundings.

On Yom Kippur, she sneaks out of shul and devours the family's break-fast meal. At Shabbat dinner she sneers at the young yeshive bucher (Jacob) whose admiration for her distracts him even from his soup, which he spoons up, but does not eat. Later she puts on the full costume of a traditional Jewish boy, only to find herself spanked by her father when she gets caught. Finally she stages a mock wedding, coaxing the same yeshive bucher she had mocked during Shabbes dinner to play her bridegroom. Unaware that Jewish law considers the wedding real and official if he puts the ring on her finger, Mollie cajoles Jacob to play his part to its logical conclusion. Jacob, having been in love with her since she arrived in Poland, ignores the warnings of his friends and places the ring on her finger.

Mollie is initially thrilled by her 'pretend' wedding ring, but soon becomes distraught as Jewish law is explained to her. Once she and her father are aware that the wedding is legal and binding, they demand that Jacob grant her a divorce immediately. Jacob refuses, instead proposing a deal. They will stay officially married for five years

but not live together, after which time if she still wants a divorce he will give it to her. Without any other option, Mollie and her father agree. During that five-year waiting period Jacob moves to Vienna and under the tutelage of his modern uncle, gradually gives up his Old World ways.

At the end of the five years, Mollie and her father arrive in Vienna, presumably to find Jacob and receive the divorce from him. Jacob, now known as ben Alli, arranges to meet them without letting on who he is. The clean-shaven, nattily dressed and very successful ben Alli woos and wins over both Mollie and her admiring father. In the final scene, ben Alli first pretends to be the Old World Jacob they are expecting, then removes his false beard and shows that he has really become ben Alli. Mollie and Jacob/ben Alli embrace in marital bliss.

The most obvious incidence of cross-dressing in the film is the one in which Mollie dresses up as a young man the night before her cousin's wedding. I will discuss this scene in some detail further on. This is not, however, the film's only instance of cross-dressing. Mollie's character is on some level cross-dressed or potentially cross-dressed throughout the first half of the film. In addition, Jacob, though he does not put on female attire, does exchange the costume of a traditional Jewish male for modern attire, and back again, resulting in identity shifts which point to the same issues raised by Mollie's female to male costume changes.

Some early insight into Mollie's character can be found in the film's opening shots. She is carried onto the scene in the arms of two healthy looking young men. These men who appear to be her friends, part of her social group, set her down in front of her father. Mollie wears boxing gloves and throws a few good punches to demonstrate her

skill to her father. The young men agree about her ability and while she goes on to talk with her father, they seem to be revisiting an earlier moment in which she showed her prowess.

In short pants, boxing gloves and bobbed hair, Mollie's clothing suggests masculinity, as do her swagger and the air punches she throws. However, when her father tells her about their trip to Poland, Mollie jumps for joy and throws her arms around his neck, kicking her feet up behind her. After this display of femininity she changes back to the tough little boxer, as if remembering whom she is "supposed to be." She pulls herself up into a serious, masculine stance and is carried off, like a victorious fighter, on the shoulders of her admiring young men. Both Mollie's behavior and her clothing in the scene represent what I will call quasi-cross-dressing. The cross-dressing is not as complete as it is in the scene before her cousin's wedding. She does not wear the same suit of clothes as either the young men or her father. Nonetheless, we can see in the confluence of male and female elements a playing with boundaries that hints at "true" cross-dressing.

The presence of "masculine" and "feminine" in a single character points to gender uncertainty. Normative film and other dramatic genres generally present characters as either male or female, separating the elements of "masculine" and "feminine," applying them in distinct ways to the binary categories of male and female. Cross-dressing blurs the lines between those categories and places the character that cross-dresses in a separate category which is not so easily defined. Although Mollie remains identifiably female throughout most of the film, the more masculine elements of her character give her access to a freedom of movement that is uncommon for women in film.

Laura Mulvey, in her classic work on feminist film criticism, argues that there is a division between characters who act in film and those who are acted upon.[1] Drawing on Freudian theories about the dynamics of erotic looking, she says that females are generally 'looked at' while males are generally doing the looking. According to Mulvey, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium."[2] In this role as object, this position of 'being looked at,' female characters are usually passive rather than active within the narrative.

Mulvey further says "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation."[3] Women, as objects of the "look" do not typically advance the story line through their own actions. Rather a woman may be the object of moments in which the action of the film freezes, as in a close-up shot of a face or other body part. Or she may be what motivates the male character to do what he does. As one Hollywood director put it "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance."[4] In Mulvey's view, female characters do not generally, in and of themselves, move the story forward by their actions.

---

[1] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen, 16:3 (Autumn 1975), p. 419.
[2] Mulvey, p. 419.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Budd Boetticher quoted in Mulvey, p. 419.

In her quasi-cross-dressed state, Mollie reverses a scene that can be understood as one such "moment of erotic contemplation." In the Shabbes dinner scene, Jacob the yeshiva bucher looks longingly at Molly while attempting unsuccessfully to eat his soup. As he looks at her with desire, dribbling the soup from his spoon, she looks back at him with contempt and ridicule. Although he clearly desires her, she does not submit to being desired. She does not allow herself to be the object that freezes the action. By rejecting the look of the male character within the film she acts in the typically male role, rather than the female one. Within the narrative, Mollie does not accept that her function is 'to be looked at.'

In addition to controlling "the look" Mollie also takes an active role in moving the narrative along. Mollie in fact, motivates the majority of the action in the first half of the film. Following an episode in which she sneaks out of Yom Kippur services, goes home and eats up the food which had been prepared for after their fast, she is reprimanded and sent to her room. Once there, Mollie goes into her tough act. Turning her hat sideways, she jabs at her punching bag and declares (about the housekeeper Mochle, who told on her), "I'll just hang one on that old hen's chin so she won't be able to cackle again for a month."[5] Mollie then dons her boxing gloves and draws herself up in a boxer's swagger. She goes to the kitchen and finding Mochle (the housekeeper) and Shabse (the handyman) there, punches both of them. Shabse beats a hasty retreat, but Mochle, stunned by the first punch, remains immobilized.

[5] All film quotations are taken from the National Center for Jewish Film release of *East and West* (1923) directed by Sidney Goldin.

Mollie, with gloved hands, places Mochle's head at just the angle she wants, pulls back and lands one on her jaw, sending Mochle to the floor. Mollie then counts to ten and places one foot on the dropped Mochle in a classic winning pose.

By leaving shul, eating the family's meal and striking out at Mochle and Shabse, Mollie creates the narrative action in the film. This active role is the one Mulvey understands as typically male "...the man's role [is] the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and emerges as the representative of power..."[6] In filling this role, Mollie stands in contrast to the typical female role in most films as well as the females within *East and West*. None of the other women in the film cause anything to happen. Mollie's cousins, aunts and grandmother all stand passively on the fringes of the scenes neither creating action nor moving the plot along. Mollie is in the center of each plot event.

However, despite having more freedom to act than her female counterparts, Mollie does not have the same ability to create action that a man would. Each of the plot events she initiates ends with her own subordination to a man. When Mollie eats the Yom Kippur meal, her father banishes her to her room. When she punches Shabse and Mochle, her father first slaps her face, then spanks her. When he catches her actually pretending to be a man, in the complete cross-dressing scene, he leans her over the table and spanks her, then shoves her from the room, apparently toward her bedroom where she appears in the next scene. By spanking her, Mollie's father treats her as an inferior, as a naughty child, rather than either the man she was portraying or the adult woman that she really is.

---

[6] Mulvey, p. 420.

Though she is not physically punished following her staging of the 'mock' wedding, she ends up married to Jacob, bested by him and thereby subordinated to him.

A closer look at the scene in which she takes on the full costume of a male reveals this disparity between her male ability to act and her female passivity. During the scene, Mollie wears the clothes of a traditional male, a tallit katan, dark suit and cap. She stands in a line of men who are singing and tries to act as if she is one of them. She doesn't know exactly what she is supposed to be doing and her movements are self-consciously modeled after the men on either side of her. When they lift their hands with open palms, she does so moments later. When they snap the fingers of their right hands, she does as well. That motion then reminds her of another motion, one with which she is clearly more familiar and she tries to engage the young man next to her in "shooting a quarter." He doesn't recognize her gesture, presumably an American one, and goes back to his singing.

Although at this moment she looks more male than at any other time in the film, she is actually less able to fill the male role. Mollie's uncertainty while pretending to be a man (or a boy, given her lack of facial hair) points to her inability to really be a man. The other men know very clearly how to be men in this traditional setting. They know what to do and, it would seem, what it means to do it. Mollie tries to be one of the guys, but is not entirely able to do so. Her inability to be a complete man is underscored by her father's dominance in punishing her masquerade.

Additionally, Mollie's inability to fully act the part of the traditional male comes from her lack of knowledge not only about maleness, but also about Jewish tradition. Her movements are only copies of the men's, both because they are male and because they

come from a traditional idiom she does not share. One might surmise that one of Mollie's female cousins could imitate these men far better than Mollie. But that female cousin would not have the opportunity Mollie gets by virtue of her dual male/female qualities. Mollie's access to the active role is predicated on her modernity. Mollie's freedom of movement is related to her adoption of modernity (at the expense of tradition).

Mollie's ability to act, to be the motivating force, comes from her symbolic cross-dressing. Laura Mulvey says, "The transvestite wears clothes which signify a different sexuality, a sexuality which for the woman, allows a mastery over the image."[7] When she is wearing her cap and boxing gloves, Mollie is able to take on the active qualities of a male, to make things happen. In fact, throughout the first half of the film, even when Mollie is not wearing her male clothes, her ability to change into those clothes at will (simply by going to her room and putting on her boxing gloves and cap) gives her the freedom of movement that is associated with male characters. Despite the fact that she drives the narrative, however, Mollie is still quite clearly female. She is the motivator of action, yet the audience remains aware that she is a female, and therefore 'naturally' passive.

It is interesting to note, as well, the placement of the full cross-dressing scene within the narrative. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the scene is prefaced by the intertitle "the evening before the wedding." The timing is important, as Mollie's most complete act of boundary-pushing comes on the eve of what is arguably society's most clearly delineated moment of gender specificity – a heterosexual wedding. After her escapade, Mollie is sent to her room and we see her dejectedly removing her male

[7] Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's Duel in the Sun" in Visual and Other Pleasures, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 24.

clothing. The next scene is more pre-wedding dancing. This time, the men dance in a completely closed circle, dramatizing the fact that even Mollie's cross-dressing cannot give her access to the male realm. An all-female group dances separately from the men, similarly celebrating the impending wedding. Significantly, Mollie is not present in either dance group. She is neither male enough to breech the closed circle, nor female enough to join the other women in dancing. Instead she is exiled to her own space, her room in which the punching bag stands waiting for her next outburst.

The duality of male/female in Mollie's character becomes clear when her ability to control the action in the first half of the film is sharply diminished in the second. In fact, it is her own action that curtails her ability to continue being active. When Mollie stages her mock wedding, drawing people together, making others do as she desires, creating a scene out of her own imagination, she does so from her position of male action. But, she is out-acted by a 'real' male. Because she does not know the Jewish law, Mollie is not aware that Jacob is acting upon her, marrying her without her knowledge. She thought she was in control of the situation, but in his more complete ability to make things happen, the male is in reality controlling the action.

Once he does so, Mollie is for all intents and purposes relegated to a passive position. What was her response to her earlier misfortunes? She wanted to punch, to react, to do something masculine. Now, having been placed in the position of a 'true' female, she does not respond by going to her room to punch her punching bag. Instead she cries on her Daddy's shoulder - a characteristically feminine, passive response.

Throughout the remainder of the film, Mollie is as passive as any of the other female characters and Jacob takes his position as the motivator of the narrative. Mollie no

longer cross-dresses. She does not box. She does not make things happen. Mollie takes on the classic role of the female. In the scene before she and her father are to meet ben Alli (Jacob), she lies on a chaise lounge in her hotel room, dressed in a long flowing dress that is clearly feminine. Her prone position on the couch represents her complete relinquishment of active qualities. She reclines in utter passivity.

Through this resumption of conventional gender roles, we can see how the film serves to reinforce, rather than to reject the differentiation between male and female. The resolution of the narrative plot comes with the discovery that ben Alli, with whom Mollie has fallen in love since being in Vienna, is in fact Jacob her own husband. With that discovery, all that has gone before is forgiven. Forgotten are Mollie's pain at having been tricked into a loveless marriage, the five years of uncertainty while waiting to get her divorce, her father's anger at how Jacob abused Mollie's innocence. Forgotten as well is Mollie's mischieviousness, her self-determination and 'male' creation of action within the narrative. None of it matters now that she and Jacob are together and in love.

If audiences of *East and West* found humor in the in-between quality of Mollie Brown, and the popularity of the film leads one to believe they did,[8] the resolution of the film and the subsequent reinforcement of Mollie's true feminine nature allowed them to experience that humor. Christine Gledhill writes that in film, the audience is able to accept challenges to the way in which they normally understand the world and to find pleasure in those challenges, but only because they are reassured in the end that reality is exactly what they think it is. She writes, "...classic narrative, then, is committed to a compulsive play on the pleasure/terror opened up by difference and process, but

---

[8] Eric A. Goldman, Visions, Images and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Research Press, 1979), p. 13.

predicated on the safety of already known closure."[9] The possibility that the categories of male and female are not as distinct as people might like them to be can be a compelling but frightening concept. In the end, though, Mollie is safely relegated to the conventional gender attributes of a female - passive, heterosexual, and attached to a man who controls the action. She has opened up the possibilities of gender instability, but she also gives the audience the security of knowing that it was just for fun, just the antics of a young mischievous woman.

In addition to challenging the boundary between male and female identity Mollie's cross-dressing also signifies the presence of what Marjorie Garber calls a category crisis. She says, "one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of what I call 'category crisis,' disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social or aesthetic dissonances."[10] In *East and West*, Mollie's cross-dressing can be seen as symbolizing the category crisis between east and west, tradition and modernity.

East and West was produced in Vienna, Austria by a group of Americans and ex-patriot Americans. In 1923, the year in which the film was created, Vienna was home to a polarized Jewish population. On one end of the spectrum were highly acculturated[11] Jews who had lived in the Austrian capital since the mid-19th century. On the other end of the

---

[9] Christine Gledhill, "Developments in Feminist Film Criticism," in Re-vision : Essays, in Feminist Film Criticism, eds., Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, Linda Williams (Frederick, MD: 1984), p. 44.
[10] Garber, p. 16.
[11] Paula Hyman, in Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1995), p.13 offers cogent definitions of acculturation and assimilation which I will employ throughout this paper: "As a *sociological process*, [italics hers] assimilation consists of several different stages. The first steps, often called acculturation, include the acquisition of the basic markers of the larger society, such as language, dress, and the more amorphous category of 'values.' The integration of minority-group members into the majority institutions follows, with the attendant weakening of minority institutions. The end point of assimilation is the dissolution of the minority by biological merger with the majority through intermarriage."

spectrum, were large numbers of Jews from Eastern Europe who had immigrated in 1914, on the eve of World War I.

The established Jewish community spoke German, held professional positions, and was involved in non-Jewish society. They had been a part of what Paula Hyman calls "the relatively rapid acculturation of the Jews of nineteenth-century western and central Europe."[12] They had responded to modernity by becoming participating members of the cultures in which they lived, in contrast to the pre-modern separation between Jews and their Gentile neighbors. In addition, this rapid process of acculturation had been and continued to be consciously promoted from within the Jewish community. Hyman notes that the German Jewish historian Isaak Markus Jost applauded his community's developments toward assimilation, even by 1833. "Jost took pride in the great strides that his Jewish contemporaries had taken in moving, as it were, from the Jewish 'Middle Ages' into the German 'Modern Age.'"[13]

This 'native' Jewish community had acculturated to a large degree, but had also maintained some amount of Jewish distinctiveness. They tended to live in predominately Jewish neighborhoods, had contact primarily with Jews from similar backgrounds (ie. Galician, Bohemian, Hungarian, etc.) and tended to marry other Jews. The community supported a variety of Jewish ideological causes and organizations, as Marsha Rozenblit describes, "...they also devised new ways of asserting Jewish identity, including Zionism and diaspora Jewish nationalism, which both perpetuated and justified distinctiveness."[14]

---

[12] Hyman, p. 17.
[13] Hyman, p. 10.
[14] Marsha Rozenblit, The Jews of Vienna 1867-1914: Assimilation and Identity, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 2.

The established Jewish community had acculturated to the point of adopting many of the larger society's markers, while retaining some elements of Jewish identity.

1914 and the eve of World War I brought to this established Jewish community a mass of poor cousins from Eastern Europe. Pushed from their homes by waves of rampant anti-Semitism, they arrived in Vienna as refugees. Between 1881 and 1914, some 350,000 Jews relocated to Western European countries.[15] Of that emigration, Aryeh Tartakower writes "A huge exodus of refugees began, on a scale unprecedented in the history of Austrian Jewry...Hundreds of thousands of Galician Jews, fully aware of the Tsarist anti-Semitism and fearing the worst if caught by Russian soldiers under war conditions, fled to the West..."[16] During the war, many of the refugees were able to return to their homes, but many chose to stay in Vienna. By the end of World War I, a significant number of refugees, about 35,000 remained.[17]

The Eastern European Jews who stayed in Vienna after the war had not been participants in the rapid acculturation ascribed to western and central European Jews. They had not adopted "the basic markers of the larger society, such as language, dress, and the more amorphous category of 'values.'"[18] They maintained their traditional Jewish clothing and spoke Yiddish or Yiddish-inflected German. These newly arrived Jews were visibly different from their non-Jewish neighbors in a way that their acculturated Jewish relatives had ceased to be. Their presence in Vienna as a group of refugees, dependent on the charity of relatives and imperfectly adapted to German culture, provided a focus for

---

[15] H.H. Ben-Sasson, ed, A History of the Jewish People,(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 861.
[16] Arieh Tartakower, "Jewish Migratory Movements in Austria in Recent Generations," in The Jews of Austria: Essays on their Life, History and Destruction, ed., Josef Fraenkel, (London: Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., 1967), p. 289.
[17] Tartakower, p. 290.
[18] Hyman, p. 13.

the right-wing nationalism and anti-Semitism which were already present in non-Jewish society.

The 'native' Jewish community's response to the immigrants was complex. J. Hoberman notes in his discussion of *East and West* that the Galician influx added to the vitality of Viennese Jewish life, "strengthening the Orthodox, Zionist, and Yiddishist camps."[19] At the same time, however, the already acculturated population felt threatened by the immigrants visibility as 'other' and feared association with them. To many assimilated Jews in Vienna, the Eastern European Orthodox, unaculturated, seemed "primitive, irrational, and a threat to their status."[20] Hoberman also quotes the novelist Joseph Roth as having said in the mid-twenties, "Those who came ten years ago are not pleased to see those who come now. Their cousins and co-religionists who sit in the newspaper offices of the first district are already '*schön*' Viennese, and they don't want to be related to the *Ostjuden* [Eastern Jewish], let alone be mistaken for them."[21]

In *East and West* we see a reflection of the Viennese Jewish community's struggle with Jewish identity. Was it peyes and tallit that made one a Jew or is it true that, as Jacob's acculturated uncle says, "A man's religion dwells in his heart, my lad, not in his whiskers?" The audience of a movie is by definition a modern audience because movies are themselves part of the modern world. The audience bias, then, might be assumed to rest on the side of modernity rather than tradition.

---

[19] J. Hoberman, Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds, (NY: Schocken, 1991), p. 63.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

And yet there is enough nostalgia invited by the scenes of Jewish traditional practice to suggest that the question of how much one could or should modernize was still a matter of debate. To be sure, the film leans heavily toward the side of modernity, as we will see.

The filmmakers involved with *East and West* brought to the film not only the Jewish milieu of Vienna, but also that of immigrant America. The director, Sidney Goldin was an ex-patriate American. The film's star, Molly Picon was a first generation and her husband/co-star Jacob Kalich was a Polish immigrant who had spent the last ten years living and working in America. Picon and Kalich had come to Vienna specifically to make the picture. While the film is set in Poland and Vienna, the main character, Mollie, is a first generation American who brings a specifically American sensibility to the situations in which she finds herself. J. Hoberman notes that the film has a "breezy irreverent tone [that] seems particularly American."[22] He credits actress Molly Picon with much of that American influence, saying "Of course, nothing in the movie is more American than its star. Picon's extraordinary appeal exemplifies the dynamic cultural relationship between the New World and the Old Country."[23]

The film's exploration of modernity and tradition must be seen in the context of the American Jewish experience of confronting modernity as well as that of the Viennese experience. Between the 1880s and the 1920s over two million Jews left Russia and emigrated to the United States.[24] This group of Jews entered an already established American Jewish community. For the most part, the new immigrants identified strongly with Americans and American culture, as had the previous generations of American

---

[22] Hoberman, p. 66.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Susan A. Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 42.

Jews, hoping to assimilate and become a part of that culture as quickly as possible. "All Jews... recognized acculturation as a necessity for immigrants to achieve a stable position in America."[25] The process of assimilation was somewhat faster for Jews who were young when they arrived and for first-generation Jewish Americans, than for older immigrants who tended to maintain more traditional patterns of behavior, dress, and culture.

Part of the drive toward Americanization involved a change in attitude toward women's roles in society. In the world they had left, primarily that of Eastern Europe, women had played a complex role in Jewish life. They shared with their husbands the responsibility of maintaining the family economically. In addition, women were primarily responsible for religious life at home and domestic needs such as child rearing, cleaning and cooking. At the same time, they were restricted from the public religious sphere and from positions of public authority. As Susan Glenn observes, "Women's work, economic and domestic, was acknowledged as an essential component of physical and cultural survival, but women as a sex were considered inferior to men."[26]

The nature of work in America was significantly different from that in Eastern Europe. In the Old Country, Jewish women had rarely been employed in factories, because this kind of work would take them from their domestic responsibilities. They were more likely to engage in "the system of home-based artisanal or outwork production."[27] In addition, industrialization had not reached as ubiquitous a level in Eastern Europe as it had in America, where "production had in large part moved from the

---

[25] Hyman, p. 132.
[26] Glenn, p. 8.
[27] Glenn, p. 69.

home into factories and workshops."[28] Upon reaching America, Jews found themselves in the midst of an industrial economy, and their responses to that new work structure varied with age and gender.

Among the common responses to the new economic necessities of America was for older and/or married women to find ways of contributing to the family economy that would allow them to remain at home. They took in piecework or garment finishing so that they could maintain the family's home life: cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc, a primary role for married women in the traditional society from which they came. Younger, unmarried women, by contrast, tended to work outside the home in factories and workshops, especially in the garment industry, often spending the majority of their waking hours in this public arena. Younger women therefore came into greater contact with Americanizing influences than did their mothers and married sisters, who stayed at home. "Going to work meant confronting a world of conflicting messages and sensibilities, a world that both assaulted women's dignity and introduced them to the liberating potential of new ideas and social patterns."[29]

Among the new social patterns young Jewish women encountered and very often embraced were ideas about marriage. In the traditional Jewish culture, marriages were arranged by parents, very often for economic or familial prestige rather than emotional reasons. Sons and daughters might have little or no say in a marriage that would provide good 'yichus,' (prestige) to the bride's family. In America, however, romantic love was viewed as primary. In the social atmosphere of the factories, young Jewish women learned and accepted this Western ideal of marriage. "Conversations with other young

---

[28] Ibid.
[29] Glenn, p. 132.

women at work strengthened the emerging belief that what mattered in marriage was love..."[30] The trend toward a new concept of marriage continued throughout the early twentieth century and beyond. As Glenn notes "Observers of social behavior in the 1920s also emphasized...the shift toward 'companionate marriage'—union based on love, mutual attraction, and consumerism rather than the older standard of matrimony associated with duty, self-sacrifice, and idealized domesticity."[31]

By the 1920's, in addition to new ideas about romantic love, Jewish women's adoption of American mores included general notions of what women's roles in the world ought to be. Glenn notes, "No longer would young women be content to struggle as the silent half; now they wanted the voice, the recognition, the respect that as working partners they had long been denied. This was a revolution in immigrant women's thinking—one that most of Mollie's[32] Jewish sisters participated in to some degree—a new definition of womanhood being constructed on the foundations of the old."[33] These young women wanted credit for the work they had been doing, for their participation in the workforce. In addition, Glenn notes that they also wanted "to take their place alongside men as companions, pals, and partners, participating socially as well as politically in worlds formerly reserved for men."[34]

---

[30] Glenn, p. 157.
[31] Glenn, p. 208.
[32] Mollie Schepps – a young Jewish garment worker whose activism Susan Glenn records in Daughters of the Shtetl.
[33] Glenn, p. 208.
[34] Ibid.

They were re-examining the ways in which women and men had traditionally interacted, adjusting to a new, more Americanized system of gender roles and expectations. The contrast between modernity and tradition in East and West is reflective of these young women's experiences in adapting to a modern system of gender roles.

The contrast between modernity and tradition in *East and West* is apparent from the film's beginning sequence of scenes. The first shot is light and airy. It is filmed outdoors, with healthy looking bushes and trees in the background. Each of the characters is dressed primarily in white. The young men look strong and virile, Morris and Mollie both seem happy and content. The openness of the American scene is quickly contrasted with the audience's first glimpse of the Old Country.

In the second scene, in a small, dimly lit room, sits a traditionally dressed man with peyes, tallit and beard. Mottel Brownstein, Morris' Brown's brother is alone in the room, writing at a small table. While the Americans in the scene before were outside, standing tall and bursting with vibrancy, Mottel sits hunched over his desk in surroundings which suggest confinement. He is the epitome of the Old World, and the film sets him in opposition to Mollie and Morris Brown' modernity. This conflict, between what Jews have been in the Old World and what they are becoming in the new one, is illustrated by the contrast between the first scene's light and second's darkness.

The cross-dressing scene in which Mollie puts on the clothing of a traditional Jewish male is one clear site of category crisis. In putting on the clothing not only of Jewish tradition but of Jewish men as well, she embodies the tension between Jewish culture as it has always been (at least in the film's presentation) and the new possibilities open to Jews through emancipation. By taking on the identity of someone who is quite

clearly not herself, she places herself in-between realities. She is in reality neither a man, nor a traditional Jew, but her clothing signifies that she is both, and others in the film believe that she is. In taking on that other reality, she pushes the borders of her identity. Mollie's cross-dressing suggests the broadening of possibilities in keeping with Garber's category crisis.[35]

Tension between modernity and tradition can be seen in Mollie's costumes, even when she is not fully cross-dressed. Her particular mix of toughness and sensitivity recalls the "flapper" style of dress and behavior current in 1920's America. In "The Flapper and her Critics" Gerald E. Critoph describes the flapper as "a girl or young woman who demonstrated a rebellious, or at least unconventional attitude through her appearance, behavior and speech."[36] Rebelling against the Victorian code which restricted women's proper roles and appearance, the flapper took on elements of male dress and behavior which allowed her a greater range of motion both literally and figuratively. Combined with this mobility was a more open sexuality than was allowed to previous generations and a sense that women could be "as good (or as bad) as any man."[37]

Critoph lists among the flapper's costume uncovered knees, bobbed hair and clothes that generally gave her the ability to take part in more active physical pursuits. He cites a contemporary observer who said of the flapper "She prided herself on sharing in all male sports that were physiologically attainable, slapped us on the back and 'rough-

---

[35] As noted in the introductory chapter, Marjorie Garber defines this term as "a failure of distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, etc," p. 16.

[36] Gerald E. Critoph, "The Flapper and her Critics" in Women in American History ed., Carol V.R. George, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1975), p. 145.

[37] Peter G. Filene, Him/Her Self, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 115.

housed' with us..."[38] Mollie's short pants, bobbed hair and boxing gloves in the first scene, as well as the short dress she wears while staging her mock wedding place her within the flapper camp.

Casting Mollie's character as a flapper allows her not only to dress in a fashion that gives her freedom of movement (in order to take on the male, action-centered role), but also to challenge the boundaries and restrictions of a previous generation. The American flapper identity pushed against Victorian models of gender. When placed in the context of the traditional Jewish world, the challenge is transferred to the Jewish genre of restrictions. Simply by dressing in a fashion that represents modernity, Mollie's dress acts as a contrast to and a questioning of traditionalism.

In Daughters of the Shtetl, Glenn compares the serious Jewish immigrant women who in the 1920s demanded equal recognition for the work they did, with a concurrent fashion in American life, the flapper. She argues that in the 1920s, the flapper represented a kind of carefree sexuality that the immigrants would not have readily embraced, despite their changing views of love and marriage. However, "it is likely that immigrants and Americans learned something from each other as both cultures re-oriented to traditional ways to carve out modern sex roles in the first decades of this century."[39] That the flapper was at least an appealing image, if not one that young Jewish girls would personally have embodied is evident from the popularity *East and West*. Molly Picon's flapper character represents a fantasy persona, someone whom the movie's audience might not dare to be, but would nonetheless admire and appreciate. In the end, the movie makes clear that

---

[38] Critoph, p. 147.
[39] Glenn, p. 208.

while love in marriage is important, a good Jewish girl will be more settled, less wild than the flapper Mollie presents in the first part of the movie.

The status quo resolution, which reinforces the distinct categories of male and female, allows the audience to tolerate Mollie's challenge of gender boundaries because they feel assured of a comfortable (non-transgressive) ending. Similarly, the film is able to lean toward modernity because it does not advocate a complete overthrow of all traditional values. Despite the fact that the film's bias is established from the opening scenes that symbolically place modernity in a more positive light than tradition, the film does not reach as clear a conclusion about modernity as it does about gender. Tradition cannot come out the clear winner in *East and West*, but not every aspect of modernity is upheld. If, as I have suggested, modernity carries with it not only a new conception of companionate marriage, but also a new vision of acceptable gender roles, then the film's stifling of Mollie's ability to act in the first half must also be seen as a partial rejection of modernity. In addition, the film does not condone a complete departure from Jewish religious life, although it does suggest that religion must be understood differently in a modern world. The film's overall leanings are certainly toward modernity. Nevertheless, not everything traditional is easily dismissed.

In order to be a good husband who could make Mollie satisfied in marriage, Jacob has to give up much of his traditionalism. His decision to go to Vienna and make himself into an acceptable husband for Mollie means changing his life entirely, but he seems willing to do so in the pursuit of true love. While not unheard of in traditional Jewish society, true love can hardly be seen as a primary factor in the usual process of marriage and family. This underlying theme, seen both in Jacob's willingness to sacrifice his

tradition for love and in Mollie's dismay at being married without love, indicates the predisposition of the film to lean toward modernity.

The overhaul of Jacob's identity in the pursuit of love is communicated primarily through his costume changes. Through a series of intertitles and short scenes we follow his progress. When Jacob arrives in Vienna, shots of a busy street, a locomotive and modern-looking people hurrying around stand in distinct contrast to the small uncomfortable looking Jacob. Once his uncle, holding himself and his wife up as a successful example, convinces Jacob that modernizing is the way to go, he proceeds to change his appearance and through it, we understand, his worldview.

We read "Jacob makes use of every shining hour," and then see Jacob in a library where the other men are all clean-shaven and modern looking. Some look at him strangely, but one man says "Don't laugh my friend. I know the young Talmud student. He has brains despite the makeup." Next we see the intertitle "progressing" and Jacob emerges from a barbershop shorn of beard and payes. He seems quite satisfied with himself and saunters off like a man with a plan. He is however, still wearing his large black hat and traditional black coat. Finally we read "nearing perfection" and see Jacob sitting at his writing desk. He is wearing a smoking jacket, no kippah and short hair. Visions of Mollie appear to him as he works, apparently on the book he will soon publish. Having adopted western ideals of beauty, charm and grace, he has become someone who can gain Mollie's love.

Jacob's transformation is presented differently than Mollie's cross-dressing because the audience is meant to understand it as a life change, not just an experiment with various modern possibilities. Although Mollie plays at being both/and, female/male,

Jacob discards his old traditional self in order to acquire his new modern self. The permanence of his identity shift is evident in the final scene of the film. In it, Mollie and her father have lunch with Jacob's uncle and aunt in their garden. While they eat, the shot changes to Jacob, now dressed in his old clothes complete with hat, payes and beard. We watch as he takes on his former bent posture, pulling his whole body in on itself. As Jacob enters the garden, Morris Brown's anger is instantly brought to the surface. He chastises Jacob, grabbing him by the collar while Jacob cowers and tries to calm him with gestures that recall the stereotype of the effeminate Jewish man. Finally Jacob dramatically pulls off his hat, payes and beard, revealing himself to the delight of his aunt and uncle who have been in on the joke all along. Morris Brown laughs uproariously and Mollie stares first stunned, then rapturously loving, understanding that Jacob is really ben Alli. He asks if she still wants her divorce and in a characteristically feminine response she pouts her lips, pursing them slightly and shakes her head no. They kiss to seal the marriage.

Jacob first puts on a mask, that of his former traditional self, and then removes it, showing that he has created a new identity which he will keep. By playing with his Old World, traditional clothing and mannerisms, we understand that his real identity is modern, New World. Jacob has made a significant change from traditional to modern, thereby reinforcing the film's general bias toward modernity.

In the final scene we see that the category crisis surrounding gender is resolved through Mollie and ben Alli's heterosexual, love-centered marriage. The resolution of the modernity/traditionalism crisis is not resolved as clearly. Although Mollie's earlier action in the film indicates that it is possible to embody both male and female, a modern idea,

the film ultimately reveals that it is only possible as a mischievous child and not as a full-grown woman. The kind of gender play that was acceptable when Mollie was seen as a young girl is no longer possible or desirable when she is seen as an adult. In the final scenes, Mollie's hat and boxing gloves are nowhere to be seen. She is not a combination of her old male and female qualities. She has simply abandoned her male ones. The traditional separation between male and female is maintained, to the exclusion of more modern gender possibilities.

Mollie's ability to act and motivate the narrative of the film is predicated on her modernity. No traditional woman would have access to her flapper clothes, much less to her boxing gloves and freedom of movement. Only in a modern world could a woman be what Mollie is at the beginning of the film. And in fact it is this active Mollie with whom Jacob falls in love. But it is the passive Mollie whom he forces into marriage. In the second half of the film her ability to act is curtailed and she becomes passive. Mollie has to become more traditional to be properly female. Modernity is not held up as the absolute good, because Mollie's modernity has to be curtailed. When the narrative resolves through the resumption of 'proper' gender roles, it diminishes the power of modernity in relation to gender.

The way in which the film deals with religion also mitigates its message about modernity. Certainly, the prevailing sense with which the audience leaves is that it is far better to live as a modern Jew than a traditional one. However, not every model of modernity is an acceptable one. Mollie and Morris are shown to have assimilated beyond the bounds of acceptable Jewish life. They are both pictured as inept at practicing Judaism, Mollie through conscious rebellion, Morris by simple lack of knowledge. Mollie

sneaks a novel into services and eats during Yom Kippur. Morris holds his prayer book upside down, eliciting the disdainful comment from a fellow worshipper that it is not a checkbook, but a prayer book.

The proper model for modern religion, it seems, is that practiced by Jacob's aunt and uncle, who keep a discreet Star of David on the house and believe, as noted earlier, that "A man's religion dwells in his heart, my lad, not in his whiskers." It is important to them to maintain Jewish identity, but traditional clothing and practice are not part of that identity. Morris and Mollie's brand of modernity is unacceptable because they have lost all connection with their Jewish identities.

East and West is not alone among films of this period in dealing with the question of Jewish identity in the face of modernity.[40] One film, *Tkies Kaf* (The Handshake) which was produced in Poland in 1924, also raises the issue of arranged marriages and questions about the ways in which Jews should and should not accommodate modernity. In the film, two men pledge to marry their children to one another when the children grow up. Many years later, one father has forgotten his pledge in the face of modern opportunities. In the end the children do marry, because they fall in love, not because of the agreement made by their fathers.

---

[40] Other films from the same time period focus more on anti-Semitism than on Jewish identity. *Yisker* (1924) and *Der Lamedvovnik* (1925) both document the unfair treatment of Jews by Gentiles and Jewish resistance. *Jewish Luck* (1925) focuses on Jewish poverty under the Czars. For more on these films see: J. Hoberman, Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds (NY: Shocken, 1991); Eric Goldman, Visions, Images and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present, (Ann Arbor, MI:University of Michigan Research Press, 1979) and Patricia Erens The Jew in American Cinema, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

Hoberman notes that the 1907 play of the same name, on which the film is based, takes a much stronger stand against arranged marriages and religious superstition than does the film which he calls, "considerably more ambivalent."[41] Regardless of the ambivalence he finds in the film, Hoberman confirms that the thematic issue is clear, "Like *East and West*, *Tkies Kaf* bespeaks the Jewish conflict between tradition and modernization."[42]

The conflict between modernization and tradition is also central to many American films of the mid-1920s. Story lines involving assimilation, upward mobility and movement out of the ghettos were common. The question of intermarriage, often between Jews and another immigrant group, the Irish, was seen as a way of assimilating into American society. As Patricia Erens notes in The Jew in American Cinema, "In one sense, this viewed acculturation as a process of absorption. By literally taking in a member of another group (in this case, the Irish who preceded the Jews and who were thus one rung ahead on the ladder of ethnic ascendancy), the Jew could climb ahead."[43] Erens also suggests that films of the mid-1920s that deal with issues of immigrant life differ from earlier films with the same themes because they lack the culture shock of the earlier films: "The comic situations which resulted from the immigrant's head-on collision with new customs and sudden wealth, as well as the insecurity and discomfort experienced by confrontation with new values, disappear from the films. Further, the children of the ghetto, first generation Americans, move up the social ladder and into new social situations with an ease unknown to their parents."[44] Nevertheless, issues of

---

[41] Hoberman, p. 76.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Patricia Erens, The Jew in American Cinema, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 82.
[44] Erens, p. 84.

acculturation and assimilation into American society remain prevalent in American films with Jewish characters and themes.

Interestingly, no Jewish film other than *East and West* during the 1920s uses the narrative device of cross-dressing. While some female-to-male cross-dressing does occur in the early 1920s among Hollywood films that do not focus on Jewish characters or plots, they are few and do not continue past 1921 or so. Throughout the majority of the 1920s, female-to-male cross-dressing was simply not a commonly employed plot device.

It is perhaps surprising that the method employed by *East and West* to approach the common issues of modern Jewish identity and gender roles is one which even today many among the Jewish community would consider risqué, that is, cross-dressing. However in the film's solid resolution of the gender questions we find that the cross-dressing is not transgressive, serving to break down gender divisions. Rather, it reinforces long-standing understandings of the 'natural' differences between men and women and the roles they rightfully play in society.

Although the presence of the cross-dresser in *East and West* challenges the notions of gender distinction and the border between modernity and tradition, in the end the film reinforces the stability of the world in which the audience lived. As Michael Rogin points out "...marking a category crisis may also provide symbolic reassurance, mastering the anxiety about mobile identities rather than challenging the social order."[45] In the end, *East and West* resolves the questions it raises. The potentially frightening possibility that modernity means nothing is stable anymore, including men's and women's roles in society, is assuaged by Mollie's return to the classic female role.

---

[45] Michael Rogin, Black Faces, White Noise, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 32.

Yidl Mitn Fidl

The audience first encounters Molly Picon's character in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* (1936) as Maidl, a young woman. In the first scene, set in the marketplace of an East European shtetl, we learn from the townspeople who talk amongst themselves that Maidl's mother is dead and that Maidl plays her violin to support her elderly father. Maidl goes home to find her father evicted and all their possessions out in the street. She suggests that they "wander about the country and cheer people up."[1] Together they decide to become traveling musicians. Maidl's father, Arye, is concerned about her welfare as they travel. He says "...and you are a girl, a young woman. Men will bother you. If only you were a boy..." The camera focuses on Maidl, whose thoughtful look alerts the audience that she might very well have a solution to that problem.

The next scene begins with a shot from behind of what appear to be the feet of a man and a young boy walking on a country road. As the camera pans up to reveal more of their bodies, the audience sees that the boy is actually Maidl dressed in boys' clothing. She[2] is recognizable both because her face is unchanged and because she repeats a characteristic action she had performed as Maidl. Yidl, (Maidl's name when dressed as a boy) yanks up her slouching sock without pausing in her stride, just as Maidl had in an earlier scene. The song that Maidl sings as she and her father hitch a ride on a passing wagon makes clear the joy that she finds in her new identity and its attendant freedom.

---

[1] All film quotations are taken from the 1988 Ergo Media Inc. release of *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, produced and directed by Joseph Green (1936)

[2] At the risk of grammatical confusion, I will use female pronouns for the character played by Molly Picon, both when the character is dressed as a woman and when she is dressed as a boy. The other option, to use male pronouns for Yidl, female pronouns for Maidl, disregards the fact that the audience is always aware that Yidl is in reality a woman dressed as a boy. The use of female pronouns will reflect the fact that there is no attempt to make Yidl seem believably male.

"Yidl with the fiddle, Arye with the bass/ Life is just a song, so why the angry face?/ Hey Yidl, fiddle, shmidl, oy there's laughter everywhere."

Arriving in town, Yidl and her father choose a courtyard and begin playing their music. Soon two other musicians come upon them and declare that this courtyard is their turf. At first, the two pairs argue, but eventually decide that there is strength in numbers. Despite their rocky first encounter, Yidl and her father decide to join Kalamutke and Froim, the other two musicians, on their travels. The four head off together to spend the night in a barn that Kalamutke knows. That evening, Froim plays a sentimental tune while Yidl daydreams and sings of love. Finally she sleeps and dreams vividly of Froim, the man she loves. Her dream is not without conflict, as she switches back and forth between her two identities, Yidl and Maidl, without being able to control the switching.

A montage of the musicians playing in courtyard after courtyard shows that the musicians are successful. They are well received and have enough money for a night at the tavern. The next morning, Yidl is hung over and sad. Trying to wash her face in the river, she falls in and fears she is drowning. Froim hears her cries for help and rushes to save her. As he stands with Yidl in his arms, she reaches up as if to kiss him, forgetting that in his eyes, she is still a boy. He drops her, shakes his head and leaves her in the river. Luckily, the river is not very deep and she is able to stand, sputtering and wiping her eyes.

Yidl and Froim return to the barn where Yidl continues to flirt and act in ways Froim finds un-manly. Yidl sings a song declaring her love "Oy Mama, I Fell in Love" and then the four musicians go off to play at a wedding in another town. Once they arrive, they learn that the wedding is an arranged one. The beautiful young Taybele has

broken off with her true love, a poor man, to wed Mr. Gold, a wealthy old man on his fourth marriage. In the name of true love, Yidl liberates the unwilling bride by sneaking her out during the wedding party. Taybele then joins the band of musicians and befriends Froim when he promises to help her find her lost lover; Yidl becomes increasingly jealous of their closeness.

They journey on to the city where Kalamutke's lady friend lives. While singing there with the musicians, Taybele is discovered by a theater manager who promises to make her a star. Froim is enlisted to play in the orchestra. Before attending the show on opening night, Yidl reveals her true identity to Kalamutke who convinces her that Froim does not love Taybele as Yidl fears. Yidl runs off to the theater to see Taybele but finds her dressing room empty. She tries on Taybele's dress, but keeps her boots and boyish hat on. When she reads the note attached to the hem of the dress, she learns that Taybele's lover has returned and that they have run off together.

The show in which Taybele was to star is about to begin and Yidl tries to tell everyone she meets backstage what has happened. No one listens and she finds herself onstage in half-Yidl, half-Maidl clothes. Trying to tell Froim about her real identity, she falls into the orchestra pit and then launches into a monologue which is serious in her eyes, but hilarious to the audience. Seeing that the audience enjoys her performance, the managers of the theater hire her. Her career is set in motion and Froim finds that he is in love with her, as she is with him. As her career progresses, Maidl is offered a job in America. She wants Froim to go with her, but after overhearing her manager say that he would just hold her back, Froim leaves town to spare her any pain. True love wins out when Froim finds his own way to America and on the boat they are reunited once again.

Like Mollie in *East and West*, Maidl/Yidl has more freedom of movement and more capacity to cause narrative action than a woman generally has in film. We first see Maidl's ability to act before she has started wearing male clothing. In the scene, however, she is only partially successful at creating the action. In the market scene that begins the movie, Maidl plays her fiddle, trying to earn money to support her father. The market is crowded, but no one is listening. A large man approaches, comments on her pretty legs and asks if she will dance with him. Maidl is wary, but when he offers her two zlotyls, she agrees, asking the others around if they have ever seen a dancing bear. She grabs him by the lapels of his coat and dances him around, not, apparently, in the romantic and/or sexual way that he was expecting. Rather than allowing herself to be the object of his gaze, as Laura Mulvey describes the typical female role in film,[3] Maidl turns the action around so that she is the one in charge of the situation. She is the one making him look like a fool. The scene is similar to the one in *East and West* in which Jacob fails to eat his soup because he is overcome by her beauty, while Mollie mocks even his admiring look. Here, however, having made the man look like a fool, he refuses to pay the money he had promised and Maidl is helpless to make him. A sympathetic man from the crowd steps in and physically forces the man to give her the two zlotyls. She is not able to carry the scene's action through to a satisfactory resolution without the help of a man.

When she proposes that she and her father travel together as itinerant musicians, Maidl is again able to motivate the action of the narrative, driving it forward. She is even able to overcome her father's misgivings about her safety by devising the cross-dressing plan. At this moment, she is not yet cross-dressed so her ability to act is not due to her male clothing, but rather to her father's weakness as a male character. As we saw in the

[3] See chapter 2 for a more complete discussion of this concept.

previous scene, until she is cross-dressed, she is only able to take on male agency to a certain point. Here, because her father's weakness leaves a gap, she is able to fill it. With a stronger male character, such as Froim, she would not have been able to act as decisively. Indeed, even when she is cross-dressed and therefore more able to act, her action is nonetheless curtailed to some extent by Froim's stronger male presence in the narrative.

After she is cross-dressed, Yidl takes control of the action, pulling her father, Arye along with her. She hails them a ride on a passing wagon and decides where they should play their instruments when they reach the town. Once Yidl and her father join up with Kalamutke and Froim, her ability to act is generally suppressed. In comparison to Froim, she is not nearly as able to move the action because he is a stronger male character. However, Yidl does have one more significant moment of agency in the film, even after the four musicians join together. She frees Taybele from an unhappy, arranged marriage. Yidl spirits Taybele out of the house in the midst of the wedding celebration at which the musicians are supposed to be playing. It is significant that the other musicians, including Froim, all follow her lead without any discussion. We simply see the group running through the field after Yidl has engineered Taybele's escape. In this scene, it is not the cross-dresser's position outside the male/female structures that allows Yidl's agency, but her position as signifier of change in terms of modernity. By releasing Taybele from a traditional arranged marriage, Yidl confirms the value of marriage based on love, a modern ideal.

Yidl has far less agency, even cross-dressed, than did Mollie in *East and West*. In addition, throughout the film, we are made aware that her cross-dressing is not always

pleasant, not always a game she enjoys playing, as Mollie did. Yidl's songs and dreams reveal her love for Froim and her attendant frustration at not being able to act on her love. During the first night the musicians spend together, Froim plays a slow, sad song on his fiddle and Yidl goes into a dreaming reverie in which she sings, "Play you fiddle play/ Play a song of love for me/ Only you alone know how it hurts my heart." The camera cuts to various outdoor scenes, first showing idyllic trees, water-lilies and sun rays beaming through billowing clouds. As Yidl's words reveal the longing in her heart, the outdoor scenes turn dark and frightening, showing violent wind in the trees, dark skies, and lightning in the clouds. When the song ends, Froim lays down his fiddle and walks to where Yidl has been dreaming. She sits, still entranced by her song, looking longingly off into the distance. Froim, seeing her behavior as strange for a boy, rudely awakens her with a command "Come to bed." Yidl cannot even have the love she desires in her dreams, because the object of her desire, Froim, does not know that she is a woman. While her cross-dressing affords her greater freedom of action, it does not bring her the enjoyment that Mollie found in *East and West*.

This difference is due in part to the fact that in the earlier film, Mollie only cross-dresses completely in one scene. Her adoption of male dress is mischievous. She is acting out against the repressive atmosphere in which she finds herself and enjoying it (until she is subsequently punished). In *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, Picon is completely cross-dressed throughout the majority of the film. The cross-dressing is at her father's bidding and is not a rebellion against repressive norms, but rather something like filial duty. One consequence is the extent to which the cross-dressed character becomes 'normal' within the narrative of the film.

Everyone in the film, except her father who is in on the charade, believes that Yidl is male. Indeed, as they travel, it seems that Arye forgets from time to time that Yidl is not really a boy. He is unconcerned, for instance, with where she will sleep when the four musicians settle down for the night. Had he thought of her as the vulnerable young woman she evidently sees herself to be, he might have made certain that she was safe from any unwanted contact with the handsome young Froim. His daughter's vulnerability, however, seems not to enter his mind, indicating that he himself has begun to think of her as male as well, or at least a-sexual. He goes off to sleep peacefully next to Kalamutke, leaving Yidl to her own devices.

Additionally, Froim and Kalamutke never doubt that Yidl is a boy, even though the actress makes no real attempt to disguise her voice or clearly feminine face. At moments when Yidl's true female identity might have become apparent, they do not suspect. Froim might reasonably guess Yidl's identity when he rescues her from 'drowning' in the river. Finding herself in her beloved's arms, Yidl turns her face to him and reaches up as if to kiss him. Froim's reaction shows that he has no idea that the boy is really a woman. If he had been aware at that moment, he might have kissed her or at least made notice of the fact that she was a woman. Instead, he drops her back into the water, apparently disgusted either by the idea of kissing another male, or by Yidl's very un-masculine behavior.[4] In addition to seeming 'normal' within the narrative, Molly Picon's cross-dressing role in *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, would not have been surprising to an audience of the 1930's because she had been playing such roles for years. By the time she made thisfilm, Picon had appeared many times in cross-dress for both stage and screen.

---

[4] Eve Sicular, "Gender Rebellion in Yiddish Film," Lilith, 20:4 (Winter 95-96), p. 17.

J. Hoberman, in his history of the Yiddish film, notes that cross-dressing in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* was nothing new for Picon: "This particular drag act was, of course, a staple of Picon's repertoire; she had dressed up as a boy as recently as her last Second Avenue production."[5] In fact, Hoberman recounts that the original plot of *Yidl Mitn Fidl* did not include a cross-dressing character. "Konrad Tom, an experienced performer-writer-director, provided Green [director] with the story of a bride who escapes an arranged marriage by running off with the *klezmorim* during the wedding. As Picon was not particularly suited to play the bride, Green made one of the musicians a girl who disguises herself as a boy in order to travel with her father."[6] Apparently Picon's audiences and fellow filmmakers had accepted her gender-bending roles to the extent that they would not have considered her for the role of the bride, a role which apparently called for unambiguous femininity.

Yidl's ambivalence about her own cross-dressing, as reflected in her songs and dreams, reminds the audience that she is in fact a woman, not, as the other characters believe, a real boy. The reminder serves to lessen the challenge to gender categories that would be present if Yidl clearly enjoyed her male role without hesitation. That unqualified enjoyment of being 'male' would indicate that maleness is appealing for a woman or that some combination of maleness and femaleness would be possible within one person. Yidl's discontent, though interspersed with moments in which she is happy to be taken as a boy (as in the drinking scene which she seems to enjoy fully) delivers the message that while she does find some pleasure in her situation, she would not, in the end, be content to embody both masculine and feminine characteristics. Consequently,

---

[5] J. Hoberman, Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds, (NY: Schocken, 1991), p. 238.
[6] Hoberman, p. 238.

the film presents less of a challenge to gender categories than did East and West in which Mollie does enjoy her play with gender-bending, even if the gender status quo is reinforced at the end.

That Picon's cross-dressing would not have seemed surprising to an audience in 1936 and that her dreams and songs serve to mitigate the implied gender challenge present a temptation to write is off as insignificant. It would be easy to argue that this is just another of Picon's trouser roles, not in and of itself important. However, as Rebecca Bell-Metereau argues, the presence of a cross-dressed character is significant, even when the film does not deal thematically with gender, because that character often represents a tension that is beneath the surface. "Cross-dress may vary widely in function from film to film, but it invariably draws attention to the concepts of masculinity and femininity."[7] In *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, the presence of Yidl, the woman-dressed-as-boy, does in fact point to cultural tensions surrounding gender identity. The film poses the same question found in *East and West*, "What is a modern Jewish woman like?" And *Yidl Mitn Fidl* asks an additional question: "What is a modern Jewish man like?" Although these questions are not the surface motivation of the film's narrative, they are significant undercurrents throughout the film. Jewish culture in 1930's America, though significantly developed since the turn of the century, was still engaged in a process of self-definition which included issues of gender identity and gender roles.

In the 1930s two factors in the American Jewish community's construction of gender identity and their reaction to modernity became more prominent than they had been in previous decades. First, the so called 'cult of domesticity' which had been present

---

[7] Rebecca Bell-Metereau, Hollywood Androgyny, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 1.

though not predominant for some time, came to be tremendously important to the Jewish middle class as a framework for understanding women's roles. Second, the global rise in racial anti-Semitism which characterized Jews not only as racially inferior, but also played on conceptions of Jews as effeminate or emasculated. Although the second is more clearly evident in *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, both issues have an impact on the portrayal of men, women, and the cross-dressing character in the film.

The 'cult of domesticity' can be understood as a predominantly middle class ethic. "Over time Jewish immigrants became increasingly sensitive to bourgeois notions of respectability. Those who sought to identify themselves with upwardly mobile, assimilated Americans insisted that a wife should devote herself exclusively to her domestic obligations and leave the task of bread-winning to the husband and other family members."[8] In this gender scheme, men were expected to work outside the home to support their wives and children comfortably. Women were in charge of the domestic realm, the ladies of the home. They were expected to take interest in the issues of the home, such as this list of items in the monthly Froyen zhurnal (Ladies Journal): "cooking, child rearing, beauty and sewing...romances, poetry and news deemed of interest to women."[9] Within this scheme of proper gender roles, the immigrants' reality of women working to support the family (whether at home or in the factories) was deemed undesirable. The movement in the Jewish community was toward the standards of the bourgeois and away from the early immigrant lifestyle.

What is striking about this trend in relation to the film *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, is the way in which it is almost completely absent in the film's portrayals of women. We do not find

---

[8] Glenn, p. 77.
[9] Hyman, p. 120.

a middle class lady, waiting to be married or a married woman with children whom she rears and inculcates with bourgeois values. Instead, the film harks back to an earlier era, to a romanticized shtetl life, and weaves into that picture ideals of love and marriage which remained current in Jewish communal life after the early part of the century. The film focuses on the ideal of romantic love winning out over arranged marriage, rather than the ideal role for the woman within that marriage. The film also does not completely denigrate the Eastern European model of womanhood, the capable woman who joins her husband in the economic maintenance of the family, or in the absence of a husband maintains herself. However, that image is far from being held up as ideal.

The second significant issue with which the Jewish community of the 1930s and the film itself grappled was the brand of anti-Semitism that was on the rise at the time. Although not substantially different from early forms of anti-Semitism, the racial science aspects of the contemporary rhetoric gave a slightly new spin to the old hatred. The relevant aspect of anti-Semitism, the one to which the film posits a response, is the association of Jews (especially Jewish men) with femininity. "Particularly in the societies of the industrialized West, Jewish men, even though they had assimilated to Western culture, were seen as unmanly...By caricaturing Jewish men as feminized, antisemites and their fellow travelers attempted to strip them of the power and honor otherwise due them as men, especially as economically successful men."[10] In both America and Western Europe, Jewish men were depicted as physically weak and unable to participate in the hard labor required of productive citizens. They were characterized as womanly, round and soft, not tough and strong like 'men.'

---

[10] Hyman, p. 134.

In the traditional Jewish culture of Eastern Europe, the ideal Jewish man was indeed not an athlete, but a scholar; not an authoritarian, but a man of understanding; a man not of the body, but of the mind. Faced with centuries-long oppression by majority cultures, Jewish men developed traits that would not be challenging to the outside world. Jacob Neusner writes "Jewish man developed an ideal of Jewish masculinity to function as a strategy for survival...one filled with patience, humiliation, self-abnegation. Israel's hero saw power in submission."[11] These characteristics of ideal manhood within the Jewish community were treated with disdain by anti-Semites in both America and Western Europe because they contrasted with the prevailing notions of what manhood entailed.

Zionism responded to the rhetoric of anti-Semitism by promoting a new kind of Jewish masculinity, one that directly countered the anti-Semitic portrait of Diaspora Jewry. Early Zionist leaders, including Theodore Herzl and Max Nordau, in espousing a new kind of Jew, tacitly agreed with anti-Semitic images of Jewish masculine identity. Paula Hyman describes the Zionist method of re-framing of Jewish masculinity:

> If the Diaspora Jew was physically weak and soft, the Zionist New Jew was strong and muscular. If the Diaspora Jew signaled physical and moral degeneration of the Jewish people, the Zionist New Jew represented its physical and spiritual rebirth. If the Diaspora Jew was manipulative and wily, the Zionist New Jew was straightforward and direct.[12]

The new kind of Jew, as described by Zionists, would have fit in well with traditional American ideals of manhood. These American ideals, in sharp contrast to the immigrant Jewish notions of masculinity, also helped to shape the images in *Yidl Mitn Fidl.*

---

[11] Jacob Neusner, "Emotions in the Talmud," Tikkun, vol.1 (1986), p. 81.
[12] Hyman, p. 142.

As Sonya Michel points out in her article, "Jews Gender, American Cinema," the traditional ideal of a Jewish manhood was in contrast with how American men were supposed to be and act. "It has now become almost a truism that the gender roles dictated by East European Jewish culture were virtually opposite of those being proscribed for American men and women at the time of immigration."[13] American mythology of the 1800's cast the ideal man as one who could brave the frontier, tame wild horses, set out into the wilderness and achieve greatness. This concept of physical strength and bravery held ground until the turn of the century, when industrialization and life in the cities replaced life on the farm and the frontier.

In his study of masculinity, Joe L. Dubbert documents a 'crisis' in manliness around this moment of radical change[14]. According to this analysis, men in the first decades of the century no longer felt in control of their destinies, not even in control of their day to day work lives. Additionally, the beginning of women's drive for equality (suffrage, greater presence in the work force) caused men to question the roles they had always played in society. The majority response to the crisis in masculine identity was a renewed emphasis on the traditional. Physical strength, bravery, and aggressiveness were once again valued elements of masculinity. Theodore Roosevelt who, "symbolized a restoration of masculine identity at a time in national life when it appeared to be jeopardized,"[15] became the ideal of an American man.

---

[13] Michel, Sonya, "Jews, Gender, American Cinema," Feminist Perspectives on Judaism, eds., Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 250.
[14] Joe L. Dubbert, "Progressivism and the Masculinity Crisis," in The American Man, eds., Elizabeth H. Pleck and Joseph H. Pleck, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ:Prentice-Hall Inc, 1980).
[15] Dubbert, p. 313.

Noting the differences between ideal standards of masculinity between 'native' Americans and immigrant Jews is not to suggest, however, that the mere presence of those differences occasioned the response of *Yidl Mitn Fidl* and its characterization of Jewish masculinity. The rise in world-wide anti-Semitism and the Zionist response to that anti-Semitism are equally important in understanding the film's depiction of Jewish masculinity. The film's director, Joseph Green said that he would avoid in his film the image of the *goles Yid*, the Diaspora Jew. That image, a reflection of both anti-Semitic rhetoric and the Zionist response to that rhetoric was the motivation behind Green's attempt to reframe Jewish manhood in his film.

Yidl Mitn Fidl attempts to deliver a message that a new kind of masculinity is most desirable. It would be too simplistic to suggest, however, that because a stronger, more physically able masculinity is preferred, that the traditional ideal of a Jewish man is rejected out of hand. Green brings a sentimentality to his depiction of the Shtetl and its inhabitants that precludes an easy rejection of all Eastern European life and culture. The film's presentation of masculinity is complex, even though in the end, the scale certainly tips toward a modern American ideal.

What then, does the presence of a cross-dressed character bring to bear on the questions of gender identity? Let us first examine the characters in the film who are male. Both Arye (Yidl's father) and Kalamutke (one of the musicians) are presented as males in the film. Neither one cross-dresses and each is clearly considered by the rest of the characters to be of male gender. However, the depiction of each of these men carries with it elements of 'femininity' common to portrayals of Jewish men in film. They are both unathletic, pale, and use gestures best described as 'limp-wristed.' They are musicians – a

profession which does not necessarily highlight physical strength or courage. They represent, not the hyper-masculine ideal of the new Jewish man, but the older stereotype of the effeminate Eastern European Jew. They are both males, but not very masculine in either the American or the Zionist New Jew sense.

Froim, on the other hand, is a model of new Jewish masculinity. He is young, handsome and athletic. Just after the four musicians decide to travel together, they are walking through a field with their instruments. Froim shows his vigor by trading his violin for Arye's bass, and carrying it the rest of the way. The younger man is far stronger and better able to shoulder the burden. In a later scene, Froim masculinity is reinforced when he repairs things around the barn where the group is camped out. As Eve Sicular describes the scene, "Froim is shown in an otherwise gratuitous scene doing carpentry—not merely a fiddler, he can handle hammer and nails!"[16] Froim's role as the love interest of the main character (Yidl) shows him to be desirable. This desirability establishes Froim's type of masculinity as the one to be emulated, not Arye's or Kalamutke's.

Finally, Yidl displays a kind of masculinity which is contrasted with Froim's more desirable kind. Because she has taken on the outward appearance of a male, although the audience knows she is a woman, she is judged by a male model. Early in the film an argument occurs between the two pairs of musicians; Kalamutke and Froim, Yidl and her father. Kalamutke informs Yidl and her father that the courtyard in which they have been playing is 'their turf' Yidl takes on his challenge, draws herself up straight and argues back. She attempts to be a masculine man, defending their right to play wherever

[16] Sicular, p. 17.

they want. A man, in her eyes, should fight for what is his. In the meantime, Arye, a real man, stands silent and passive, not entering the fray. Yidl and Kalamutke exchange angry words until he advances on her physically. Even though Kalamutke is held in check by Froim, Yidl is frightened and retreats behind her father's outstretched arm. She shows herself not to be the powerful man she was pretending to be.

Despite the physical threat, Yidl does not stop throwing words at Kalamutke from behind her father's arm. Getting progressively bolder again, she steps out with hand on hip and challenges "And if we don't go, then what? Do you own this place?" Her gesture is strong and challenging, but also stereotypically feminine. At this point, Froim grabs both of Kalamutke's arms to hold him back and Yidl cowers behind her father. It is clear that the only real strength in the group is Froim's.

There is a sense that this argument could go on forever. The two not very masculine 'men' are equally matched and neither will have the ability to win and end the argument. However, at this moment, the camera cuts to a huge, brutish man who had been sweeping in the courtyard. He comes among them, yelling at Kalamutke and Froim. Each rumbling word that comes from his mouth is echoed by Yidl in her attempt to emulate his manly voice, "GET GOING--get going, BEAT IT--beat it, SCRAM--scram" until he notices his small echo and taking Yidl by the scruff of the neck like a puppy, tosses her out toward the street.

Safe again, Yidl announces to her father with one finger raised in a challenging gesture "If only I were a man, I would..." He himself had been powerless in the situation, and yet he is still more man than she is. "What would you do?" her father asks laughing, "But you're still a girl." Down the street, Froim chastises Kalamutke, "You should be

ashamed of yourself, starting up with a child." Froim emphasizes the fact that although Kalamutke was acting pretty tough, there had been no real threat. When faced with the man of real physical strength and stature, Kalamutke retreated just like the boy had.

Not only is Yidl not a masculine man like Froim, the last lines of the scene remind the audience that she is not any kind of man at all. Her father says "What would you do?...you're still a girl." She is female, and by virtue of that fact, cannot be the kind of man that Froim is. She makes a passably believable boy, judging from the other characters acceptance of Yidl as a boy. In the end, though, she is not even the kind of boy who might grow up to be a man like Froim. She is only a woman.

In another set of scenes between Froim and Yidl, we see just what kind of man Froim is and Yidl is not. After a night of drinking in the tavern, Yidl rises early in the morning. She is hung over and when she goes to wash in the river, she falls in. The moment in which she dips her head in the river is mirrored by Froim simultaneously washing his head in the well at the barn. Symbolically, it seems that they are of one mind, doing the same thing at the same time. But, while Froim is in control, able to dip his head in and pull it out again, Yidl is out of control because she is not being who she really is. She is not able to save herself as a 'real man' could, but has to be saved like a child or a woman. When Froim, in the role of heroic man, comes to save her, she cannot even be saved as a helpless woman would, because she is still dressed as a boy.

The grateful Yidl, forgetting herself or perhaps so overcome by her brush with danger, reaches up to kiss Froim. But he does not see her for the woman she really is (and therefore acting as she stereotypically should act). All he sees is a boy who is acting quite effeminate. He drops her into the river, shaking his head disgustedly and goes back to the

barn. Back at the barn, Froim remarks on Yidl's behavior to the other men. Arye defends Yidl saying "Yidl is still just a child." Froim responds that "children should stay at home...He's worse than a girl."

In the next scene Froim sits with hammer in hand repairing a broken chair. With sleeves rolled up, he is the picture of a working man, strong and able. Wearing a men's coat with sleeves that are too long, Yidl is anything but masculine. She formally thanks Froim for saving her life, then looks away shyly and bats her eyes slightly. Froim is disgusted once again and commands "Stop making faces like a girl. You're a grown boy." He cannot stand the feminine behavior coming from a boy. Yidl responds by crossing her arms and lowering her voice to say "Thank you for saving my life." But, because he did not really save her life, even this is not the response Froim wants, the correct masculine response. He tells her to stop thanking and go eat. Later in the scene, Yidl's weakness is further illustrated by her ineptitude at helping Froim work. Holding the chair for him while he hammers, she gets her finger smashed and then whimpers like a girl. The scene is finally resolved, however, when Froim affectionately taps Yidl on the cheek as he leaves. This physical contact sends Yidl into her love song "Oy Mame" and the audience remembers that Yidl is not in fact, an effeminate man, but a woman in love who is forced to keep that love under wraps. The fact that she is a woman redeems her feminine behavior, and reminds the audience that she is the character with whom they are supposed to identify.

The film makes a strong statement about the most desirable way to be masculine. It holds Froim up as the ideal man – physically strong, brave, a gentleman. He is also capable of affection, as we see in the kindly way he taps Yidl's face at the end of the

carpentry scene and the love he shows Maidl when she is finally revealed to be a woman. Froim's kind of masculinity is in contrast to the effeminate qualities of Arye and Kalamutke, the stereotypical Jewish men. However, as noted earlier, Arye and Kalamutke are far from being despised characters. The film shows each a kind of respect, even though neither is held up as the ideal.

The presence of the cross-dressed Yidl takes the issue a step further, calling into question not just masculinity, but femininity as well. Froim's masculinity is contrasted not only with effeminate men, but also with a woman who would try to be like a man. This critique obliquely covers both the traditional image of Eastern European women who were meant to be strong, managing not only the home life of the family but often the economic life as well, and the new American women who hoped to find a role in public life by voting and holding positions of power. However, just as there is complexity in the film's examination of masculinity, so too the ideal of femininity is not single-minded. A strong image of the ideal new Jewish woman is clearly reinforced throughout the film. At the same time, images of the more 'traditional' Eastern European woman are not uniformly negative.

The film posits the ideal Jewish woman in the figures of Taybele and eventually in the unmasked Maidl. Taybele represents all that is desirable in a modern Jewish woman. When we first meet her she is in tears at the prospect of her forthcoming marriage to a much older, but very wealthy man. We learn that she has agreed to the marriage because of her family's dire financial straits. She is loyal to the family and therefore cannot refuse the marriage, even though she does not wish to marry him. Her true love, an electrician, was not able to give her the financial stability her family needed

and left her so as not to cause her more pain. Her mother reminds her "But Yosl was poor. You saw that he understood everything and left." Here we see the Old World understanding of marriage, a financial arrangement that benefits the families of the bride and groom. Love is seen as far less important within that structure, if it is noticed at all.

The modern understanding of marriage, as we saw in *East and West*, revolves around love between the bride and groom. Taybele's love for Yosl, the electrician, and her desire for companionate marriage[17] with him marks her as straining toward a modern sensibility. Ironically, it is the cross-dressed figure, Yidl, who is able to help her achieve this ideal of femininity. In the midst of the wedding festivities, Yidl sneaks into the bride's room and takes some of Taybele's clothes from the wardrobe. The scene then switches back to the wedding party where the bride is nowhere to be seen. The band of musicians appears outside, trekking through a field with the bride in tow. Yidl identifies with Taybele's plight, herself in love with a man she cannot have (in her present state), and makes possible her escape. In the process, Yidl allows Taybele to fulfill the modern feminine ideal by following the man she truly loves instead of agreeing to a loveless marriage. In her desire for companionate marriage, her youth, beauty and ladylike comportment, Taybele represents what the film sees as desirable in a modern Jewish woman.

Although Taybele is held up as the ideal woman, the portrayal of Kalamutke's lady friend is far from negative. Just as Kalamutke and Arye, while not representing the ideal man, are still regarded with respect, so too is Kalamutke's friend. In the context of the Eastern European Jewish worldview, she is an excellent woman. She owns a

---

[17] Glenn, p. 208.

restaurant, supports herself and although she is older than Taybele, Kalamutke still thinks she is attractive. Her most desirable trait, in his eyes, is her cooking. "Nowhere in Warsaw will you get a fish like she cooks." And yet, Kalamutke's lady friend is never given a name of her own. She exists only as an extension of him. She is presented as a desirable woman, not to the young man who represents the future, Froim, but to Kalamutke whose own masculinity is already somewhat in question. While she is not a negative stereotype of a Jewish woman, Kalamutke's lady friend is also not held up as the ideal.

In her love for Froim, Maidl is as much a symbol of the ideal romantic marriage as Taybele. The woman she really is, beneath the boy's clothing loves passionately and is eventually able to unite with the object of her affection. The narrative makes clear Yidl's feelings for Froim from very early in the movie. During the first night the musicians spend in the barn, Yidl dreams of love. As her dream begins, Yidl is dressed as Maidl, in a white dress with polka dots and a bow. She wears a wide-brimmed hat and sits admiring the flowers in a meadow. Froim enters, wearing all white, and smiles lovingly at her. Together they walk through the meadow to a bridge. In the middle of the bridge, the lovers pause, looking out on the water. Suddenly, Froim is holding in his arms, not Maidl, but Yidl. He sees the change and simply walks away, with very little reaction. Yidl, however, seems horrified at her own appearance and runs off the bridge.

The dream then shows Yidl chasing after Maidl, trying desperately to reach her alter ego, but to no avail. Finally Yidl sits and cries, whereupon she is suddenly Maidl again. Froim returns and the two joyfully hug and kiss. The dream scene fades, however, to find Yidl in the barn, lavishing affection on a cat she is holding, not Froim. Yidl is

unable to attain Froim's love because she inhabits a space somewhere between male and female. Her subconscious, as expressed in the dream, chases after her femininity, wanting only to be fully a woman, and therefore able to love Froim. The film again confirms the value in a woman being a woman, not trying to be a man, or even a boy.

This is the same value which is upheld in the end of the narrative as well. Froim is finally able to see (and therefore to love) Maidl only when her cross-dressing is put into a socially acceptable context – as a comic act for the theater. In the scene which serves to reveal her true identity, Maidl finds herself onstage before a packed audience. Wearing the dress intended for Taybele as well as the boy's hat and boots she has worn throughout the film, Yidl tries to reach Froim in the orchestra pit. Froim does not immediately understand that she is a woman and says "the dress, the dress!" Releasing her curls from beneath the cap, she tells him "Don't you see? I'm a girl." When encouraged by the producers to continue her unrehearsed act, she launches into a monologue about her adventures as a boy. From the orchestra pit below, Froim begins to play her alter ego's theme song "Yidl Mitn Fidl" to which she now responds with disgust. "Wherever I go, I hear that song Yidl Mitn Fidl."

Now dressed entirely as a woman, Maidl's monologue gives her the opportunity to describe how she feels about her cross-dressing. She is first sad and frustrated "Did you ever wander about the country and sing to earn your living? You don't know what it's like!" She then dances and reminisces about the freedom her masquerade allowed her "Life was wonderful. We were free and happy." But her happiness soon turns, "Till suddenly. Somebody came along and the men's clothes started to feel tight on me…Oy Mame I fell in love…" For Maidl, cross-dressing was first a means to an end, but later

she found pleasure in the freedom it afforded. Finally, though, she wanted to be fully a woman in order to be with the man she loved.

The emotions Maidl describes can be seen as mirroring the film's attitude toward her cross-dressing generally. It is acceptable as a way to avoid being vulnerable while providing for her father's well-being. Along the way, it is entertaining and allows her access to freedom of movement she might not otherwise have. But in the end, being a woman who is like a man is neither an acceptable nor a desirable choice. As long as the cross-dressing is just for comic effect, as it is in her stage act, Maidl is rewarded for being Yidl. The montage toward the end of the movie shows money falling from the sky and newspaper clippings of Yidl's cross-dressed act. Maidl clearly has great success through cross-dressing, but when she is off-stage, she is completely female. In the final scene, Maidl and Froim are united in love on the boat bound for America, he looking handsome as ever in his tuxedo, she totally feminized in her floor length formal gown.

Molly Picon's cross-dressing in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* marks her contemporaneous Jewish society's ongoing attempt to define not only acceptable, but ideal gender characteristics. In 1936, American culture taught that the ideal man was athletic, muscular, brave and headstrong. The ideal woman was family-oriented, a lady, demure. Joseph Green's film presents the new ideals of Jewish masculinity and femininity but does not demonize the more traditional Eastern European models. And though she plays with the space between the two gender poles, Molly Picon's Yidl only finds resolution when she places herself firmly within the bounds of traditional female characteristics with her very clearly masculine Froim by her side.

Yentl

Barbra Streisand's production of Isaac Bashevis Singer's short story, *Yentl*, begins as these words scroll across the screen: "In a time when the world of study belonged only to men there lived a girl called....Yentl."[1] From the outset we understand that the character called Yentl (and later Anshel) will be juxtaposed with the world of study and the world of men. We first meet Yentl in the market where she ineptly goes through the motions of women's work. She is far more interested in the book seller who has come to town than in figuring out which fish is freshest or hearing the latest gossip. When she returns home we learn that she is quite well educated. From the beginning of the film, Yentl's thoughts and feelings are revealed through songs. The other characters never hear the songs, and in many cases, the song is sung over the action. Yentl/Anshel's lips do not move so that we understand the song to be her inner monologue.

The film goes on to establish Yentl's love of learning and love for her father. The two are interwoven because her father is both her only parent and her teacher of sacred Jewish texts. The fact that she is a woman means that they must study behind closed shutters because as her father says "God, I'm sure, will understand. I'm not so sure about the neighbors," Yentl's only passions in life are her father and the study of Torah.

When Yentl's father dies, she is faced more clearly than before with her exclusion from the male religious realm. In a traditional Jewish community, the mourner's Kaddish would be recited only by men (as would any other public prayers). As her father's only living child, Yentl feels the responsibility and the desire to recite the Kaddish, even though she is technically not obligated to do so. Despite the neighbors protests that it "has

---

[1] All film quotations are taken from the CBS/Fox Video release of *Yentl* directed by Barbra Streisand (1983)

to be a male relative," Yentl reads the Kaddish at her father's grave. The camera pulls back from the scene as the other people present at the grave respond at the communal parts of the Kaddish, thereby validating the recitation. Barbra Streisand has been criticized for the neighbors' responses during this scene. The implication of their participation with a woman reading Kaddish is that Jewish women are excluded from public worship by their own reticence. Felicia Herman reads the scene as "...implying that traditional Jews would allow Jewish women to do as they pleased if the latter would simply take the initiative."[2]

The death of Yentl's father leaves her without any family. A neighbor woman, however, says she will take Yentl in to help with the kids and the housework, "Believe me, Yentl, you'll be so busy you won't have time to think!" The prospect of having no time to think, of a life devoted to housework and not study, prompts Yentl to make a radical decision. Whispering "forgive me Papa," Yentl cuts her hair off. The next scene reveals Yentl now walking along the road with a valise, dressed completely as a traditional Jewish boy. She wears pants, tallit katan, and vest; a long black frock coat, wire-rimmed glasses, and cap. Her short interchange with a passing wagon signals her successful masquerade. The driver assumes that she is a boy.

Yentl reaches an inn where the yeshiva students wait for rides back to their schools. The young men accept her as male, joking that she is too young to yet have a beard. At the inn, she first meets Avigdor who will later become her study partner and the object of her love. She calls herself Anshel, the name of her brother who died as a young

---

[2] Felicia Herman, "The Way She *Really* Is: Images of Jews and Women in the Films of Barbra Streisand," in Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture, ed., Joyce Antler, Hanover & London: Brandeis University Press, 1998), p. 187.

child. Anshel decides to join Avigdor at his yeshiva.

When they arrive in Bechev, home of the yeshiva, Anshel is forced to share a bed with Avigdor until the next day when a room will be available for her. The scene, like the one in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* in which Yidl and Froim must sleep near one another in the barn, highlights the difficulties Anshel experiences in pretending to be a man. Regardless of how learned and intelligent Anshel is, she is still a woman and therefore uncomfortable sharing a bed with a man, even one who thinks she is also a man.

The next day, Anshel passes the yeshiva Rabbi's test with flying colors and is assigned to be Avigdor's study partner. Their relationship quickly grows as they spend all their time together studying and debating. Inviting Anshel to the weekly dinner at the home of his betrothed, Avigdor introduces Anshel to Hadass. Hadass is a beautiful and demure young woman who represents the kind of woman Anshel does not seem to be. She cooks, anticipates Avigdor's every need and is deeply in love with him. On the walk home, Avigdor's understanding of women in general and Hadass in particular becomes clear:

> Anshel: She doesn't say much does she?
> Avigdor: What does she have to say?
> Anshel: Don't you ever wonder what she's thinking?
> Avigdor: No. What could she be thinking? Anyway, I don't need her to think. I can do that with you.

To Anshel's distress, Avigdor does not consider the possibility that his wife could be an intellectual partner for him. Only a man, another scholar can fill that role.

In the scene following the dinner at Hadass's house, Anshel and Avigdor debate the story of creation while walking through a meadow. They tussle over the meaning of the Bible verses and then physically tussle as young men might. The difference is that

Anshel is not really a young man. Their argument becomes the occasion for the film to address their underlying attraction for one another. Avigdor decides suddenly to go swimming and Anshel follows him, still playing, until she realizes that he plans to swim naked, and that the other boys are naked as well. She is embarrassed by their nudity and resists Avigdor's attempts to get her into the water. Convinced that she is unable to swim, Avigdor drags Anshel to the edge of the water, promising to teach her. Anshel struggles violently, and Avigdor finally lets her go saying that he will not force her. Distraught, she runs from the river back to her room where she undresses, examining her self and the deception under which she lives. Her singing commentary reveals her distress at loving Avigdor while not being willing to abandon her passion for study.

Avigdor's engagement with Hadass is called off when her father learns that Avigdor's brother committed suicide. Her father will not allow his daughter's bloodline to be tainted by Avigdor's "melancholy." Avigdor is dismayed and goes into a deep depression. Anshel tells Avigdor that Hadass's parents think she, Anshel, would be a good second choice for husband. She assumes that Avigdor will laugh with her at the ridiculousness of it, but instead he becomes convinced that it is the best way for him to maintain his connection to Hadass. He begs Anshel to marry Hadass. Anshel refuses until Avigdor is on the verge of leaving town because his heart is broken. Unable to let him leave, and break her heart as well, Anshel consents to the marriage.

After she marries Hadass, Anshel finds various ways of avoiding consummation of the marriage. During their first night together, Anshel argues that Hadass is still in love with Avigdor and that she would be committing a sin to have sex while thinking of another. Later Anshel exhausts her with Talmud study after a long day of preparing for

Shabbat. Finally, however, Hadass has fallen in love with Anshel and insists that she wants to make love. Anshel refuses her and is thus pushed to the precipice. She must reveal herself. She plans a trip to Lublin with Avigdor in order to tell him the truth.

When they arrive in Lublin, Anshel reveals herself to Avigdor. He is at first angry and appalled at her deception, but eventually accepts that she is a woman and confesses the love he has felt for some time. While the audience might expect that they will marry and live happily ever after, the film rejects the conventional ending of a cross-dressing film. Instead, they find that they cannot be together because Avigdor will not/cannot integrate his study partner Anshel with the woman he loves, Yentl. It is impossible for him to go beyond the gender structure of his society.

In the next scene, we see Anshel/Yentl saying goodbye to Avigdor as he mounts his carriage. They cannot reconcile their different views of what a woman can and should be, so they part company. Anshel gives him letters for the rabbis asking them to annul the marriage. Avigdor, it is understood, will return to Bechev and marry Hadass, who has, through her marriage to Anshel, gained the independence to stand up to her parents. We then hear Yentl/Anshel reading a letter she is writing, which tells Avigdor and Hadass that she is off to a new land where she "hear[s] things are different." In the final scene Yentl, is dressed in female clothes on a boat, presumably bound for America. She sings an anthem to the new life she hopes to find there.

Yentl's first extensive cross-dressed interaction with other people is with the yeshiva students waiting for rides back to their yeshivot. Although she has practiced her new 'male' voice while walking by herself, she has not yet had to present her male persona to other people. The fear she feels is mirrored by the darkness of the inn's

interior as she enters it. She closes the door behind her, shutting out the light and symbolically shutting herself into this very foreign world of men.

As Yentl walks carefully through the room, overhearing snippets of conversation, a young man lands in front of her, having apparently jumped from the rafters or the upper level. She seems bewildered by her surroundings until the camera focuses in on a familiar object, a chess board. Her intellect is her grounding throughout the film and the chess board reminds her of chess games with her father and the reason she has come into this strange world. As she regains her composure, Avigdor, one of the chess players, speaks the first clearly understandable words of the scene in response to a conversation between other students. He says, "The Talmud recognizes that life is filled with contradictions." Ironically, Avigdor ascribes to the Talmud the recognition of life's complexity implying that he, as Talmudic scholar, recognizes and accepts that complexity as well. However, by the end of the film he shows that he himself is unable to embrace the contradictions that Yentl embodies.

Watching the chess game, Yentl proves herself intellectually equal to the men around her. She advises one of the players against the move he is about to choose. He ignores her advice, makes the move and is then beaten by Avigdor on the next move. Avigdor remarks that his opponent "should have listened to him [Yentl]." One challenge effectively won, Yentl is then placed in another difficult situation. She is stopped by a large man with a full beard. Another young man pushes past her, warning her not to play with the bully, but she is already stuck. The large man pushes Yentl into the chair opposite him, responding to her "Why?" with "Because I said so." The bully forces her into an arm-wrestling match which she quickly loses. Yentl's cross-dressing has gotten

her into a contest of physical strength, one which she cannot hope to win, being a woman and much smaller than the man. Again she is able to survive the situation using her intellect, that element of her identity which is able to transcend the culturally-imposed limitations of her female gender:

> Yentl: (*struggling in the arm wrestling match)* Wasn't it Rabbi Akiva who said the true strength of a man...
> Bully: (*winning the first round with a thud*) One kopek.
> Yentl: ...lies in his ability to stretch even the narrowest mind. (*giving him a kopek*)
> Bully: (*grabbing her hand as she tries to stand up*) Now you can stretch my mind again. (*winning again*) Two kopeks.
> Yentl: I thought it was one.
> Bully: Hmm, but I beat you twice.
> Avigdor: (*from the next table*) Give him back his money.
> Bully: Why?
> Avigdor: Because I said so. (*The bully reluctantly returns her money*)

Yentl tries to compete with the bully in the only way she can, by turning her intellect and knowledge of the Jewish sources into a means of mocking his greater physical strength. And in fact, her intellect does allow her to survive, if not to win, the competition. Yentl elicits Avigdor's assistance with her quick wit and perhaps because of their earlier interaction over the chess board. He uses his authority as a respected yeshiva student to chastise the bully who grudgingly returns Yentl's money, but leaves with a parting shot meant to belittle her masculinity, "I'll see you later when your beard starts to grow...mama's boy." The bully has instinctively sensed that Yentl's masculinity as measured by physical standards is lacking. The message of the scene is that in this yeshiva world, Avigdor's intelligence, and therefore Yentl's as well, holds sway over brute strength.

An interesting complexity is introduced by Streisand's casting the role of Avigdor with Mandy Patinkin, a man who is physically attractive as well as physically fit. While it is clear that it is his status as the smartest yeshiva student that persuades the bully, one could imagine that, if necessary, Avigdor could also physically overpower him. While the film's narrative affirms "brains over brawn," the visual message is "brains backed up by the potential for strength and good looks over brawn." And in the end, at least for Avigdor, Yentl/Anshel's brilliant mind will not be sufficient.

The next significant cross-dressing scene comes when Anshel and Avigdor arrive in Bechev together. Avigdor suggests that his landlady has an extra room where Anshel can live, but when they get there, they find that the room is in use for the night. They have to share Avigdor's room until Anshel's is vacated the next day. The bedroom or sleeping scene is common within the genre of cross-dressing films. The bed carries connotations of sexuality, even when the purported aim is merely to sleep. For the cross-dressed character it is a dangerous place because the expectation that people will undress before they go to sleep means a highly increased risk of being found out. There is also the confusion of what appears on the surface to be same-gender, non-sexual, physical proximity (and therefore 'safe' by heterosexual norms) but is really opposite-gender proximity (and therefore potentially sexual by those norms.)

As the scene begins, Avigdor is already in bed, tossing restlessly. Anshel sits at a small desk with a book and a lamp. Frustrated at not being able to sleep, Avigdor demands that Anshel turn out the light and come to bed. Anshel replies that she will be tested by the rabbi the next morning and is studying for that test. Avigdor insists until Anshel puts out the lamp and slowly approaches the bed. Her hesitation has a variety of

causes. By undressing, she might very well be found out to be a woman and would lose the opportunity to study. Her presence in a young man's room would then mark her as improper and even immoral. Finally, there is an underlying sexual tension between Avigdor and Anshel, even before the narrative has shown them falling in love. At the inn when they first meet, Avigdor's attractiveness already catches Yentl/Anshel's eye, making her spill some soup as she eats. By not getting into bed, she is resisting the physical attraction because she cannot act on it while pretending to be male.

Stalling or perhaps trying to distract herself from her discomfort, she engages Avigdor in conversation. She asks about his fiancée, Hadass. Catching a glimpse of herself in the corner of a mirror she asks "Is she pretty, this Hadass?" Later in the film, this moment of comparison between her own femininity and Hadass's will recur with a similar glance into Hadass's dining room mirror. Here, the look reinforces for the audience the fact that Anshel is in fact a young unmarried woman who is about to climb into bed with a handsome young man.

When she finally gets into bed, Anshel holds herself on the very edge, momentarily falling off, but bracing herself on the opposite wall. Avigdor does not understand why another young man would react this way to sleeping in the same bed with him (a situation which would have been more common in the shtetl than having a whole bed to one's self.) Moving closer to Anshel whose back is still turned to him, he watches Anshel for a moment, then says, "You'll fall off the edge." Anshel, defensive, replies, "I always sleep like this…I think it's written…two bachelors in the same bed

must lie back to back...so, turn over please."[3] Anshel returns to her intellect and Jewish law to save her from the confusion of Avigdor's physical proximity.

The conversation continues even after Avigdor has acquiesced to her demand that he turn his back to her. Talking again about Hadass, the conversation becomes threateningly sexual for Anshel. Avigdor says that he will not be able to sleep because thinking about Hadass will distract him. He asks Anshel, "Don't you ever think sinful thoughts?" She immediately responds that she does not, fearing that she will continue the sexual nature of the conversation by saying yes. Avigdor turns over quickly and comes closer to her asking, "No?!" "Yes!" she says quickly, almost frantically. Avigdor tells her not to be so nervous, and she responds "Why should I be nervous," terrified that Avigdor will make a sexual advance toward. Finally it becomes clear that although she was aware of the sexual tension underlying the conversation, he does in fact, see her as a boy. To her question of why she should be nervous he responds matter-of-factly, "You're being tested by the rabbi in the morning."

Anshel fears Avigdor's sexual advance because she knows that she is really a woman. Avigdor's continued assumption that she is a boy allows the scene to end safely, without any sexual contact between them. The scene is framed at the beginning and end with the idea of the rabbi's test in the morning. This reference places safe boundaries on the sexual tension of the scene. Anshel's cross-dressing, the rabbi's test reminds us, is for a higher purpose. She is not deviant, cross-dressing for her own pleasure, even though the

[3] While Streisand's delivery of the line implies that Anshel has made up this law, there is in fact a discussion in the Talmud about whether two bachelors may share the same bed. R' Judah forbids the practice (Kiddushin 4:14) but the view of the sages prevailed that there was no need for such a safeguard against homosexuality (Kiddushin 82a), because "Jews are not suspected of such things."

scene itself is titillating for the audience through its potential for forbidden sexuality, which the audience experiences along with Anshel.

The sexual attraction begun at the inn grows through Anshel and Avigdor's close friendship. Finally, Anshel must acknowledge the love she feels for Avigdor and the fact that she is unable to express that love because he knows her only as a boy. Like Yidl in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* she is in love with a man who believes she is also male; he therefore does not consciously reciprocate her love. Unlike *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, though, *Yentl* makes clear Avigdor's interest in Anshel, dealing with the implicit suggestion of homosexual attraction in a way that the earlier film does not.

The film dramatizes the sexual attraction between Anshel and Avigdor in a moment of physical closeness which follows a debate about men and women's inherent in/equality. Walking through the fields on a sunny afternoon, Avigdor and Anshel debate the meaning of the creation story. She argues that God took a side from Adam to create Eve, not a rib. "Rib, side, what's the difference?" he says, dismissing her argument. Anshel responds "All the difference in the world. Since Adam was created both male and female...If God took one side of Adam and not his rib and created woman that means they're the same. We all are, everybody, don't you see?" Avigdor tries to end the debate by pointing out that only women can give birth to sons and therefore that women and men are not the same. Anshel will not accept his closing argument however and runs from him teasing, "Side" to which he responds "Rib." Catching and tickling her as he would a fellow male student, Avigdor knocks Anshel laughing to the ground. Lying on top of her, Avigdor looks into her upturned face and she into his. The sun brightly encompasses his head with radiance and soft piano music plays in the background. For a

moment the connection between them seems clear and unencumbered. The audience, in on Yentl's deception, imagines for a moment that Avigdor knows the truth as well and that they are simply a man and a woman in love. Just as suddenly the spell is broken and Avigdor runs off to the river for a swim with the rest of the yeshiva boys. There is no hint that he understands the feeling that has passed between them. However, he is clearly in need of a redirection of energy.

When Anshel reaches the place where the boys swim, Avigdor is already naked, ready to dive into the water. The difference between Anshel and the rest of the boys is clear, not only because their bodies are not the same as the body beneath her clothes, but also because she cannot fully participate in their horseplay. The moment of 'male' play that she and Avigdor shared a moment before is lost because she cannot take it any farther without revealing herself.

Anshel tries to maintain her role as part of this group, hoping to sit quietly and read or "watch the clothes," but the others cajole her to join in. Avigdor surmises that she cannot swim and tries to drag her to the water's edge, promising that he will teach her. His language, though ostensibly about swimming, recalls an older more experienced man hoping to achieve a sexual encounter with a younger, inexperienced woman. Holding her by the arms, he pulls her toward the water:

> Avigdor: Don't be afraid. I'll hold you.
> Anshel: No. No. I don't like swimming.
> Avigdor: Take off your clothes (*pulling her coat off by the arm*)
> Anshel: No, Stop.
> Avigdor: I'll hold you. Take off your clothes. I'll hold you, come on.

Anshel: No. No.
Avigdor: You're going to get all wet. Oh, stop it.
Anshel: Please, Avigdor stop.
Avigdor: What are you ashamed? You're embarrassed?
Anshel: Stop it. I don't want to.
Avigdor: All right, all right, all right. If you're that scared. I'm not going to force you.
Anshel: (*almost a whisper*) next time.
Avigdor: When you're ready.

Their sexuality is completely at the surface, more present because of his nakedness and their physical proximity than it has been before. Avigdor seems unaware of the sexual aspect of the encounter, while Anshel is quite conscious of it and disturbed by it. Once she has broken free from his grasp, Anshel runs away from the river back to her room.

As it does throughout the film, Anshel's singing reveals thoughts and feelings she cannot express aloud: "There's no chill and yet I shiver/ there's no flame and yet I burn/ I'm not sure what I'm afraid of and yet I'm trembling." Finally expressing the love she has for Avigdor, Anshel undresses in front of her mirror, exposing the woman beneath the men's clothing. As she removes the bandages that flatten and disguise her breasts, she sings the most revealing part of her reverie: "What are all these new sensations?/ What's the secret they reveal?/ I'm not sure I understand, but I like the way I feel." When she is completely undressed she experiences relief from the confusion her cross-dressing creates. Her feelings for Avigdor are threatening and confusing because he knows her as a boy. If Avigdor knew that she was a woman, her love for him would seem natural. The passion with which she sings about her love is only possible because she has removed the outer trappings of maleness. It is a fleeting moment and in the next scene she is once again dressed as Anshel, interacting with Avigdor as a boy, though she is evidently distressed about all that had occurred the day before.

Anshel and Hadass's marriage further complicates the sexual landscape of the narrative. After they are married, each interaction between them reinforces the confusion of Anshel's position as a woman pretending to be a man. The confusion comes to a head when Hadass finally refuses to be distracted or diverted from real sexual contact with Anshel. A dinner with Avigdor convinces Hadass that she is no longer in love with him, and that she desires her 'husband' Anshel. She proceeds to seduce Anshel, saying "When you told me I had the right to refuse you, you didn't tell me I also had the right to demand you." Anshel had begun to teach Talmud to Hadass in order to distract her from sexual closeness. Having gone beyond what Anshel taught her, Hadass is now empowered by her studies to take on the role of sexual initiator, a role that would otherwise be reserved for the man.

The scene begins with Hadass removing Anshel's glasses, without which Anshel cannot read. She symbolically removes the very barrier that Anshel had continuously placed between them to avoid sexual contact. Hadass blows out the candle and tells Anshel that she no longer desires Avigdor, "so it isn't a sin." When Anshel tries to protest she places her finger on Anshel's lips. Taking Anshel's face in both her hands she draws her closer. They kiss for a split second and then Anshel moves her face to Hadass's shoulder, transforming the sexuality into an affectionate hug. In Allison Fernley and Paula Maloof's insightful review of the film, they argue that the film goes beyond most films of the same genre by engaging, if only momentarily, with the presence of homoerotic attraction instead of redirecting or having the characters respond with panic to it. They write, "there is no denying that Yentl briefly succumbs to Hadass's seduction,

allowing her lips to brush Hadass's before she breathlessly tells her she cannot go through with it."[4]

In this regard, *Yentl* goes beyond the two earlier films studied here. While the hint of homosexuality is raised in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* by situations in which the woman dressed as man comes close to kissing a man, the audience knows, if the characters do not, that the interaction is in reality heterosexual. In *Yentl*, just the opposite occurs. Hadass believes that the interaction is heterosexual, but the audience knows that it is in fact homosexual. While some level of titillation makes cross-dressing the appealing film genre that it is, the acceptable level of challenge to sexual norms differs among the several time periods. The typical American movie audience in 1983 was presumably willing and/or able enjoy a greater amount of homoeroticism than were the earlier audiences, as long as that homoeroticism is ultimately suppressed.

Although the film plays with the possibilities of homosexual attraction, in the end the narrative reasserts the comforting heterosexuality of each of the characters. As a result of Hadass and Yentl's brief kiss and Hadass's desire for sexual union, Yentl decides that she must remove herself from the confusing situation she has created. Having successfully transformed Hadass's passion into safe affection, at least for the moment, Anshel tucks her into bed. She spends the night walking in the forest, resolving "I've wanted the shadows, I don't anymore/ No matter what happens, I won't anymore." Her passion is for Avigdor and she knows now that she must tell him the truth. "Tonight if he were here, my silence would be broken/ I need him to touch me, to the love that's in my heart." She believes, too, that confessing both her love for him and her real identity

---

[4] Allison Fernley and Paula Maloof, "*Yentl*," Film Quarterly 3, (Spring 1985), p. 43.

will be a liberating experience, regardless of the outcome, "...the same heart that tells me to see myself, to free myself at last."

In the next scene, Anshel and Avigdor set out for a trip to the city together. As they begin their journey Anshel tells him that she has a secret she will share when they arrive. In Lublin, they share a room much like the one they shared on their first night in Bechev. Before she reveals herself, Anshel tries to make Avigdor understand why she would do what she has done.

Anshel: Avigdor, what would you do if all you ever wanted in life was to study and it was forbidden?
Avigdor: It isn't forbidden.
Anshel: But if it were...
Avigdor: It isn't.
Anshel: What if there was some crazy law that said all men called Avigdor or all men with brown eyes were forbidden to study, what would you do?
Avigdor: I'd study anyway.
Anshel: Secretly?
Avigdor: If I had to...Why?

Anshel tells him that she has in fact been studying secretly, that her name is Yentl not Anshel, that she is a woman. Avigdor's reaction moves from fear to anger; from anger to love; and then to disbelief. When Anshel opens her shirt, showing him (but not the film's audience) her breasts, he is horrified. He jumps up from the bed where he had been lounging and moves away from her, calling her a demon. Avigdor reacts not only to her deception, but also to the confusion of a woman who would dress like a man. In his system of rigid gender categories, he cannot understand a person who seems to embody both male and female traits.

Yentl moves toward him, as if physically trying to force him to understand. As they argue, he approaches her, angrily pushing and hitting her. Grabbing her, they fall to the ground, kneeling together and finally his anger/passion changes. He confesses his

love for her, the love that he had recognized but could never understand, could never accept before. Once he has accepted the fact that she is a woman, he is able to feel his love for her completely. The love is no longer something to be pushed down, redirected, because she is not a fellow male as he had thought. Realizing that their love is not forbidden because she is a woman, Avigdor begins to plan their life together "We'll go somewhere no one knows. I'll find a new Yeshiva." Avigdor tries to incorporate Yentl into his system of conventional gender categories, but Yentl has not changed. She is still the woman who cannot fit into society's gender roles. She asks if he will find a Yeshiva, "for both of us?" Avigdor is stunned to learn that Yentl does not want to become his bride if it means relinquishing her studies. He cannot conceive of a woman to whom study matters that much, even though she is standing in front of him. He cannot understand a woman who does not fit into the gender structures of his world.

Of the three cross-dressing characters studied here: Mollie, Yidl and Yentl, Yentl is by far the most able to sustain the active role usually associated with male characters in film. Throughout the film she motivates the action. First, by choosing to live as a male, she initiates the relationship with Avigdor which is central to the film's narrative. Next, she creates the relationship with Hadass by agreeing to marry her in Avigdor's stead. She then chooses the moment of her revelation to Avigdor and in the end, decides to leave the society in which she has lived to search for a place in which she can study and live freely. Neither Mollie in *East and West*, nor Yidl in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* is able to consistently move the action of the film for the duration of the narrative. Yentl is able to do so, though certainly at the price of losing the love she has found. In addition, neither Mollie in *East and West* nor Yidl in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* really wants to belong to the world of men. Cross-

dressing is a prank, a small rebellion in the former, an economic necessity in the latter. Yentl, by contrast, truly does want access to a world which is closed to her as a woman and even the possibility of doing so can only be raised because the world in which the film was created had changed significantly from the world of the earlier films.

Being a pioneer in the film industry as the first woman to co-produce, co-direct and star in a Hollywood movie, Barbra Streisand brings to the film a different set of gender assumptions than those that are portrayed in the film. New ideas about the proper roles of women in 1980s America give Yentl a freedom of movement that neither of the other characters could have. According to Felicia Hermann comparing Streisand's film to the original short story by I.B. Singer, "[Streisand's] Yentl...is [Isaac Bashevis] Singer's seen through twentieth-century, American, Jewish, and feminist eyes. Yentl is no longer a freak of nature. Her love for learning is entirely natural, and only society's rules, which prevent her from indulging this love are unnatural."[5] It is significant, then, to compare the assumptions about gender that arise from a 1980s American worldview with those that are portrayed in the film.

As a member of a society that has been substantially altered by the feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s, Streisand assumes that women and men should have equal access to education and to the sacred and that women are men's equals in intelligence. The film provides ample illustration of the fact that in its society, men have access where women do not, starting from the first time we meet Yentl in the market. The book peddler advertises his wares saying, "picture books for women, sacred books for men." When Yentl tries to purchase one of the books from the 'wrong side' of the cart, he

---

[5] Herman, p. 185.

admonishes her, asking if she wouldn't rather have a nice picture book. She argues with him, asking where it is written that women cannot buy sacred books (a question she raises through the film) and finally tells him that the book is for her father. The bookseller is satisfied as long as the book is being bought for a man. Later, as Anshel, she enters the world of the Yeshiva – a world which is marked by a complete absence of females. Only men study in the Yeshiva. Only men study the sacred books at all. The idea that a woman might either want to or be capable of studying is ludicrous, as Avigdor says after Yentl has revealed that she is a woman, "This is crazy. I'm arguing Talmud with a woman!" Streisand's assumption that women should have access to education and sacred study allows Yentl to forge her way through the male world envisioned by the film.

In other realms as well, the film depicts women's roles as the community understands them. Women, as we see in the opening scenes, maintain the domestic realm. They are to cook, clean, and make it possible for their husbands and sons to study. They raise their daughters to do the same. At the fish stand where Yentl buys dinner, we see a woman instructing her daughter about choosing the freshest fish and by contrast we see Yentl accepting, without question, the fish that is given to her by the shopkeeper.

The culture surrounding women's presence in the market is illustrated by a [female] shopkeeper who hopes to share a bit of gossip with Yentl. To Yentl's curt reply the shopwoman says "You never have time," indicating that gossip or less pejoratively, talking, is part of the world of women, in which Yentl does not participate. A clever use of film editing illustrates Yentl's view of women's culture: Yentl sits in the women's gallery in the synagogue where the women talk among themselves, not paying attention to the service going on below. The bars of the gallery fade into the bars on Yentl's

chicken coops as the scene shifts, thereby implying that the two images are the same. At least in Yentl's eyes, the women in the gallery of the synagogue are like cackling hens. Their conversation is meaningless and annoying. The world of women seems trivial to Yentl because she views the world of men as more important (as does the society).

Later in the film, Hadass offers another model of Jewish femininity, of a proper young woman from a family of means. Again she is seen through Yentl's (as Anshel) eyes. Anshel examines her to understand what kind of woman Avigdor desires. When Avigdor and Anshel have their first dinner with Hadass's family, the women move on the periphery of the room, never really joining the conversation or the meal. Hadass and her mother serve the men (including Anshel), never pausing to use the two chairs which sit across the table. Anshel understands the attraction of this kind of woman, but also measures Hadass with a healthy portion of the disdain she showed the other women. Anshel's inner thoughts are superimposed on the action through song. She ridicules the frivolous nature of what she understands to be Hadass's life, "When she gets up her biggest decision is figuring out what to wear/ To pick a blouse or a skirt and then there's the problem of what should she do with her hair/ And later she stands and studies the chicken, the question is whether to roast or to not roast/ Or better yet maybe – a pot roast."

But, Anshel's assessment of Hadass is not entirely disdainful. In the midst of all the serving, Hadass and her mother meet in front of the large mirror facing the table. They pause and her mother fluffs and rearranges Hadass's long, beautiful curls. Anshel, observing this moment, raises a hand to her own shorn hair, feeling perhaps, less feminine, less desirable than Hadass. She sees in Hadass a model of femininity that

apparently pleases the men and muses (in song) "Who wouldn't want someone who fusses and flatters/ Who makes you feel that you're all that matters...If I were a man, I would too."

After marrying her, Anshel comes more and more to admire Hadass's grace as well as her intelligence. She appreciates Hadass's domestic abilities, bemoaning, perhaps, her own lack of such talents. As Richard Corliss notes in his review of the film, "Yentl muses in derision, then in awe, then in sympathy, on Hadass's domestic graces."[6] But even more, she comes to see the value of those talents, and of Hadass's quiet grace. She sings about Hadass: "She's mother, she's sister/ she's lover./ She's the wonder of wonders/ No man can deny./ So why would he change her?/ She's loving—she's tender—/ she's woman— / so am I." In their review of the film, Allison Fernley and Paula Maloof write "The respect Yentl expresses here belies a greater concern with the traditionally 'feminine' than the film's dedication[7] or its heroine's avid pursuit of the male world would seem to allow. 'What she's taught me isn't written anywhere,' Yentl sings of Hadass, with reverent regard for the female world her books do not (cannot?) acknowledge."[8] Despite her own desires for things that are traditionally masculine, Yentl comes to appreciate qualities in Hadass that are traditionally feminine.

In Anshel's complex appraisal of femininity, not entirely disdainful but also not entirely admiring, and her own decisions not to conform to those ideals, we see a complex view of women that leads critics to wonder about the film's message. *Yentl* has been widely praised and criticized for its feminist statement and its lack of same.

---

[6] Richard Corliss, "Toot, Toot, Tootseleh," TIME, (November 21, 1983), p. 93.
[7] "This film is dedicated to my father...And to all our fathers"
[8] Fernley and Maloof, p. 44.

In his review of the film during its first week in the theaters, David Denby wrote, "Barbra Streisand is here expressing her boredom with the sexual polemics of recent years. She renders obeisance to the fathers—male authority and wisdom—and, at the same time, she celebrates the greatness of both kinds of women, the placid, persevering ones who keep things going and the intellectual pile drivers who venture forth and conquer."[9] Denby sees the film's lack of an overt feminist message (or perhaps in its avoidance of stridency) as positive.

Other critics have expressed disappointment that the film does not make a stronger statement about women's liberation. In Hollywood Androgyny, Rebecca Bell-Metereau writes, "the basic plot hardly makes revolutionary comments about women's rights; indeed, one wonders about the necessity for voicing the statement that it does make, at a time in which the education of women is readily accepted."[10] Bell-Metereau wonders about the purpose of advocating for women's education when women already have access to education. She criticizes the film for treating a subject that is not challenging to the status quo, that is not on the frontline of feminist thinking. Interestingly, though, she speaks from an American, rather than from a Jewish perspective. In saying that women's education is already a given, she speaks of secular, not sacred learning. Within American Orthodoxy in 1983, women's Jewish education (that is, the kind of Talmudic study Yentl desires) was not an accepted norm, although it existed. And, even more strikingly, although women had since 1972 been ordained by the Hebrew Union College, the seminary of the Reform Movement, it was only in October of 1983 that the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary voted to allow

---

[9] David Denby, "Educating Barbra," New York, (November 28, 1983), p. 113.
[10] Rebecca Bell-Metereau, Hollywood Androgyny, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 231.

rabbinic ordination of women. Two years later in 1985, the first Conservative woman rabbi was ordained. Bell-Metereau's point, while true for the larger, non-Jewish society, is not as accurate for the Jewish community in which long traditions about men's access to sacred learning still held (and in some circles still hold).

Nevertheless, Bell-Metereau recognizes that access to education is not the only issue at stake in the movie. She says "...the response of popular critics suggests that the film's subject is less dated than it might appear to the wishful feminist. It is not so much a film about women's right to an education as it is a personal statement by Streisand about her own determination to exert influence in a world still dominated by male power structures."[11] Bell-Metereau points out that although the specific topic of the film might not be a pressing issue, the larger concept of women's exclusion from various positions of power and authority was still relevant in 1983.

Another feminist concept that Streisand presents within the film is that it is possible and even desirable for a woman to remain true to her inner self, even if that inner self does not conform to societal norms. The society in the film cannot accept the kind of nonconformity that Yentl represents, a woman who wants access to both male and female domains, to both marriage and sacred study. When she has revealed herself to him, Yentl tells Avigdor, "I want to study with you, not darn your socks." He responds in the only way he can because his society cannot accommodate what she wants to be, "You're asking the impossible." Later he says, "Don't you understand, I want you to be a real woman," to which Yentl responds, "I am a real woman." Yentl believes that she can remain true to herself only by leaving the society that would restrict her. She has the

---

[11] Ibid.

agency to leave, as a female character in the earlier films would not, because Barbra Streisand understands the world differently than the characters in her film do.

Felicia Herman, in a more recent critique, also comments on the film's feminist message, contrasting it with the tone of Singer's original short story, "And though Singer's story ostensibly focuses on a Jewish woman who breaks out of the usual role allotted to Jewish women, it does not transform the average woman's role in any way...Singer's story is not feminist and can barely be seen as encouraging to women like Yentl: to pursue her illicit passion, [Singer's] Yentl must hide her true self, leave her home, and live in isolation and fear..."[12] Herman suggests that the cultural assumptions that undergird Streisand's adaptation of Singer's short story result in a different tone and underlying message in the film than the short story.

The challenge presented by the cross-dresser is stronger here than in the other films, as indicated by the lack of clear gender resolution at the end of the film. In the other two films, the cross-dressing character's gender is firmly established not only by the clothes that she wears and in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* by her own assertion that she is a woman, but also by the character's participation in a heterosexual union. The films may raise questions about the gender identity of the cross-dressing character. They may even raise questions about the society's assumptions and social categories, but in the end they conform to those same assumptions and categories. *Yentl* does not, at least not entirely.

Throughout the course of the movie, Anshel falls in love with Avigdor, her study partner and best friend. When she finally reveals herself to him, the audience has an expectation that they will marry and live happily ever after. Even Avigdor, once Anshel

---

[12] Herman, p. 185.

is revealed to be a woman and therefore available to him in a way she was not previously, believes that they will form a traditional union. He will study, as expected for a man; she will cook and keep house, as expected for a woman. If the film fit into the expected pattern of the cross-dressing genre, Avigdor's assumptions would be borne out. As Fernley and Maloof explain, "what makes this genre acceptable and no doubt accounts for its popularity is its demand [for]...a thoroughly conservative conclusion in which disguises are removed and heterosexual pairs are bonded together. The social order, then, is called into question for the better part of the film only so that it can be completely reaffirmed by the ending."[13] *Yentl* does not, however, fit neatly into the structure of the cross-dressing genre. Because she chooses not to marry Avigdor and thereby affirms her true female gender through heterosexual union, Yentl steps outside the categories defined by her society.

Yentl does not, however, step outside the bounds prescribed by Streisand's society and that is why the film was not seen as unacceptably radical by its viewing public in 1983. Yentl chooses to pursue her 'career' instead of abandoning it for the sake of love. In the wake of radical feminism of the 1960's and 70's, this choice can hardly be seen as beyond the scope of acceptable. In the final scene, Yentl is dressed in female clothes singing about the opportunities that await her in 'a new place.' She believes that in America she will be able to live as she could not before. She can be feminine, that is not pretending to be a man, and masculine, that is pursuing the thing she desires to which only men have traditionally had access. "...the female identity she creates for herself

[13] Fernley and Maloof, p. 41.

refuses to privilege either the traditionally 'male' or the traditionally 'female'; and this female identity is not one with which we are very familiar, in life, fiction, or film."[14]

Yentl ends with the hope that its title character will go to a new place and be able to integrate the parts of herself that she could not combine in the shtetl. She will find a way to continue the Jewish study which is her central passion. And, as indicated by her female clothing in the final scene, she will be able to maintain her feminine identity as well. She will not have to cross-dress, to disguise any part of her to be who she is. The place in which she will have this freedom, though never stated explicitly, is understood to be America. Interestingly, the film does not make as clear a statement about Jewish identity in a non-Jewish majority culture, in America.

One might expect the film to reinforce a strong particularistic Jewish identity to mirror Yentl's strong female identity. However, critics like Felicia Herman have pointed out a general lack of religiosity throughout the film, even though the community which is represented would have been extremely religious.[15] There is only one scene showing organized prayer, even though three daily services would have been expected as part of the yeshiva world. There is neither a kiddush nor ha-motzi recited before dinner is served. While the men all wear ritual tzitzit, they do not wear payes. There are also misrepresentations of Jewish practice, as for instance the scene in which a neighbor woman tells Yentl, "We mourn for ten days only, then it's on with life." In Jewish tradition, of course, the first ten days of mourning are significant, but mourning does not cease at the end of that period. These ritual practices and many others would have been integral parts of a traditional Jewish society of the type the film represents. Members of

---

[14] Fernley and Maloof, p. 44.

that society, even the women, would have known their correct observance, even if they did not know the laws upon which the observances were based.

Yentl's passion for study and her lack of attention to other rituals seems to exalt study over any kind of religious observance. Furthermore, the study that is exalted has been reduced to the simplistic question Yentl asks repeatedly: "where is it written?" She implies that only those laws which are written, based on Torah or Talmud, and not on mere tradition or custom are valid and that the laws that are written are all good and fair; that the written laws would not exclude her from studying for instance. This simplification "allow[s] the audience to assume that Yentl only has to consult a kind of 'Big Book of Jewish Law,' to prove which laws are written."[16] By placing study over any other kind of Jewish practice, Herman says that, "[the film] crafts a nostalgic shtetl and yeshiva world where Judaism is nothing but a love of books, thereby making 'Jewish' life palatable to and simple enough for all audiences to sympathize with and understand."[17]

Herman also points out that some elements of the Judaism which is presented have Christian overtones. When Yentl finds herself in the woods the night that she has left home to live as a boy, she sings a prayer. The words of the prayer are more reminiscent of the Christian Lord's Prayer, "Our Father who art in Heaven," than anything found in the Jewish liturgy. Yentl sings "God, our heavenly Father/ O God, and my father, who is also in heaven." In addition, Yentl begins her prayer only after kneeling on the ground in front of a lit candle. Jewish prayer might include a variety of body

---

[15] I find Felicia Herman's thinking on how Judaism is presented in Yentl and other Streisand films very helpful. I have used many of the ideas she presents throughout this section.
[16] Herman, p. 187.
[17] Herman, p. 188.

movements such as bowing, shuckling, or even prostrating oneself, but kneeling is a traditionally Christian posture.

Just as Barbra Streisand's worldview influences the possibilities open to Yentl within the film's narrative, so too does Streisand's understanding of Judaism impact on the portrait of Jewish life in the film. Herman argues that the distorted image of Judaism that is presented in *Yentl* reflects "the very image of themselves that many American Jews have tried to promote, an image of 'cultural Jewishness' made popular in the interwar period that has continued in some fashion up to the present."[18] The Judaism within the film reflects the reality of this 'cultural Jewishness' and the high level of Jewish assimilation in 1980s America. The main message of the film's Judaism seems to be that while there may be some cultural differences, Jews are at heart the same as non-Jews. As Hermann notes, "Taken together, the lack of scenes of Jewish religion (in a community that was historically *very* religiously observant) and the appropriation of Christian religious symbols and prayers reassures the audience that, truly, Jews are no different from Christians. Surely, the films seems to argue, if Jews were truly accepted by society, they would look and act (and pray) just like everyone else."[19] Jewish identity, then, in *Yentl* has an element of cross-dressing itself. The Judaism that is presented looks like what we know to be traditional Judaism, but underneath is proven to be enough like the non-Jewish majority that it is not threatening. Streisand's *Yentl* fails to make a strong statement about Jewish identity and this is in keeping with the other films studied here. None of the films, despite reinforcing the necessity for some awareness of Jewish cultural identity, stresses a particularistic Jewish identity.

---

[18] Herman, p. 189
[19] Herman, p. 187.

The cross-dressing in *Yentl* presents a clear challenge to the way in which society defines gender boundaries is present, although it is not resolved with the kind of finality that is found in the other two films. While the two earlier films resolve the gender debate with a solid resumption of traditional gender categories, in *Yentl* there is an open-ended possibility that society's gender definitions can be re-written, that it may be possible to successfully embody both male and female. That melding of identities remains only a possibility, however, because Yentl is forced to leave her world and travel to a new one where she only hopes to live as she desires.

Yentl also presents a challenge to society's understanding of sexuality in a way that neither of the other films does. The challenge, as noted above, is titillating for the audience, but acceptable because it is resolved in the end. Despite the fact that Yentl chooses not to stay and participate in the traditional structure of marriage, her heterosexuality (and that of Avigdor) is clearly established by their mutual admission of love.

Finally, the conflict with modernity, as it is expressed through Streisand's imposition of her modern assumptions upon the narrative's historical setting, is resolved in favor of modernity. In the end, the potential freedom represented by immigration to a new land prevails over the restrictions established by the shtetl society, especially as represented by Avigdor's inability to accept Yentl as she is. In the final scene, modernity is represented by the big modern ship on which Yentl rides to a new life in contrast to the non-industrial shtetl she leaves behind.

Conclusion

Sigmund Freud wrote: "When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is 'male or female?' and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty."[1] In the films I have studied, the distinction between male and female, at least for the other characters, if not for the audience, is not unhesitatingly certain. Each of the films plays with the general assumption that a woman is a woman and will be recognizable as such by her clothes, her mannerisms and actions. In each of them, a woman dresses as a boy for a different reason, with varying degrees of believability within the narrative.

In *East and West* Mollie is merely playing when she cross-dresses, poking fun at her traditional relatives by flouting the rules of their society. She only passes as male for a moment and then her charade is punished. In *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, Maidl cross-dresses as Yidl so that she can travel with her father as an itinerant musician. Virtually all of the characters in the narrative believe she is male until she herself reveals the masquerade. In *Yentl*, Yentl dresses as Anshel in order to pursue her life-long love of study, a pursuit which would be denied her as a woman. As in *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, the other characters in *Yentl* believe that Anshel is male, even allowing her to be married to a woman.

Regardless of the character's reason for cross-dressing, and the extent to which the cross-dressing is believed by the characters in the film, none of these cross-dressers attempts to look like a real man. None of the three lowers her voice, adds facial hair or body mass, although Yentl does go a step further than the other two by binding her

---

[1] Freud, Sigmund, New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, James Strachey, Trans., (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965, orig. 1933) p. 141.

breasts and cutting her hair. The cross-dresser's level of believability can be an indicator of the way in which the film approaches questions about gender and modernity.

From *East and West*(1923) until *Yentl*(1983), some of the answers to these questions change and others remain constant. In *East and West*, Mollie represents a kind of fantasy female. In her quasi-cross-dressed state, with short pants and boxing gloves, Mollie has a freedom of movement that is remarkable for a woman in film. She moves the action along in the first half of the film, and although she is punished each time, she continues to act of her own volition until she is finally subordinated by Jacob's cunning. One might expect that this freedom of movement would go hand in hand with the cross-dresser's acceptance as male. In *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, for instance, Yidl's ability to move the action does come from her complete acceptance as a male. However, in this case, it is her absolute difference – neither fully male nor fully female that allows Mollie's freedom of action. Because she is outside the strict male/female categories, expectations of proper behavior seem not to control her. Mollie's father is equally removed from the traditions she mocks, but he, as a man, does not have the freedom to play with them that she does. As a man, he must fulfill the expectations his society places on males, just as the women in the film must fulfill society's expectations of them.

In the second part of the film, Mollie is forcibly placed into the category of 'female' by Jacob's cunning. By tricking her into a real marriage instead of the pretend one she thought she was orchestrating, Jacob makes her a female in this society's traditional sense. She, in turn, accepts the restrictions implicit in society's gender categories and becomes a passive character, stereotypically acting the part of the helpless

female. This passive Mollie, romantically linked to Jacob who has subsequently remade himself into a proper 'modern' man, is the feminine ideal that wins out in the end.

The film ends with Mollie's complete contentment at having fallen in love with the man who was already legally her husband, ben Alli/Jacob. Mollie is able to play with the trappings of gender and with the freedom of movement usually reserved for men because in the end, the expected state of gender relations is reaffirmed. Had she remained defiantly semi-masculine, not falling in love with Jacob perhaps, or finding some way to regain mastery over the situation, the 1920s audience very probably would not have accepted her subversive behavior. It would have been too challenging to portray a state of affairs so different both from the traditional understandings of gender roles and even from the 'modern' ideals of companionate love and marriage. Instead, the film allows a fair amount of flirtation with the idea that women can be something other than what is traditionally acceptable and finally settles on a new vision of marriage without a radical new vision of femininity.

Surprisingly, the extent to which *East and West* plays with gender roles and expected gender behavior is greater than in *Yidl Mitn Fidl.* In the latter film, Yidl is able to control the action of the narrative. She convinces her father that they should set out as traveling musicians, plays her violin so that the four musicians choose to play together rather than fight, and releases Taybele from her loveless marriage. She is fully accepted as male and therefore able to move the action even more than Mollie in *East and West.* However, the film frequently reminds the audience that she is not entirely happy with her exterior maleness. In her dreams and songs of love, her attempt to kiss Froim when he

'saves' her from drowning, and eventually her own words when she reveals herself "Somebody came along and the men's clothes started to feel tight on me," the audience can see that she does not revel in her cross-dressing role as much as Mollie did.

This is not to say, however, that she does not, at times, enjoy the freedom her cross-dressing affords. Yidl is thrilled with her freedom when she sings "Yidl with the fiddle, Arye with the bass /Life is just a song, so why the angry face? / Hey Yidl, fiddle, shmidl, oy there's laughter everywhere." Each time she motivates the narrative, Yidl seems happy to have the ability to make change, an ability none of the other females in the movie seem to have. And in the tavern, she joins right along with the men drinking, singing and carrying on. Despite her enjoyment in having this freedom, the moments of yearning for Froim, whom the narrative tells us she can only 'have' if she is fully a woman, make clear that the film is not positing a new set of possibilities for women. Instead it reinforces the unhappiness she feels at being kept from her true love. Maidl is happy to wear girls clothes and act like a girl when she knows that Froim returns her love. Unlike the joy Mollie feels in playing with gender roles, Yidl would seemingly rather not be confined by the semi-maleness of her clothing, would seemingly rather be the kind of feminine woman who takes her part in romantic (heterosexual) love.

Yentl shares with Mollie from *East and West* the joy at being more than what is acceptable as a female, despite the fact that like Yidl, the other characters in the narrative believe that she is male. In her male persona she also moves the action of the narrative; deciding to dress as a boy, going to the Yeshiva, choosing to marry Hadass and then to leave her. Yentl certainly enjoys the freedom that being dressed as a boy allows her. She is thrilled to join the Yeshiva world, to be able to dispute Talmud and show her

intellectual prowess. Further, when she compares herself to Hadass during her first meal there, she feels that her concerns as a 'male' are more valuable than Hadass's female ones, "When she gets up her biggest decision is figuring out what to wear/ To pick a blouse or a skirt and then there's the problem of what should she do with her hair."

Like Yidl, Anshel ultimately feels constrained by her male dress because it prevents her from being with the man she loves, Avigdor. She sings, "What are all these new sensations?/ What's the secret they reveal?/ I'm not sure I understand, but I like the way I feel." However, unlike Yidl, Anshel does not entirely renounce everything that goes along with her cross-dressing. When it becomes clear that Avigdor cannot accept the aspects of Yentl that are 'male,' that is, her desire to study and to be active in the public realm of Jewish religious life, she makes the decision not to abandon those 'male' parts, even for the true love she has found with Avigdor. Instead she goes to a new place where she will theoretically, at least, be able to combine those 'male' parts with her 'female' self. In the final scene she is again dressed as a woman, but with the understanding that in America, she will be able to study and find love as well.

The world of *Yentl's* audience is one that is more willing, perhaps more able to accept a serious challenge to the gender status quo. Feminism has created a social milieu in which a woman with 'male' characteristics is potentially acceptable. It is possible, the film seems to say, to be a different kind of woman than would have been acceptable in the Shtetl. However, the film does not go so far as to suggest that all traditional notions about femininity are wrong or unacceptable. It does not reject all previous views of proper gender roles. By the end, Yentl gains respect for Hadass's feminine qualities, and by wearing female dress at the end signifies that she is willing to accept much of what is

traditionally female. And despite the fact that their love will not be fulfilled in the end, the film does place Yentl firmly within heterosexual norms by stressing her love for Avigdor.

In the end, each of the films, to a greater or lesser extent, reinforces the acceptable gender norms of the society in which it was produced. In the 1920s and the 1980s, the films' creators found more room to play with gender roles and the expected characteristics of both men and women. In the 1930s, a time when Jewish masculinity was under attack from outside the community, the film does not push the boundaries of women's expected roles and actions beyond what is acceptable. Despite the degree to which each of the films pushes these limits, the presence of the cross-dresser signals a category question within the Jewish community that remains relevant over a sixty-year time span.

The presence of the cross-dresser in these three films also signals the question of how the Jewish community will deal with modernity. Each film is created at a different historical moment and yet all three raise questions of Jewish identity in the face of changing social and economic norms. The issue of Jewish identity in response to modernity, in these films, cannot be entirely removed from the question of gender roles. To a large degree the particular issues of modernity found in the films revolve around questions of gender.

In *East and West*, Mollie's 'modern' flapper costumes and behavior, the scenic contrast between the light and airy modern world of America and the dark, crowded, traditional world of Eastern Europe, and Jacob's eventual transformation into the appealingly modern ben Alli all signal the film's leanings toward modernity. The

traditional Jewish rituals are shown with some amount of nostalgia, but they are clearly elements of a world that is past its prime. We see in Mollie's nightmare that being a traditional Jewish wife in an arranged marriage is far from her ideal. And as Jacob's uncle teaches him, "A man's religion dwells in his heart, my lad, not in his whiskers," meaning that wearing traditional clothing and even participating in traditional rituals are not necessary for maintaining Jewish identity. In addition, by ending the film with in Mollie and ben Alli's final kiss the film embraces another aspect of modernity: romance and companionate marriage. Modernity does not win out completely, however, because Mollie's ability to act, the very modernity which is praised, is also curtailed by the men in the film. She is not able to become fully 'modern' because that would push the boundaries too far. Her ability to act, predicated on her modernity, is stifled by her attachment to Jacob/ben Alli and therefore traditional gender boundaries remain.

In *Yidl Mitn Fidl* the struggle with modernity is most clearly expressed in the portrayal of Yidl's love interest, Froim. In his physical strength and charm, he represents a modern image of Jewish masculinity that is a direct response to anti-Semitism's image of the Jew as effeminate and weak. Froim's kind of masculinity, drawn from both modern American images of ideal men and Zionist promotion of a new kind of Jewish masculinity. The traditional Jewish ideal of masculinity, involving sensitivity, intellect and non-aggressiveness is devalued by the film in its portrayal of Kalamutke and Aryeh. Although the film does not make them disagreeable characters, thereby condemning their brand of masculinity, neither does it elevate them to the level of Froim. Kalamutke is a comic, ineffectual sort of man for whom the others show tolerant affection. Aryeh, speaking only rarely and never creating any action in the narrative, is a peripheral

character with whom the other characters have virtually no relationship. The film's message is clearly that modern masculinity, as defined by America and Zionism, is preferable to traditional masculinity.

Companionate marriage, still a modern invention within Jewish life by the 1930s, is present as a marker of modernity in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* as it was in *East and West.* Taybele's marriage to the rich old man, Mr. Gold, is portrayed as unfair and unacceptable. The neighbors all speak of it as sad event, although they are more than willing to rejoice at the lavish party Mr. Gold arranges. Taybele herself is heartbroken at having rejected her true love in order to provide her mother with economic stability. When Yidl frees Taybele from her arranged marriage, nothing is said of Taybele's mother and her economic need. Presumably, the value of companionate marriage, in the film's view, outweighs the need to provide for her mother in this way. Modernity, in the form of love is more important than traditional concerns about family.

In *Yentl*, modernity is much more difficult to assess, in part because the world of the narrative and the world in which it was created are so disparate. The film seems to criticize the strict gender boundaries that define Jewish life in the shtetl. There is no reason, the film seems to say, that women should be barred from either sacred study or the public realm of Jewish religious life. Yentl is obviously capable of participating in those male spheres, even if the social mores of the time force her to dress as Anshel to do so. Further, when Hadass shows that she has learned Talmud well enough to go beyond the lessons Anshel has taught her, the film conveys the message that other women in the society would be able to participate in the male realm if they were allowed to do so.

By conveying that message, the film brings to the world of the shtetl a distinctly modern notion that women and men play different societal roles only because society has created those roles, not because they are incapable of filling different ones. As we see in Anshel and Avigdor's discussion of Adam and Eve, Avigdor (representing traditional norms) sees men and women's societal differences as biological, pointing to a pregnant women he tells Anshel "Look, can you do that...create life, give birth to sons? When you can do that, then tell me we're the same." Avigdor interprets men and women's roles in the world as coming from their different biology, not from anything society has created. In arguing that men and women can in fact do the same things, including the religious practice and study that is central to Jewish life, the film posits a very modern understanding of gender roles.

As some critics have noted, however, the film does fully advocate the level of gender equality one might have expected in 1983. In light of the enormous changes wrought by the feminist movement in the late 1960s and 70s, the film does not seem so very modern in its outlook. Women's access to education had been a foregone conclusion in the secular world for decades by the 1980s and in the Jewish world, although Conservative and Orthodox Judaism had not reached the level of gender equality that Reform had, women's access to study and religious practice was hardly as restricted as the film would seem to imply. But, as Rebecca Bell-Metereau comments "...the response of popular critics suggests that the film's subject is less dated than it might appear to the wishful feminist. It is not so much a film about women's right to an education as it is a personal statement by Streisand about her own determination to exert influence in a

world still dominated by male power structures. It is an allegory."[2] The notion that women and men are not biologically encoded for the roles they play in society is the main thrust of the film's modern sensibility, not that women should have access to education. In the figure of Hadass, who learns that she, as a woman, is in fact able to learn Talmud, the film argues that society plays a large role in determining what men and women feel they are able to do.

Throughout these films, similar questions about gender arise from the presence of a cross-dressed character. Is gender biologically encoded or does society create gender distinctions? Does a confrontation with modernity mean that all gender distinctions can be dismissed? Is it possible to go beyond the societally-imposed limits on gender roles? The seemingly risqué nature of the cross-dresser might tend to indicate that the answers to these questions would be uniformly open-ended. From the vantage point of late 20th Century scholarship on gender, as well as the great strides both American and liberal Jewish society have taken toward gender equality, one might assume that films that use cross-dressing as a narrative device would advocate for a total breakdown in outwardly imposed gender distinctions. One might guess that these films would conclude that the confrontation with modernity does recommend the abolition of all previously known categories. One might at the least assume that these films would argue for the ability to transcend traditional gender distinctions that limit people's freedom of movement.

And yet, for the most part, traditional gender categories remain intact, are even strengthened by the angst of the characters who try to overcome them. Women are women, these films say, and men are men. There is no sustainable in-between. In this sense, *Yentl* is somewhat anomalous, straying from the concrete resolution of traditional

---

[2] Rebecca Bell-Metereau, Hollywood Androgyny, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 233.

gender roles that the other two films include. Yentl does choose to leave her society because she is unable to fulfill her chosen role within it. However, given the society in which the film was produced, a society which was itself renegotiating those gender categories, *Yentl* was not considered radical by its contemporary critics.

If, at first glance, one might assume that the presence of the cross-dresser would indicate the breakdown of gender categories, one might also assume that the cross-dresser would signal a preference for modernity over traditionalism. This assumption, to a certain degree would be correct. Each of the films places value on certain aspects of modernity. Companionate marriage, freedom from the restrictions of the traditional world, and the opportunities available to both genders in a "New World." However, in each of the films, traditional values are upheld at the expense of modern ones.

In *East and West* and *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, Mollie and Maidl's modern freedom of movement, gained through their cross-dressing, is curtailed by the end of each film. They are not able to be modern women if modernity means expanding the categories of male and female. Interestingly, in *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, Froim is able to embrace the modern understanding of masculinity, perhaps because the new definition of masculinity does not entail a shifting of the Jewish society's power structure, as the women's greater freedom would. In *Yentl*, modernity in the form of greater possibilities for women is embraced, but heterosexuality, as a traditional value, is reinforced through Yentl and Avigdor's mutual attraction and love.

Modernity, it seems, remains an appealing promise throughout the sixty-year time span between *East and West* and *Yentl*, and the presence of the cross-dresser illustrates the consistent Jewish fascination with modernization. As we have seen, however,

modernity is not embraced so completely that basic societal structures fall away. Gender distinctions remain, even when the particular roles men and women play are renegotiated. The role of the cross-dresser, then, is not to announce the destruction of societal structures, but rather to mark the presence of a particular society's essential questions, in the case of Jewish film, questions about gender and modernity. In each of these films, the cross-dresser acts not as a destabilizing force, as one might assume, but rather as a reinforcement of existing categories of gender, albeit in new and modern ways.

Bibliography of Works Consulted and/or Cited

Films:

Yidl mitn Fidl directed by Joseph Green

Ost und West directed by Sidney M. Goldin and Ivan Abramson

Americaner Shadkhan directed by Edgar G. Ulmer

Yentl directed by Barbra Streisand

Books:

Antler, Joyce (ed), Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture, Hanover & London: Brandeis University Press, 1998.

Baer, Richard, Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female, Leiden, E.J. Brill,1970.

Baum, Charlotte; Hyman, Paula; Michel, Sonya, The Jewish Woman in America, New York: Dial, 1976

Bell-Metereau, Rebecca, Hollywood Androgyny, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Belton, John (ed), Movies and Mass Culture, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996.

Ben-Sasson, H.H. ed., A History of the Jewish People, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, p871.

Biale, Rachel, Women and Jewish Law, New York: Basic Books, 1984.

Bullough, Bonnie; Bullough, Vern L.; Elias, James (eds), Gender Blending, Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1997.

Brod, Harry (ed.), The Making of Masculinities, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987.

Brod, Harry (ed.), A Mensch Among Men: Explorations in Jewish Masculinity, Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1988.

Cantor, Aviva, Jewish Women/Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life, SanFrancisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.

Carson, Diane; Dittmar, Linda; Welsch, Janice R. (eds.), Multiple Voices in Feminist Film

Criticism, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Cohen, Sarah Blacher, From Hester Street to Hollywood: the Jewish American Stage and Screen, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.

Cohen, Sarah Blacher (ed.), Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

De Lauretis, Teresa (ed.), Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Doane, Mary Ann, Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis, New York: Routledge, 1991.

Doane, Mary Ann; Mellencamp, Patricia; Williams, Linda (eds.), Re-vision : Essays, in Feminist Film Criticism, Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984.

Dresser, David, American Jewish Filmmakers: Traditions and Trends, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Erens, Patricia, The Jew in American Cinema, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Erens, Patricia, Issues in Feminist Film Criticism, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Erens, Patricia, Sexual Stratagems: the World of Women in Film, New York: Horizon Press, 1979.

Freud, Sigmund, New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis, James Strachey Trans., New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1965, orig.1933

Friedman, Lester, Hollywood's Image of the Jew, New York: Ungar, 1982.

Garber, Marjorie, Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety, New York: Routledge, 1992.

Glenn, Susan A., Daughters of the Shtetl, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990.

Goldberg, Judith N., Laughter through Tears: The Yiddish Cinema, Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983.

Goldman, Eric A., Visions, Images and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Research Press, 1979, 1983.

Green, Phillip, Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Greenberg, Blu, On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981.

Heschel, Susanna ed, On Being a Jewish Feminist: a Reader, New York: Schocken Books, 1983.

Hoberman, J, Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds, New York: Schocken, 1991.

Hyman, Paula, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: *The Roles and Representation of Women*, Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1995.

Mellencamp, Patricia, A Fine Romance: 5 Ages of Film Feminism, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.

Mellencamp, Patricia, High Anxiety : Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, & Comedy, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Mulvey, Laura, Visual and Other Pleasures, Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1989.

Nadell, Pamela S., Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination 1889-1985, Boston: Beacon Press 1998.

Picon, Molly with Jean Bergantini Grillo, Molly!, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980.

Pleck, Elizabeth H. and Pleck, Joseph H. eds., The American Man, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1980.

Rogin, Michael, Black Faces, White Noise, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Rowe, Kathleen, The Unruly Woman: Gender and Genres of Laughter, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995.

Rozenblit, Marsha L., The Jews of Vienna 1867-1914: Assimilation and Identity, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983.

Singer, Isaac Bashevis, Yentl the Yeshiva Boy, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962.

Sokoloff, Naomi B. etal, Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992.

Articles:

Acker, Ally, "Arts Women behind the Camera," Ms, March-April 1992.

Baskin, Judith R, "Rabbinic Judaism and the Creation of Woman," Shofar, Fall 1995, Vol. 14, No.1.

Corliss, Richard, "Toot, Toot, Tootseleh," TIME, November 21, 1983.

Denby, David, "Educating Barbra," New York, November 28, 1983.

Fernley, Allison and Maloof, Paula, "*Yentl,*" Film Quarterly 3, Spring, 1985.

Gilbert, Sandra M, "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature," in Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,1982.

Gunning, Tom, "Outsiders as Insiders: Jews and the History of American Silent Film," Waltham, MA: National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University, n.d.

Hyman, Paula E., "Jewish Feminism," in Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, eds. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, New York: Routledge, 1997.

Kael, Pauline, "The Perfectionist," The New Yorker, November 28, 1983.

Kroll, Jack, "Barbra, the Yeshiva Boy," Newsweek, November 28, 1983.

Michel, Sonya, "Jews, Gender, American Cinema," Feminist Perspectives on Judaism, eds. Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994.

Mulvey, Laura, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" reprinted from Screen,16, no.3, Autumn 1975.

Jacob Neusner, "Emotions in the Talmud," Tikkun, vol.1, 1986.

Sicular, Eve, "Gender Rebellion in Yiddish Film," Lilith, Winter 95-96, Vol. 20, No.4.

Steinam, Gloria, "*Yentl,*" Ms, February 1984.

Stewart, Garrett, "Singer Sung. Voice as Avowal in Streisand's *Yentl,*" Mosaic: A Journal

for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba, 4 Fall 1985.

Tartakower, Arieh, "Jewish Migratory Movements in Austria in Recent Generations," in The Jews of Austria: Essays on their Life, History, and Destruction, ed. Josef Fraenkel, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1967.