

“Bridesmaids”: A Modern Response to Patriarchy

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*Bridesmaids: A Modern Response to Patriarchy*

**Introduction**

We see implications of our patriarchal world stamped across our society, not only in our actions, but in the endless artifacts to which we are exposed on both a conscious and subconscious basis. One outlet which constantly both reflects and enables patriarchy is our media; the movie industry in particular plays a critical role in constructing gender roles and reflecting our cultural attitudes toward patriarchy. Film and sociology scholars Stacie Furia and Denise Beilby say, “Producing representations of gender is, thus, deeply affected by prevailing historical, social, and cultural contexts and ideologies, which take form through the images, scenes, characters, dialog, and narrative, among other artistic and technical elements that comprise a film” (Furia and Beilby 209). More specifically, the comedy genre of movies has come to construct gender norms in a rather stylized fashion. As our media has evolved alongside our societal progression of gender development, we see new patterns emerging and new audiences being targeted.

Throughout the history of film, males have generally been most represented (Lauzen 310); this remains the case when it comes to comedy specifically. This can be attributed to a number of reasons, not only reflecting patriarchal standpoints, but male-dominated statistics as well. According to a study done by Martha Lauzen, the executive director for the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, female directors accounted for just 15 percent of all films made in the US in 2011, and a mere 5 percent of the top-grossing box office hits. This number reflects films in general, and obviously becomes even more disproportionate when the

focus is placed on comedies. The underrepresentation of women in comedies becomes furthermore apparent as we turn to those acting in these films. Female comedy has been somewhat of a taboo and an untouched territory for many years, but as the film industry evolves and our society becomes more active in resisting the standard patriarchal norms, we see directors slowly beginning to venture into this somewhat foreign genre.

A prime example is the rather recent release of the movie *Bridesmaids*, directed by Paul Feig and produced by the popular comedic director Judd Apatow in 2011. Feig is known for his success in creating the critically hailed show *Freaks and Geeks*, and is also known for directing episodes of popular comedic shows such as *The Office*, *Arrested Development*, *30 Rock*, and *Parks and Recreation*. Not only is he recognized as a director of comedy, but his dramatic film *I Am David* has also been well-received by critics, winning five awards. Apatow is perhaps even more acclaimed in the film industry, having produced a litany of popular films and having received over 20 various nominations and awards for his work. Some of his well-known film productions include *Anchorman*, *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*, *Superbad*, and *Step Brothers* (*IMDB.com*). Apatow also worked with Feig in the making of *Freaks and Geeks*, so *Bridesmaids* was not their first production together.

*Bridesmaids* has received wide attention from both the general public as well as movie critics, as it has introduced a new, previously unexplored outlet for the film industry. Movie critics have compared this film to similar male-driven comedies. *Boston Globe* critic Wesley Morris says *Bridesmaids* “feels like a direct response to movies like *Wedding Crashers*, *The Hangover*, and *I Love You, Man*, in which men have colonized and mutated territory that once was the sole province of women. *Bridesmaids* both resembles these movies- silly, broad,

implausible- and doesn't. This one likes women" (*boston.com*). Renown movie critic Robert Ebert parallels this critique, saying "*Bridesmaids* definitely proves that women are the equal of men in vulgarity, sexual frankness, lust, vulnerability, and insecurity" (*rogerebert.com*). These comparisons demonstrate that women can be just as crude as men, and the glowing recognition from numerous acclaimed critics proves the prominence of this movie.

Whereas males have so consistently driven the film industry, Apatow has produced a film dominated by women, which is certainly a rarity in the field of comedy. Many studies have found the underrepresentation of women in film. As Rose Weitz explores in her analysis of such studies, "Scholars have found that midlife (and older) women are underrepresented in U.S. films. In a random sample of 100 top grossing films from the 1940s to the 1980s, men over 35 accounted for 25% of central characters but women over 35 accounted for only 3%, with supporting characters showing a similar pattern" (Weitz 19). With middle-aged women historically accounting for almost ten times less of the central characters in movies, an almost entire cast of leading females in a comedy definitely makes a statement in the film industry.

Since its release, *Bridesmaids* has been nominated for 24 different awards and has won 6 so far, and exceeded box-office expectations, generating over \$26 million opening weekend and grossing almost \$300 million worldwide, surpassing *Knocked Up* as Apatow's top-grossing film to-date (*IMDB.com*). This movie is not only significant in its fiscal success, but also in the doors it has opened for women in the film industry. Women are not only being represented more as an acting entity, but also as comedic consumers. More importantly for rhetorical scholars, the significance of *Bridesmaids* lies in its constructive messages that contribute to the reasoning behind its success.

Through my analysis, I will provide a description and critique of *Bridesmaids* to consider the implications it has on typical patriarchal norms; I will assess how it not only serves to empower women in the doors it has opened for the comedic film industry, but also how it has both reflected and rejected the standard patriarchal norms in doing so. By engaging in this analysis, I hope to create a deeper understanding of this successful film by considering the following questions: how does *Bridesmaids* serve to empower women? Yet, in what ways is its success contingent upon its adherence to certain gender norms that further demonstrate a patriarchal society? I will first provide a detailed description of *Bridesmaids* and its rhetorical situation. I will then engage in an act of rhetorical criticism by applying a combined framework of feminist and ideological criticism.

### ***Bridesmaids: The Film***

*Bridesmaids* is a comedy with six female leads: Kristen Wiig as Annie, Maya Rudolph as Lillian, Rose Byrne as Helen, Melissa McCarthy as Megan, Ellie Kemper as Becca, and Wendi McLendon-Covey as Rita. The plot follows Lillian's bridal production with these five women as her bridesmaids, centering around her lifelong best friend Annie's comical tug-of-war with Helen, the wife of Lillian's fiance's boss, for the maid of honor duties. Annie is a low-key, single woman in her 30s picking up the pieces after losing her bakery and breaking up with her egotistical boyfriend. Whereas Annie's wedding arrangements are relatively simple in nature, Helen's are extravagant and completely over-the-top. Lillian and all of the other girls are constantly praising Helen's ideas and Annie feels neglected. The film revolves around the jealousy between Annie and Helen over the maid of honor duties, with Helen gradually rising as the "star" maid of honor at the cost of Annie's series of unfortunate yet hysterical events, all with

the support of the following four bridesmaids. These events involve a dress-fitting gone wrong after Annie takes the girls to a rundown Mexican food joint, an eventful plane flight after Helen gives Annie sedatives, and Annie's ultimate breakdown at Lillian's bridal shower when Helen gives Lillian a trip to Paris, which enrages Annie to the point that she goes on a rampage by destroying Helen's enormous cookie and chocolate fountain. Throughout the movie, Annie has a developing fling with a sweet cop named Nathan (played by Chris O'Dowd). Nathan encourages Annie to recover her baking dreams, but she shuts him down, resulting in yet another damaged relationship. Just when Annie has reached the bottom of her luck after being banned from Lillian's wedding and having to move in with her mother, Megan comes in to cheer her up. Megan is the main clown of the movie, whose hilarious actions have ranged from attempting to seduce an air marshal to an episodic bathroom scene at the dress fitting. When she comes in with a shoulder for Annie to lean on, she does so through her raunchy humor while simultaneously revealing her own insecurities, making Annie realize she is not the only one who has faced certain woes.

Around this time, Lillian goes "missing," and Helen comes running to Annie in a frenzy, finally showing her own signs of weakness. Annie uses this as her opportunity to begin rebuilding one of her torn relationships, and builds a friendship with Helen through a comical search for Lillian. Annie uses this time to reach back out to Nathan with Helen's help, through a hilarious series of illegal driving scenarios. Everyone works together to find Lillian (who was in bed this whole time), apologies are made, friendships are restored, and the wedding happily and harmoniously proceeds. Helen even gets Nathan to come to the wedding for Annie, and the movie culminates with the two rekindling their relationship, driving away on a silly police call.

*Bridesmaids* was written by its starring actress Kristen Wiig, whose comedic fame has developed through her Saturday Night Live popularity; in 2008, *Entertainment Weekly* featured her on their list of 15 Great Performances for her SNL impersonations and she also made their 2009 list of 25 Funniest Women in Hollywood (*IMDB.com*). Wiig wrote the script with Annie Mumulo; the two have been friends for a while, and spent about a decade writing the script, according to an interview with *Time Out Chicago*. Wiig and Mumulo are both members of the Groundlings, “an improvisation and sketch comedy theatre that has been entertaining LA audiences for over 26 years” (*Groundlings.com*).

Judd Apatow’s brand-name and history in comedic film production was a huge contribution to the success of this film. Apatow’s comedic resume is endless, including the production of *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, *Anchorman*, *Superbad*, and *Knocked Up*. Known for his male-dominated films, *Bridesmaids* gained special attention, with a strong female cast being introduced to film comedies. Gender was inevitably a main focus in the release of this film, but in an interview with Apatow he reveals that gender was never his focus: “I don’t see comedy in genders. I see it more as, something’s funny or it’s not. And that’s why this movie plays well to men and women” (*Hollywoodreporter.com*). Apatow actually hopes that the success of *Bridesmaids* will open doors to the gender debate in the film industry; in this interview, he stated that “it’s ridiculous that women have to see 8 million male-driven films, and no one ever says, ‘Will women come to see these five guys hijack a plane?’ They just assume they’ll come because they have no other options... It’s great proof that there is a big market- and proof that men want to see this movie about women” (*Hollywoodreporter.com*).

Even though the audience is female-driven, the humor is directed at both men and

women. Because it is R-rated, the movie is technically meant to be viewed by a more mature audience, or at least those over 17. This rating is reflective of its crude humor, occasional foul language, and sexual references. All of the main characters are generally in their 30s, representing a younger to middle-aged portion of the adult population, but the scenarios are relatable to most of the wide age range of adult viewers.

Viewers and critics of *Bridesmaids* argue about whether this film's success is due to its renowned Hollywood production team or because of its social responsibility. Apatow argues that the occasion is really much more simple: to share "a very sweet story about female friendship" (*MTV.com*). This film is a result of recognizing a previously neglected audience- female comedic viewers- and synthesizing an assemblage of hilarious actresses with a well-known Hollywood production team in order to not only simply tell a funny story, but to create a new subgenre.

The feminine foundation of this film is undeniable; the development of *Bridesmaids* and its unique brand is highly contingent on our societal patriarchal norms. In order to analyze how this film both reflects and rejects patriarchy, we can use the rhetorical strategies espoused in feminist criticism, considering elements of ideological criticism as well. Before directly engaging in a feminist critique, we should first understand the groundwork contributing to these rhetorical methods.

### **Rhetorical Methods**

These two methods actually intertwine in a complementary way in the sense that feminist criticism is actually an example of how to use ideological criticism; it revolves around the construction of gender and the adherence to or the neglect of patriarchal ideology. Feminist criticism rose from the waves of American feminism. The history of feminism has been divided

into three waves, known as the first, second, and third waves of feminism.

The first wave marks the inception of the feminist movement, beginning in the 1800s and lasting until 1920. This period was primarily about political rights, revolving around Women's Suffrage. Some key figures during this time were Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Wave II dawned in the 1960s and is still manifested today; its central issue is Women's Liberation, reflecting civil, cultural, and economic rights and progressivism. This wave arose with World War II, as the need for women in the work industry grew immensely, and housewife stereotypes and patriarchy were challenged. Key figures of this wave are Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. Finally, Wave III feminism is the most recent segment of the movement, commencing in the 1980s and continuing today. This contemporary wave of feminism is founded upon the notion of identity, reflecting factors of race, class, and gender. The focus on identity is important because equality is not solely being associated with gender alone or gender and patriarchy; it is much more complex. As Amanda Lotz describes in an article exploring third-wave feminism, "within the U.S., third-wave theory developed in response to the limitations of essentialist understandings of women that narrowed the relevance of some features of second-wave activism, and its attention to the diverse experiences of women aids in understanding not only the U.S. context, but the varied realities for women around the globe" (Lotz 8).

*Bridesmaids* is very emblematic of the third wave of feminism; this wave becomes the most complex for feminism due to its consideration of issues regarding identity and gender construction. Feminist criticism is grounded in rhetorical stylistic and substantive features. In its theoretical origins, "its very assumption is a violation of the female role" in the sense that the rhetor "entails qualities of self-reliance, self-confidence, and independence" (Campbell 563).

Feminist criticism is in this way considered anti-rhetorical in its self-determinative process, which violates the rhetorical standards prior, which stood on “substantive grounds” with features encouraging “submissiveness and passivity in the audience” (Campbell 565). These substantive grounds of rhetoric are common with the standard concepts of Neoaristotelianism and other rhetorical frameworks which simply read into the artifact without eliciting an ideology. The very nature of feminist criticism is ideological in its “consciousness raising” paradigm. Campbell argues that this paradigmatic form involves “no leader, rhetor, or expert. All participate and lead; all are considered expert.” Awareness is the goal, and this is accomplished through an analysis which “must move from personal experience and feeling to illuminate a common condition that all women experience and share” (Campbell 567).

Feminist criticism exemplifies “risking the self” (Campbell 567), exploiting the typical casting of both female and male roles. In the way that it violates our notion of the reality structure, feminist criticism relies on going against “norms of decorum, morality, and ‘femininity’ of the woman addressed” (Campbell 567). One linguistic device used to support this framework is the symbolic reversal, which serves to “transform devil terms society has applied to women into god terms and always exploit the power and fear lurking in these terms as potential sources of strength” (Campbell 568). Symbolic reversals reappropriate negative connotations of terms typically used against females, using these very terms as sources of empowerment. Devices such as the symbolic reversal disrupt the male gaze that our society standardly embraces; this reflects our instinct to look at things from a pseudo-male perspective, supporting our acceptance of patriarchal norms which dominate our cultural paradigm.

As Laura Mulvey explains, “cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object,

thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged” (Mulvey 17). Mainstream film fortifies the male gaze, so in order to challenge the patriarchal perspective we must extract these cinematic codes. Along these lines of traditional cinematic standards, Mulvey states that “a woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (Mulvey 12). The rhetorical tools of feminist criticism such as symbolic reversal allow modern film directors and producers to reject the patriarchal gaze that has typically dominated “narrative verisimilitude.” The male gaze is well-noted for the subjectivity it places on females, sexualizing them in such a way that connotes a sense of passivity and makes men active consumers. Rose Weitz examines Mulvey’s article, creating her own definition: “male gaze: a lingering look that sexualizes the female body and provides sexual pleasure to the male gazer” (Press 24). Mulvey describes that “the image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form- illusionistic narrative film” (Mulvey 18).

The creation of agency is a primary concern for feminist criticism; feminist artifacts should promote a sense of agency in the allowance of choices and empowerment. By asserting female agency, this rhetoric by nature rejects the male gaze. In relation to Bitzer’s assessment of rhetorical situations, these situations are the result of “one controlling exigence which functions as the organizing principle” (Campbell 570). In the theoretical assumptions associated with

feminist criticism, the exigency controlling the rhetorical situation is patriarchy; the call to action is the rejection of patriarchal norms. Through feminist criticism, we first examine the construction of gender in the artifact, then further probe by evaluating how the rhetor either advances or rejects these patriarchal norms. This analysis becomes even more complex when we find situations within the artifact which fall in the midst of the patriarchal spectrum, perhaps empowering feminist ideologies to certain extents, while simultaneously disempowering these ideals in other forms.

Because feminist criticism is so critically grounded in ideology, we should also examine the theoretical origins of ideological criticism. The purpose of ideological criticism is to observe the elements presented in a rhetorical artifact, and to use the underlying meanings of these elements to formulate an ideology and determine the consequences of this ideology on the audience and/or the broader society. An ideology by definition is a “pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretation of some aspect(s) of the world” (Foss 209). Ideologies reflect systems of group values and beliefs, and have the power of becoming hegemonic when they accumulate “the symbolic power to map or classify the world for others” (Foss 210). Ideologies are extremely powerful in the sense that they shape the ways in which we see the world; they are even more powerful in the sense that they can also influence the actions we take to appropriate the values they pose. Patriarchy is an example of an ideology which has gained cultural hegemony throughout the course of history, and unless challenged, will continue to assume the roles of a dominant ideology through the norms it has established. Ideological works are in front of us all the time; it is our job to unmask the norms these works convey.

Philip Wander argues that there is a moral component of ideological criticism, asserting

that the critic carries a moral responsibility. Wander introduces the concept of the ideological turn which is born out of the exigence to respond to hegemonic norms such as patriarchy. The ideological turn in modern criticism comes from the need to search for alternatives to powerful vested interests; in this sense, the ideological turn “reflects the existence of a crisis” (Wander 92); these crisis-ridden situations are constructed through those established interests. Rhetoric reflects life being threatened in this manner, and the ideological turn places the burden on the critic to offer alternatives in order to point the audience’s view in the right direction. The purpose of the ideological turn is to “situate ‘good’ and ‘right’ in an historical context, the efforts of real people to create a better world” (Wander 92). Ideological criticism enables rhetorical consumers to discover the underlying meanings constructed through artifactual elements and formulate an ideology accordingly; the ideological turn places responsibility on the rhetor to construct this ideology carefully, in order to advance an improved sense of being and an ameliorate worldview.

I will now combine elements of both feminist and ideological criticism to engage in a rhetorical analysis of *Bridesmaids*, using the facets of feminist criticism to extract the ideologies advanced by this film.

### **Critiquing the Artifact**

Because the attention gained from *Bridesmaids* has stemmed from its unique portrayal of females in comedy and because the genre of comedy is generally reserved for men, the very nature of this film is a violation of patriarchal norms and the present hegemony. Other contextual constructions of this film contribute to the rejection of patriarchy as well. The fact that the script was written by two females serves to empower women because it gives women a voice, representing both the female population and Wiig and Mumulo on personal levels. By entering

the untrodden zone of female writers in comedy, Wiig and Mumulo engaged in the rhetorically feminist device of “risking the self,” violating decorum in the simple respect that they provide a unique perspective which reveals that not only do females care about the genre of comedy, but that females can engage in this genre and be humorous even in male perspectives, disturbing our preconceptual male gaze. Their purpose in writing this script is not to perpetuate female stereotypes, but to simply express the real, imperfect relations and situations that females face.

A particular scene in *Bridesmaids* which contributes to the rejection of the patriarchal hegemony is the infamous airplane scene, which is very commonly featured on movie trailers and reviews. This is the scene where the bridesmaids let loose; they all have their fair share of drinks and Annie goes on a hysterical rampage while mildly sedated. Megan has been seated next to whom she assiduously believes to be an air marshal, though he denies it. She and the air marshal swap gender roles, with Megan pulling out lines in an attempt to seduce him, which leaves him feeling awkwardly uncomfortable. There is one particular scene where Megan tries to trap “Air Marshal John” in the airplane restroom:

Megan: “Hey ‘Not-Air-Marshal-John,’ you want to get back into that restroom and not rest?”

Air Marshal John: “No, I’ve got to get back to my seat.”

Megan: “Yeah, you’ve got to get back... On my seat.”

This scene is very characteristic of the rest of the film, demonstrating that women are not that different than men; they can be just as vulgar and sexual, and they can overdrink and be equally as raunchy. Whereas men are usually portrayed as the more sexually-abrasive gender, there are several instances throughout this movie where this role is assumed by these female characters.

Megan's stunt in the flight scene demonstrates this notion of the female assuming typical male orientations toward sexual behavior. She even tells the other women, "I'm glad he's single because I'm going to climb that like a tree," rejecting the patriarchal norm that women are sexually submissive. Throughout the entire movie, the bridesmaids' conversations are generally colloquial and overall simply hilarious, dismissing the common conception and portrayal of women as perfectly proper and passive beings. The comedic genre empowers the female entity in these regards; it serves as an outlet for women to be viewed in a new perspective, empowering them in the sense that it equates their humor to that of men's, using gender reversals to reject the standard patriarchal norm.

Although this film has been commended for the voice it has given to women in the comedic film industry, when examining the suggested elements and their underlying meanings through an ideological perspective we can see the ways in which this film actually perpetuates patriarchal norms, even though its very nature seems to be opposition. In the very way that its context rejected patriarchy and gave feminism a voice through its female writers, we also see how patriarchal hegemony is advanced; while Wiig and Mumulo wrote the script for *Bridesmaids*, the film's success is largely attributed to the name and reputation brought forth by its renowned producer Judd Apatow. Even though this film is unique in comparison to Apatow's other films with its female cast, the success of Apatow's repertoire of male-dominated films are what drew attention to this film in the first place.

While the humorous script along with the strong and dynamic female cast serve to empower women both in society and in the film industry, much of the content in *Bridesmaids* is established upon stereotypical female roles; building upon these roles only advances patriarchy,

which distracts from this film's potential to enable women. The primary cliché this film advances is obviously that reflecting the relationship between women and marriage. It has become a cultural paradigm to assume that women are obsessed with marriage, and our media takes advantage of this assumption. *Bridesmaids* is no different in this respect; the entire plot revolves around one woman getting married, and the humor and drama reflects the relationship built between Lillian (the bride) and her bridesmaids in this process. Marriage is an American ideology in itself, and *Bridesmaids* builds upon our orientations toward this ideology to entertain its audience.

Feminist critics have long chastised the ideology of marriage, and have been skeptical of its promotion particularly in western society. Sara-Jane Finlay and Victoria Clarke, scholars in sociology, media studies and sexuality studies, examined a range of feminist perspectives on marriage to support this concept. First they take a look at the cross from Wave II to Wave III feminism, when Ti-Grace Atkinson emerged with her feminist ideals. Finlay and Clarke note, "Atkinson (1974) was particularly critical of love and marriage as the ideal relationship because, in making women acquiesce to a subordinated role, they are complicit in their own oppression" (Finlay and Clarke 416). Transitioning into Wave III Feminist ideology, Finlay and Clarke turn to the perspectives of Victoria Robinson and Becky Rosa, first describing Robinson's argument that "marriage is rooted in a discourse of monogamy that 'privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy'" (Finlay and Clarke 417). They then assess Rosa's further scrutiny of the institution of marriage from a feminist perspective, asserting that marriage "denies women access to sexual freedom and continues the separation of women from each other" (Finlay and Clarke 417).

While the movie's theme reflects the roller coaster ride of friendship, marriage is undoubtedly an underlying focus. The ideology of the road to marriage serves as a basic grounds for the entire movie to build upon, perpetuating the associated norms throughout the film. Even though *Bridesmaids* resists standard male-driven comedy, it does so by placing the female characters behind the comprehensive ideology of the western approach to marriage; the whole process and production of marriage is typically associated with feminine fixation. The scenes of the film itself serve as the grounds of this ideology; each of the sceneries themselves are feminine in nature, most of them relative to Lillian getting married. These scenes include the initial bridal announcement at a country club, the dress fitting at a luxury boutique, the bridal shower at Helen's mansion (replete with all things purple, Paris-themed, and butterflies), and finally, the actual wedding.

Patriarchal norms are further advanced through other structural details in this film. Annie, for instance, is a baker; baking is very commonly associated with the female stereotype. Helen is portrayed as the ultimate female and perfect bridesmaid, whose life revolves around serving her husband and designing perfect wedding invitations. Megan is the one woman who seems to reject patriarchal norms the most; she works for the government and has the "highest possible security clearance." While all the bridesmaids play comedic roles, Megan is definitely the forerunning clown of the film, with the most quotable lines and memorable scenes. Megan is also the least feminine character; while the other women are rather petite and wear skirts and heels, she has a much more masculine stature and wears men's golf attire. While Megan's character as a female is a rejection of patriarchal norms, she does so through enduring qualities that are so far from the conception of feminism that it almost disables the empowerment of

women, because it invokes the ideology that in order to be humorous and successful, females must assume all conditions of masculinity.

The ways in which *Bridesmaids* rejects patriarchal structures while simultaneously supporting them through underlying elements establishes a unique ideology: women can be equally as funny as men, but men are still empowered in the sense that they serve as the definition for what humor entails. In order to meet the cultural comedic conception, these female characters reject particular standards of patriarchy, but the ways in which they do so successfully are due to their adherence to masculine norms and gender reversals. This is still a large step for feminism, however, because in the past women have been seen as “lower” than men; having these women portray more masculine qualities and giving them a voice generates a sense of equality in terms of identity. In this way, this film is a prime example of Wave Three Feminism and its response to the patriarchal structure.

### **Findings and Implications**

The findings of this analysis contribute to rhetorical practice and theory by bringing forth an interesting aspect of our cultural response to patriarchy: how can we reject patriarchal norms if the only way to do so is by equating women with men, suggesting that men are the standard and the ideal to pursue? While *Bridesmaids* has been very successful in recognizing the potential of female actresses and characters in the comedic film industry, the grounds upon which they come to gain such recognition deserves more attention. Through my analysis, I have engaged aspects of both feminist criticism and ideological criticism to look at both contextual and scenic elements that construct the film *Bridesmaids*. Through such rhetorical analysis, I have discovered that the patriarchal paradigm cannot be completely understood through the observations of

presented artifactual elements on their surface level. Because patriarchy has been constructed through our historical existence as humans, we must use this context to uncover deeper, suggested meanings and symbolic constructions of artifactual elements. *Bridesmaids* is an example of rhetoric enabling feminist ideologies in the empowerment it has given women in terms of recognition; this is how we can observe the rejection of patriarchy on a surface level. The underlying elements within this film draw forth more complex responses to patriarchal hegemony, however. Through this analysis, we can see that the very rejection of patriarchy may result in the very adherence to this dominant structure; by enabling women to have a greater role in comedy, this may result in capitalizing on typical female stereotypes, such as the bridal party. *Bridesmaids* serves as an empowering platform for females in the comedic film industry, and it will be interesting to see how this new genre evolves as our society progresses in response to the reforming dominant patriarchal paradigm.

*Bridesmaids* as an entity resists male gaze in the sense that it enables women to prove they too can take an active role on stage in the field of cinematic comedy; typically comedies have been associated with main casts of men, with the occasional female thrown in every once in a while. This movie demonstrates that an entire leading cast of women can also not only take the stage in comedy, but gain the respect of critics and a widespread audience. *Bridesmaids* also resists the male gaze in its lack of sexual subjectivity of the female characters involved. While they are dressed in feminine attire, the entire female cast is always dressed relatively modestly: Annie's wardrobe typically consists of knee length semi-form-fitting business suits, Helen's consists of classy country club apparel, and Megan's is far from promiscuous, consisting mainly of khaki pants and argyle sweatshirts. The women's appearances are all very realistic and do not

perpetuate the sexuality of the male gaze. Sexual appeal is not meant to be a thematic focus of this film; the concentration is on the relationships between the friends in this film, which is why sexuality is not capitalized.

Ivy Schweitzer analyzes the incorporation of women in media, describing it as a “transcultural phenomenon that a woman writer had to be ‘approved’ as authentic for public consumption by male authorities, who signed off on them- a kind of gendered quality control. Such oversight must have had a chilling effect on women” (Schweitzer 407). Women have historically held inferior roles to men in the production of media; men typically hold authoritative positions, controlling even female writers in the industry. We see this evident in the case of *Bridesmaids*; even though Wiig and Mumulo wrote the script for this film, its success was highly contingent on the producer and director who oversaw production. Even as the relationship between men and women in the media has seemingly become more balanced over time, it has also become much more complex as our society has grown to adhere to the advancements of feminism. Andrea Press further probes this idea, stating, “My data indicate that the partial social revolution accomplished by feminist-inspired efforts has thrust women into a kind of ‘double jeopardy,’ in which they are exposed to what they perceive as the demands of the feminist world- to achieve in the public realm- even as more traditional demands on women- to shoulder the bulk of work in the family, to present themselves as desirable sex objects- remains in place” (Press 110). Even though female representation has certainly evolved in regards to overcoming particular patriarchal standards, a double-standard still exists to continue the extension of certain roles and ideals that are feminine in nature.

### Areas for Future Research

As a film, *Bridesmaids* serves as a groundbreaking movie as far as demonstrating the perpetuation of actresses in comedic films, not only geared toward a female audience, but toward the general population. While the film does rely on several patriarchal norms even in its defiance of the general male gaze, it still provides a solid momentum for the immersion of female casts in formerly male-dominated arenas, such as comedy. In fact, leading actress from *Bridesmaids* Melissa McCarthy (better known as Megan) will appear in another Paul Feig directed comedy alongside Sandra Bullock later this year. The action comedy is called *The Heat*, and further defies male-dominated leading roles and patriarchy in the portrayal of these two middle-aged women as federal agents in the pursuit of taking down a drug lord. Whereas *Bridesmaids* is a comedy driven by romance and drama, *The Heat* goes a step further in the comedic field by placing two female leads in an action-centered film. Rhetorical facets used to critique *Bridesmaids* will definitely benefit the critique of this upcoming film as well; Film and Communications scholars can use this upcoming film as an artifact to even further demonstrate the progression of females in the field of comedy movies, reflecting the rejection of stereotypical patriarchal norms.

With female casts emerging in across the realm of comedy, it would benefit future studies to examine these films in relation to their perpetuation of the double bind. As psychotherapist Paul Gibney describes, “double binds ‘work’ because someone has power over someone else, or at very least (and hardly ‘least’), someone has the right to define the operant context for another person” (Gibney 55). Will films such as *Bridesmaids* and *The Heat* serve to decimate the double bind, or will male direction and production of these films only further perpetuate this concept?

The rejection of the dominant structure in a male-dominated industry is a very delicate matter; while *Bridesmaids* may not be a perfect rhetorical model in nullifying the patriarchal ideology, it certainly is a leap in the right direction.

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