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Voyaging Colonialism: Seafaring Patriarchy,
Toxic Heroism, and the Construction of
Gendered and Racialized Hierarchies in *Sexing
the Cherry* and *A Mercy*

Elizabeth Eberwein

Candidate for the degree

Bachelor of Arts

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

College Honors

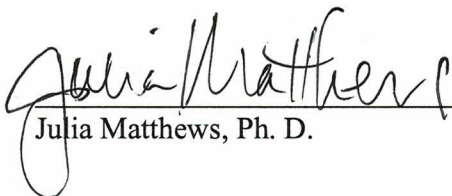
Departmental Distinction in English



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Abstract

In colonial times, mobility and societal freedom were largely restricted to men. This sanctioned male mobility and the accompanying restriction and immobility of women is demonstrated by the historiographic metafiction *Sexing the Cherry* and *A Mercy*, which depict women under male subjugation, left behind as the men of the novels set out to voyage. This gendered difference in mobility is portrayed chiefly in nautical terms – only men own and sail ships, and the ways in which the men and women of the novel interact with and utilize water are vastly different. The mentality of the seafaring adventurer is closely linked to the mentality of the colonizer, the slave trader, and a toxic sense of patriarchal masculinity, which seeks to collect and conquer in order to achieve status and wealth, to rise in a social hierarchy – necessarily at the expense of oppressed lower categories. The construction of racial categories in America, layered over the preexisting European gender categories – expressed by Winterson as a “hero/home-maker” binary – birthed a doubly dehumanizing and oppressive hierarchy which weighs down upon the minority women of Jacob Vaark’s farm in *A Mercy*. Morrison and Winterson demonstrate the detrimental effects of these hierarchies and the mentality underlying them, as the well-meaning male protagonists of each novel nonetheless fall into patterns of voyaging patriarchy and ultimately feed the same oppressive system they initially claim to oppose.

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Introduction

In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire identifies the “decisive actors” of colonialism as

“the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies” (33).

The novels which this project examines comparatively – *Sexing the Cherry* by Jeanette Winterson and *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison – serve to elucidate this statement by providing fictitious but historically sound depictions of these very actors: white male voyagers who believe themselves to be forces for the good of civilization. In reality, the central male figures of each novel – Jordan in *Sexing the Cherry* and Jacob Vaark in *A Mercy* – feed only their own greed for recognition and social status, while justifying the privileged lifestyles they construct for themselves as acts of heroism.

Sexing the Cherry’s Jordan nurtures a yearning for adventure in the specific form of sailing which presents itself innocently enough in childhood, as he floats his paper boats on the river Thames (Winterson 13). However, with influence from John Tradescant – explorer, exotic fruit collector, and “hero” (74) – the boy abandons his adoptive mother Dogwoman for a life at sea, seeking exotic sights, admiration, and hero status for himself. The seafaring heroism illustrated in *Sexing the Cherry* is a highly problematic one, reflective of the gender roles strictly enforced by 17th century European society, and a social mobility exclusive to men. Winterson invokes “heroic” figures like Christopher Columbus to demonstrate a toxic

masculine mentality behind the seafaring adventure Jordan pursues, one emphasizing male conquest, discovery, and ownership.

In *A Mercy*, the “trader” (Morrison 16) Jacob Vaark has transported to his farm an array of disadvantaged women: Lina, a Native American woman removed from her community, Florens, a slave girl obtained from Jublio plantation, Sorrow, a captain’s daughter held onboard a ship for most of her life and repeatedly sexually abused, and Rebekka, a mail-order European wife. Jacob views his “acquisition” of these women as “rescue” (*A Mercy* 40), appointing himself their noble savior, when in fact he depends on and benefits directly from their unpaid labor on his property.

Jacob prides himself early in the novel on his moral superiority to D’Ortega – the slave-holding owner of Jublio plantation – and is “determined” to make a name for himself “without trading his conscience for coin” (32). Yet over the course of the novel, Vaark gradually justifies participation in the same rum trade which finances D’Ortega, for his own gain. Yet even actively profiting from a slave-based industry and enabled to travel on his commercial voyages by the women who maintain his farmland, unsalaried, Jacob exonerates himself on the basis of not keeping slaves in the same cruel and predatory way that D’Ortega does on his tobacco plantation.

The actions and mentalities of Jordan and Jacob Vaark conform not only to Césaire’s description of colonial actors, but also to Memmi’s concept of the culturally mythologized colonizer: “when not engaged in battles against nature, we think of him laboring selflessly for mankind, attending the sick, and spreading culture to the nonliterate. In other words, his pose is one of a noble adventurer, a righteous pioneer” (*The Colonizer and the Colonized* 3). Despite their colonial participation in and benefit from exploitative mentalities and

industries, Jordan and Jacob consider themselves heroes. The colonizer's "battles against nature" feature in both men's stories as well. Jordan's ships, and all seafaring voyages, attempt to tame the ocean under human control, manipulating the natural element of water for expedition and discovery. Meanwhile, Jacob combats the wilderness of colonial American terrain on his farm, and destroys massive amounts of trees for his superfluously grand third house (the physical manifestation of his corruption, funded by rum trade earnings), as Lina reports with horror.

The men of both novels consider themselves righteous, even as they take full advantage of the benefits granted them as white males, abandon and exploit the women who care for them, and fall more and more in line with the profiteering patriarchal systems they claim to despise. Both operate under a deluded, mythologized, and self-aggrandizing colonial mentality which fits Memmi's description snugly, allowing them to conceive of themselves as the "noble adventurer" and "righteous pioneer" even as they benefit from corrupt hierarchies of power and reinforce oppressive systems. Jordan's voyages (as well as those of his peers and contemporary alter-ego Nicolas Jordan) and determination to become a Hero – despite genuine love for his mother Dogwoman and his general open-mindedness, sensitivity and imagination – nonetheless enforce the gender binary of European society in *Sexing the Cherry*, by claiming the exclusionary mobility available only to males, in order to garner social recognition and heroic status. Jacob Vaark considers himself the moral exception to plantation owners like D'Ortega, yet constructs a microcosm of colonial hierarchy on his land which depends entirely on his white male authority, and demands the unpaid labor and permanent confinement of the women he transports to his property.

In both novels, mobility and societal autonomy is strictly limited to males, leaving women immobilized and dependent on male authority. This difference in mobility constitutes the most apparent symptom of an enforced gender hierarchy – articulated as roving male “heroes” versus stationary female “home-makers” by Winterson (134) – which is long-established in the 17th century London of *Sexing the Cherry*, and which is imposed along with newly constructed racial categories of subjugation in the colonial America of *A Mercy*, which Morrison depicts in its very beginning stages. Both authors aim to investigate the process of construction by which these hierarchies are established, and the exploitative, toxic, and dehumanizing mentalities supporting them.

Both novels deal directly with the constructed social hierarchies of the 17th century, but water itself constitutes another important link between the metafictional worlds. Given “the violent corporeal history of the Atlantic” (DeLoughrey 703), and the dark role of ships in American colonization and the slave trade, water’s depiction in each novel – and the differences between male, female, white and nonwhite interaction with, utilization of, and/or restriction from access to water – becomes crucial. Initial passage over water is, after all, necessary to American colonization, and it is this fact which fundamentally links *Sexing the Cherry* and *A Mercy*. The space between the worlds of the novels is oceanic, and the shift from England to America is one of colonial voyage over water, one which seeks dominance over the sea in order to exert the same dominance over the land (and its native people) at the end of the journey.

Several scholars have acknowledged water’s central role in colonialism. Karen Bakker describes water as “intensely political in a conventional sense: implicated in contested relationships of power and authority” (616), and illuminates “the relationship

between water and modernity” (617). In her article on “hydroimperialism,” Sara Pritchard identifies a “fundamental connection between water, its management, and colonial or neocolonial relations” (591). Bodies of water become unavoidably entangled in ocean-crossing colonial ventures, and imperial expansion is tied to the seafaring desires and mindsets of male adventurers who steer ships across oceans as extensions of the society they subscribe to, in pursuit of social recognition for their discoveries.

Patriarchal voyagers, considering themselves brave heroes, view the water they traverse simultaneously as a thrillingly free space of exploration, and as merely a means to an end, “a space of transit in which the sea is barely present, subsumed by the telos of masculine conquest and adventure (DeLoughrey 704). As both novels reveal, the truly enticing element of sea travel for patriarchal figures is not the experience of sailing itself, but the promise of discovery and conquest at the destination, and of admiration and recognition upon return to homeland. Thus the fact that “colonial narratives of maritime expansion have long depicted the ocean as blank space to be traversed” (DeLoughrey 703) coexists and intertwines with highly romanticized conceptions of swashbuckling adventure on the high seas.

There is no better example of this toxic and conquest-driven seafaring mentality than a first-hand account of a slave-ship captain himself. Much of the nautical-heroic language surrounding Jordan and his fellow male figures of *Sexing the Cherry* hauntingly echoes a section entitled “The Last Voyage of the San Pablo” in the memoir of Captain Theodore Canot, a slave trader of the early 1800s, who fancied himself a true adventurer. He opens this section of his written recollections with a distressingly upbeat description of his recurring desire to transport slaves by ship, as if a fond hobby and cultivated habit:

“Before I went to sea again, I took a long holiday with full pockets, among my old friends at Regla and Havana. I thought it possible that a residence in Cuba for a season, aloof from traders and their transactions, might wean me from Africa; but three months had hardly elapsed, before I found myself sailing out of the harbour of Santiago to take, in Jamaica, a cargo of merchandise for the coast, and then to return and refit for slaves in Cuba” (Canot 240)

This passage displays all the major themes of the toxic patriarchal adventurism that Morrison and Winterson dissect. For one, the idea of “going to sea” as idyllic pastime, and a time of departure so casually chosen on whim by a man with ultimate autonomy over his own goings, demonstrates the extraordinary mobility and voyaging capabilities granted men. Secondly, the economic mobility inherent in dealing frequently with “traders and their transactions” exhibits the financial and social influence exclusive to white males at the time. Thirdly and most obviously, Canot’s offhand reference to enslaved human beings as “cargo of merchandise” makes evident the tremendous feats of moral delusion necessary to consider slave trading an exhilarating adventure from which it is difficult to “wean” oneself, instead of the violent mistreatment and objectification of human beings that it is. A mentality so removed from human feeling that it is willing to dehumanize shiploads of people for the sake of profit and adventure is a rancorous one indeed.

Canot makes clear the true thrill of seafaring – profit and dominance – at several points, while demonstrating the self-justifying and mythologizing mentality that allows such a voyage to be deludedly described as an adventure. For instance, he tells us that “if the enterprise resulted well, a bounty of one hundred dollars would be paid to each adventurer” (242), and later, facing setback, that “the love of life, or perhaps, the love of gold, made us

fight with a courage that became a better cause (246). With the same impressively self-deceptive and self-aggrandizing mindset as Jordan and Jacob of the novels, Canot somehow blatantly acknowledges his greedy financial motivations and casts himself as a noble hero fighting for a greater cause, in the same breath.

Two important parallels to the novels also surface in this account. For one, Canot and the crew of the *San Pablo* devise a deceitful plan to “conduct the vessel in every way as if she belonged to the royal navy” (242), demonstrating the even further increased male protection and authority granted by the militarization of sea travel, and government-sanctioned profiteering enterprise. This parallels Nicolas Jordan in *Sexing the Cherry*, Jordan’s 20th century alter-ego, who inquires at the “Navy recruitment office” and is told “about all the sophisticated equipment [he’d] be using and all the places [he’d] see” (Winterson 119). He is then “accepted as a naval cadet” (120), fulfilling his burning ambition of “sailing round the world” (140). In both Canot’s and Nicolas Jordan’s cases, the magnified male mobility and authority of the Navy is taken on as a means to an end – latching onto increased protection and authority from a powerful patriarchal structure – rather than out of genuine desire to serve. Canot’s deceit, especially, demonstrates the potential for corruption created by unchecked and enforced structures of patriarchal mobility and power.

Secondly, Canot’s greatest self-proclaimed hardship in the course of the account echoes the reason D’Ortega initially summons Jacob Vaark to his plantation – deadly illness among the slaves held hostage aboard, causing loss of “cargo.” Canot reports that “several slaves were ill of smallpox. Of all calamities that occur in the voyage of a slaver, this is the most dreaded and unmanageable” (245). Canot and D’Ortega both exhibit infuriating self-victimization, placing profit over human life, but describing the illness and death of hundreds

of human beings under their charge as calamity hindering their own financial aspirations. Their own accounts suggest they've been unfairly punished by a cruel blow of fate, not placed directly in positions of domineering power at the expense of hundreds of lives.

This self-vindicating mentality is the norm, however. Patriarchal voyagers who designate themselves heroes can do no wrong, as Nicolas Jordan in *Sexing the Cherry* reiterates: "if you're a hero you can be an idiot, behave badly, ruin your personal life, have any number of mistresses and talk about yourself all the time, and nobody minds. Heroes are immune" (118). Given Nicolas Jordan's setting in the late 20th century, the unshakably self-righteous mentality of the adventurer is clearly not a mere artifact of 17th century colonial times.

This grand-scale self-delusion, upheld by hierarchal structures of power and a cultural mythologization of dangerous men as heroes, is the mentality of the patriarchal voyager, the Hero, and the seafaring adventurer. It is this toxic mentality which this project aims to investigate, in the specific contexts of *Sexing the Cherry* and *A Mercy*. Morrison and Winterson narrate instances of "colonial enterprise, colonial conquest" (Césaire 41) which illuminate the mentality and structures which make them possible. The central men of the novels – Jordan and Jacob Vaark – are not as straightforwardly cruel as Captain Canot, but it is their more complex sensitivity and senses of compassion which make their ultimate yield to patriarchal power and greed all the more disressing. Despite more noble intentions, the adventurer's mentality claims them both, and both Jordan and Jacob rely on constructed and exploitative hierarchical "relations of domination and submission" (Césaire 42) in order to greedily forge their own reputations in their respective societies – claiming the mobility, exclusive to white males, offered them by patriarchal, colonial society.

Chapter 1: Seafaring Heroes, the Hero/Home-Maker Binary, and Gender in *Sexing the Cherry*

In her historiographic metafiction *Sexing the Cherry*, Jeannette Winterson paints a watery world which begins and ends on the river Thames. Though aquatic images of various forms surface often throughout the novel, the most prominent image, by far, is sailing. Jordan, found in the riverbed as a baby and raised by Dogwoman, nurses an all-consuming fixation with seafaring adventure, by his own words “obsessed” with “the thought of discovery” (Winterson 3). The obsession is mirrored by his 20th century alter-ego, Nicholas Jordan, who dreams of “sailing round the world” (140), and joins the Navy. The two parallel male protagonists together demonstrate the mobility and authority granted by owning and operating a ship – a freedom restricted to males in the novel, and in 17th century, colonial-era society.

The young Jordan begins to realize his male mobility, and dream of nautical voyage, early on, beginning with the display of the exotic banana. His mother Dogwoman glimpses into his seafaring vision as the boy gazes at the never-seen-before fruit – “I put my head next to his head and looked where he looked and I saw deep blue waters against a pale shore... This was the first time Jordan set sail” (6). Listing this reverie as Jordan’s first voyage enforces the fact that masculine sailing power is in large part constituted by mentality, the belief that the world is one’s own for the exploring, the discovering, the taking. Even as a boy, Jordan believes that he is not confined or limited by the place and circumstances of his birth, but free to chart his own journey to wherever his heart desires.

None of the female characters of the novel presume this much freedom; such a vision would never so much as cross the mind of a woman in 17th century England, who did not have the luxury of escape by ocean to exotic lands – at least not unless ordered for transportation by a man or accompanying her husband – let alone aspirations of steering her own ship.

Jordan's pressing desire to sail is intimately and inseparably tied to the desire to be a hero, like his idol and mentor John Tradescant, who "sailed to exotic places collecting such rare plants as mortals had never seen" (17). The longing underlying these seafaring dreams is not merely to sail, but to sail with intent of discovery, followed by triumphant return to motherland, gaining heroic status, social relevance, admiration, and authority. Presented the opportunity of voyage with his idol, Jordan realizes these intentions: "when Tradescant asked me to go with him as an explorer I thought I might be a hero after all, and bring back something that mattered" (101). To "bring back something" entails conquest and collection along with exploration.

Throughout the novel, Winterson reveals this seafaring heroism to be far less innocent than whimsical images of Jordan's boyhood paper boats floating on the river (13) imply. A hero the likes of John Tradescant conquers and retrieves for his country, "will flourish in any climate, pack his ships with precious things and be welcomed with full honours." After all, "England is a land of heroes, every boy knows that" (74). Heroes of this definition utilize ships and bodies of water not merely for exploration, but for material gain, and in order to garner cultural recognition and status.

This acquisitive male heroism does not disappear in the contemporary age. Nicholas Jordan's prized childhood possession, *The Boys' Book of Heroes*, further elaborates this conquering brand of heroism, its cover displaying "ships and aeroplanes and horses and men

with steel jaws” (116). The Heroes listed are William the Conqueror, who invaded England to claim its throne via a fleet of ships, Christopher Columbus, who sailed mistakenly to “discover” America, Francis Drake, slave trader and sea captain, and Lord Nelson, British Royal Navy admiral. These seafaring “heroes” demonstrate the kind of voyagers that the two Jordans of *Sexing the Cherry* seek to emulate, and the kind of men held in high regard and heaped with fame by society. They are men who wrought violent conquest by ship. The excursions of these men have been heavily romanticized, woven into fancified tales of virtue, bravery, and the spirit of adventure, which in fact mask gruesome truths and grave errors. The cultural process of idealization by which these types of men become vaunted heroes is a dangerous one, willing to sacrifice truth and compassion in exchange for comfortable cultural myths and figures to venerate.

Though Jordan, Tradescant, and Nicolas Jordan prove relatively harmless compared to the historicized men of *The Boys’ Book of Heroes*, committing no major atrocities and collecting only fruit, their mentality aligns with, stems from an emulation of, and feeds the kind of dangerous, mythologized heroism and conquest-driven adventure which underlies imperial colonialism.

Jordan attests to the process of exaggerating his own and Tradescant’s voyages to garner admiration: “our ship, which is weighing anchor some miles from this island, is full of fruit and spices and new plants. When we get home, men and women will crowd round us and ask us what happened and every version we tell will be a little more fanciful” (103). Seafaring adventures in particular are easily fabricated or exaggerated, since they by nature occur out of sight of anyone but those aboard. Furthermore, actions taken by adventurers at sea or in a new land are out of the eye and jurisdiction of motherland society, allowing even

more potential for misbehavior and deceit. Unfortunately, rose-tinted lies told by and about voyagers and their adventures often become societal myths, upheld for centuries.

Jordan may bring back only fruit and spices from the lands he traverses to, but his mindset is repeatedly shown to reflect the same heroic ideology and toxic masculinity which drive more egregious acts of seafaring conquest. He details his adult aspirations later in the novel, in line with this ideology: “I want to be brave and admired and have a beautiful wife and a fine house. I want to be a hero and wave goodbye to my wife and children at the docks, and be sorry to see them go but more excited about what is to come” (102). Regardless of Jordan’s comparatively innocuous maritime conquests, the heroism he pursues centralizes material possession, social status, male mobility/voyaging capability, and a wife who stays home.

There is also a male lineage of inheritance to this heroism; authority and knowledge is passed from man to man. Heroic adventure runs patriarchally in Tradescant’s family: “for Tradescant, being a hero comes naturally. His father was a hero before him” (102). Tradescant then passes this inherited male voyaging power on to Jordan, teaching him first to optimize his paper boats and then to sail a real ship, and feeding him stories woven full of the mystical language of male seafaring adventure and the freedom it brings – “He showed Jordan how to lengthen the rudder so that the boat could sail in deeper water without capsizing. He told him stories of rocks sprung out of the ocean, the only land as far as the eye could see, and no life on that land but screaming birds” (17). The passing of male authority and voyaging knowledge here intertwines with the colonial myth of proclaiming land free of Europe’s touch *terra nullius* – unowned, unsettled, and ripe for discovery – in this instance of

male inheritance, fixing the idea of a blank world waiting to be heroically explored in Jordan's boyhood imagination.

Tradescant elevates and actualizes Jordan's nautical dreams, from paper toys to legitimate and socially-sanctioned sailing knowledge and ability. It's crucial that Winterson includes his character as a mentor to Jordan, for he provides the transferred male authority that Dogwoman cannot give Jordan. Though she has raised him and cared for him, only Tradescant can make the boy's dreams a reality, thanks to "his own days of adventures on the seas" (17), and the inherited male authority vested in him.

Jordan idolizes Tradescant as an immediate example of the adventuring masculinity he believes he should emulate: "what I would like is to have some of Tradescant grafted on me so that I could be a hero like him" (74). In fact, Tradescant's appearance in Jordan's life superimposes the desire to be a hero on the preexisting and more innocent childhood desire to sail, and it is only with Tradescant's invitation, guidance, and passing of male legacy that Jordan finally does embark on a real ship. They adventure together, until the authority and heroic status passes fully to Jordan: "when Tradescant died, Jordan took over the expeditions and charted the courses and decided what was precious and what was not" (107). Mentor and childhood passed, Jordan fully claims his male power to voyage and to conquer what he deems valuable. Thus *Sexing the Cherry* presents an entire lineage of masculine inheritance as it unfolds, passing maritime mobility from man to man, and the imprinting of Tradescant's adventuring, conquest-driven hero mentality onto Jordan himself.

In these nautical terms, Winterson articulates an enforced system of patriarchal hierarchy, and the gender binary which rules 17th century England. The sailors of the novel are strictly male, with the sole exceptions of the imaginary Fortunata, who "took a boat and

sailed round the world” (94), but is the product of Jordan’s fantasies, and the contemporary Ecological Woman’s small boat, revealed in the very last pages of the story, which she and Nicholas Jordan utilize to escape a burning London. These exceptions are clearly intended to subvert the norm, however, and the sea-faring, Heroic voyagers of *Sexing the Cherry* remain exclusively male. In contrast, the real women of the novel are stationary and confined, existing on long-discovered and male-dominated land. Under colonial-era English patriarchy, while men traverse the world, staking out land, transporting goods and people, and returning to heroic welcome, women remain at home, in the motherland and the husband’s home, filling prescribed female roles. Maleness constitutes the ticket to freedom and mobility, while femaleness dictates immobility, confinement, and subjugation to male authority.

This exclusive mobility for men and the accompanying restriction of women is what constitutes the “hero”/“home-maker” binary, which the mythological character Artemis details:

“She had envied men their long-legged freedom to roam the world and return full of glory to wives who only waited. She knew about the heroes and the home-makers, the great division that made life possible. Without rejecting it, she had simply hoped to take on the freedoms of the others side, but what if she travelled the world and the seven seas like a hero?” (134)

Though Artemis questions this binary, even the divine huntress is unable to subvert its crushing consequences in the novel. Instead, she is raped by Orion and is left eternally landlocked, confined to her solitary camp on the edge of the sea. She remains for the rest of her life on “the land...where she wanted to stay until she was ready to go” (135). Conversely, before raping her, Orion relates his voyages across the world, boasting his male mobility:

“the ragged shore, rock-pitted and dark with weed, reminded him of his adventures, and he unraveled them in detail...There was nowhere he hadn’t been, nothing he hadn’t seen” (135). Orion, rapist, fits the societal definition of a true seafaring adventurer, a Hero by all standards of *The Boys’ Book of Heroes*, enacting on his victim the ultimate form of patriarchal conquest.

Winterson depicts this haunting scene of warped mythology in order to demonstrate the full force of the oppressive gender hierarchy which presses down upon women of Dogwoman and Jordan’s era, inescapable even by a goddess. While males of the time were granted freedom to roam and rewarded with hero status for their adventures, women contended with ever-present barriers to their freedom and mobility, were near-constantly objectified, valued only for sexual pleasure or child-bearing, restricted from economic participation, and expected to submit without question to male authority. Women who dared to test these limits were certainly not deemed heroes by their society.

The clear contrast drawn between societal mobility for men and immobility for women, expressed specifically in terms of nautical voyaging ability versus landlocked confinement in *Sexing the Cherry*, throws the water imagery of the novel into sharp relief. The dissimilar ways in which the male and female characters of the novel interact with and utilize water becomes crucial in the context of the hero-homemaker binary and a society operating around a seafaring and conquest-driven definition of hero.

From the very first pages of the novel, Dogwoman acknowledges the power that the mobility of water grants men, as she deliberates a name for the baby she’s delivered from the river: “what was there to call him, fished as he was from the stinking Thames? A child can’t be called Thames, no, and not Nile either, for all his likeness to Moses. But I wanted to give

him a river name, a name not bound to anything.” (3) Her insistence on naming her adoptive son after a flowing body of water is not inconsequential. In the world of the novel, the moniker holds substantial weight and initially grants Jordan his male nautical mobility. If Dogwoman had named him differently, she tells us, his fate might have been stationary instead of voyaging: “I should have named him after a stagnant pond and then I could have kept him, but I named him after a river and in the flood-tide he slipped away” (4). This contrast between stationary and free-flowing water constitutes a repeating theme throughout the novel as well. While oceans and rivers provide freeing spaces, full of voyaging potential, still and contained bodies of water, and water harnessed for human/societal purposes, have different implications, often used to enforce the restrictive patriarchal system.

Dogwoman’s tone of regretful loss in naming Jordan after flowing water is also noteworthy; from the beginning, she seems resigned to the fact that her son will inevitably leave her for the sea, and expresses this foresight several times before he actually embarks. Tradescant’s appearance makes Jordan’s eventual departure definite for Dogwoman. She recognizes that the patriarchal hero status and promise of adventure he offers Jordan is more enticing than anything she provides as maternal figure, and that Jordan will imminently leave her to pursue his male mobility.

After Jordan and Tradescant’s first encounter – fixated around Jordan’s paper boat – and mother and son head home, she tells us she “wondered how long it would be before he made his ships too big to carry, and then one of them would carry him and leave me behind forever” (18). Later, when Jordan does finally set sail with Tradescant, Dogwoman is far from surprised: “when he left me I was proud and broken-hearted, but he came from the water and I knew the water would claim him again” (79). This prescience stems from her

awareness of the gender hierarchy in place, and the male nautical mobility Jordan cannot help but claim. No matter her foreknowledge, however, Jordan's departure still cuts Dogwoman deeply.

Her mournful sense of abandonment speaks further to the gendered difference in mobility. 17th century women's prescribed role of "home-maker" and the voyaging abilities granted men makes inevitable some kind of desertion for women – when the men they depend on for any kind of societal recognition or legitimacy depart on adventure, they are necessarily left behind and helpless. Meanwhile, patriarchal voyaging takes little note of those it condemns to immobile loneliness.

In the novel, even the well-meaning and sensitive male protagonists, Jordan and Nicolas Jordan, both fantasize of leaving their (imaginary) partners home. Jordan paints a very domestic departure scene indeed: "I have packed my striped bag and taken my coat from the hook where Fortunata put it. She has come to see me off and we are standing together by my boat" (104). She accompanies him into the water, kisses him, and then wades back to shore as Jordan sails off.

Nicolas Jordan also dreams of a woman he can leave home, and later return to: "for a long time I had a secret lover called Mina Frogs. When I came home a hero she was always waiting at the docks and desperate to marry me" (114). Mina's name comes from the frontispiece of another of Nicolas Jordan's telling books, *The Observer's Book of Ships*, "describing over a hundred types of ships" and containing photographs from which Nicolas Jordan builds his own first model ship. Notably, *The Boy's Book of Heroes* and *The Observer's Book of Ships* are the only titles of Nicolas Jordan's prized volumes that Winterson provides.

Despite her keen awareness of Jordan's seafaring fate, Dogwoman does everything in her power to retain her son. The second time Tradescant appears in the novel, he sets about the process of extracting Jordan from his maternal guardian, telling her, "I've come about Jordan" and revealing that "he wanted a gardener's boy at Wimbledon where he was laying out a great garden for Queen Henrietta" (23). Despite motherly despair and fear of the abandonment she knows is inevitable, Dogwoman "want[s] Jordan to have the work, knowing how it would delight him to see such exotic things growing all in one place" (23). Though it breaks her heart, she is unable to deny Jordan the opportunities for exploration available to him as a male, and finds her "solution" by insisting, "I'll accompany him" to the palace (23). A "journey" (24) over land, at least, is attainable for Dogwoman, though the social mobility involved in becoming "servants of the King" (25) is only granted by Tradescant's invitation. Thus Dogwoman sets out with her son on the first of his literal voyages, refusing the recommended vessel (carriage) and traveling by foot: "we walked," she tells Tradescant upon arrival, "and when Jordan was tired I carried him" (25). This venture into royal territory is the first taste of the male mobility, figurative and literal, that Tradescant offers Jordan. Working for the king is a substantial step up the social ladder from a humble life with Dogwoman, and the direct precursor to an invitation for Jordan to join him on his heroic sea journeys.

At Wimbledon, further distinction is drawn between natural, free-flowing water and contained or human-harnessed water, with the undertone of class hierarchy that necessarily tinges a royal setting. Male authority at the very top of a monarchical system, imbued with the epitome of societal authority and mobility, seeks to control not only other people, but nature itself, for personal gain, public admiration, and luxury.

The construction of the garden is aided by a “French gardener named Andre Mollet who has come specially to teach Tradescant the French ways with water fountains and parterres” (39), demonstrating the assistance and knowledge granted a man of Tradescant’s reputation. Male mobility, then, seems to include having others sent or transported to one’s location for one’s own benefit - the ability to bring the exotic and the desirable to oneself, not merely to travel in search of it.

Mollet’s plans include “a stream shooting nine feet high with a silver ball balanced on the top. The cascading torrent will mingle with a wall of water like a hedge, dividing the fish-ponds from the peasantry” (39). Water here serves as a constructed barrier to separate the exotic novelties meant only for royal consumption – fish ponds “filled with rare waters, sometimes salt, sometimes still, containing fabulous fishes of the kind imagined but never seen” (39) – from the common populace. The control and manipulation of water, along with restriction to its access, serves as a powerful tool of authority in the hands of those on the highest rungs of social hierarchy. Here, the use of one form of water to limit the viewing of another form of water also serves to highlight the often ludicrous nature of boundaries imposed by luxury.

It is also at Wimbledon, in the interval between Jordan’s land and sea journeys, that most of his fantastical explorations take place, including meeting (or the invention of) Fortunata and her sisters, the “Twelve Dancing Princesses” (42). He describes Fortunata as “a woman whose face was a sea voyage I had not the courage to attempt” (14), and she seems to be the fantastical manifestation of his overwhelming desire to adventure by ship, the mystical call to Heroic exploration that drives him. Fortunata’s tremendous freedom, then, including her commanding of a “boat” sailing “round the world earning [her] living as a

dancer” (94), may speak to Jordan’s more nuanced and liberating view of women, but does nothing for the actual women of the novel, and speaks in equal part to the requisite for such freedom in the 17th century: masculinity and a mentality entitled to such mobility.

Essentially, Fortunata’s small instances of power and subversion hold very little weight in the novel because she is, after all, merely the imaginary creation of a male mind already imbued with the freedom it is so surprising that she wields.

After some time with the King as gardener, Tradescant decides to set sail once again, and there is no question in anyone’s mind that Jordan will accompany him. Dogwoman describes her moment of final heartbreak and begrudging acceptance: “that night Tradescant made plans to take ship and leave us. I saw the look on Jordan’s face and my heart became a captive in a locked room. I couldn’t reach him now. I knew he would go” (65). Indeed he does. Jordan leaps at the opportunity to set out with Tradescant “as an explorer” (101), hoping to become a Hero like his mentor.

In her son’s absence, Dogwoman demonstrates the only use of water available to her as a woman, in contrast to Jordan’s claimed freedom to voyage by ship over all the waters of the world. Her interactions with water occur only when she douses herself at the pump, and these washings take place in attempts to be socially accepted, bathing becoming an extension of patriarchal confinement. Though she hates bathing, Dogwoman does so in order to purify herself, to restore cleanliness and docility – either to gain acceptance from men, or after committing an egregiously subversive act.

Her first instance of washing occurs when she falls in love for the first time, but concludes that the object of her affections does not pay her notice because of her dirtiness: “eventually I decided that true love must be clean love and I boiled myself a cake of soap...I

hate to wash, but knowing it to be a symptom of love I was not surprised to find myself creeping towards the pump in the dead of night...determined to cleanse all of my clothes, my underclothes and myself” (32). Her washing in hopes of male attention is a clear example of how even the simple act of bathing becomes a telling choice, illuminating the patriarchal system at play.

After the murder of Scroggs and Firebrace, Dogwoman recounts another washing: “I went to the pump where I had once washed myself and all my clothes in favor of love, and I took off what I was wearing and doused myself properly” (86). After committing a crime and exerting a rare subversive power over the lives of two men, Dogwoman feels compelled to bathe yet again, to purify herself of the deed, and to be deemed once more acceptable.

Her final instance of washing occurs upon the heroic return of Jordan: “When I got news of Jordan’s return I knew he would be returning a hero and that I had to meet him as a hero’s mother” (110). Her son’s homecoming is an occasion which merits ultimate decorum for Dogwoman, and she describes her preparation: “now the bells are striking and I must drape on my pearls and get ready for Jordan. I have washed my neck” (139). Her son deemed a hero by society, Dogwoman feels obliged to present the cleanest and most culturally conforming version of herself.

For Dogwoman and all women in 17th century London, water is dominated by patriarchy, forming the medium for the seafaring voyages that carry the men they love away on adventure, and confining the women themselves to a prescribed existence at home. Some progress is made in the ensuing centuries, as Nicolas Jordan attests to – “sometimes the women get to be heroes too, though this is still not as popular” (121) – but structures dictating greater male mobility still persist in many facets of society.

The strict gender binary, exclusionary male mobility, and toxic Heroism of Jordan's narrative in the 17th century finally begin to dissolve in the last section of *Sexing the Cherry*, when the contemporary Nicolas Jordan declares the Ecological Woman – an environmental activist “camping by a polluted river” (125) – heroic, in a new sense, for her efforts: “surely this woman was hero? Heroes give up what's comfortable in order to protect what they believe in or to live dangerously for the common good. She was doing that, so why was she being persecuted?” (142) This new definition of heroism offers hope for women in the future, though the Ecological woman's persecution promises ongoing struggle.

Nicolas Jordan employs his own mobility to find and travel to the woman by the river. The two then eat dinner, and reflect literarily on the pollution of the water – “‘The river's glowing,’ I said. ‘It's phosphorus, the tests are conclusive.’ ‘It reminds me of *The Ancient Mariner*, the slimy sea’— before setting sail together on her “rowing boat” (147) in a refreshing reversal of nautical roles.

Jordan and Dogwoman also escape a burning London by ship in the final pages of the novel: “we slid peacefully towards the sea, the wind behind us, the great sail fat” (149). Winterson allows the rigidly enforced gender binary she has exposed throughout most of the novel to dissolve into peaceful abstraction at the end of her metafiction – male and female characters of both 17th and 20th centuries united in liberating voyage by boat, away from the confinements of society.

Chapter 2: Mobility, Ownership, and Racial Categories in *A Mercy*

In many ways, Jacob Vaark of *A Mercy* proves more problematic than Jordan, Nicolas Jordan, and Tradescant of *Sexing the Cherry*, in his thirst for recognition and material wealth, along with a complicated and destructive colonial mentality masked by self-justification. The women Jacob has transported to his farm have no agency of their own unless operating under his authority, and remain at home tending his land, enabling him to “trade and travel” (102) freely. Despite the “steady female labor” (39) which makes his life of adventure possible, Jacob still considers himself a noble, heroic, and generous man, the exception to the norm in a world of merciless and abusive plantation owners like D’Ortega. Nonetheless, Jacob’s increasing wealth, acquired over the course of the novel, stems directly from the same slave trade which profits the man he despises.

Male mobility in *A Mercy*, like in *Sexing the Cherry*, frequently manifests itself as nautical voyaging. Jacob enters the novel by ship, both Florens and Rebekka are transported on Jacob’s orders by boat to his farm, and Sorrow spends the beginning years of her life aboard her father’s ship. However, in the world of *A Mercy* and of colonial America, male mobility also appears as the ability to travel on one’s own terms/access to means of transportation in general, the ability to participate financially in American economy, and the chance to rise in reputation in a freshly constructed social hierarchy. This transition from purely romanticized seafaring mobility in *Sexing the Cherry* to a broader representation of male mobility in *A Mercy* makes logical sense in context of imperial expansion, as American settlement and the structures created in the colonization process are the direct result of seafaring colonialism.

A voyage intended for conquest and discovery progresses into claiming “discovered” land for the imperial (despite native residents) and not only imposing, but building upon and expanding, the European patriarchal structure itself. The New World constitutes the destination for the kind of colonial exploration demonstrated in *Sexing the Cherry*, and here in the colonial America of *A Mercy*, under a more complex social hierarchy which oppresses based on race as well as gender, land ownership and economic mobility become equally prominent as manifestations of exclusionary male authority and mobility.

Morrison highlights this manifold mobility and draws a parallel to *Sexing the Cherry* with Jacob’s initial aqueous entrance, his first appearance in the novel: “the man moved through the surf, stepping carefully over pebbles and sand to shore. Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him” (10). The mentality of the seafaring hero is not lost in Jacob Vaark, and this emergence from the sea reflects English colonialism’s migration onto American soil, having traversed the Atlantic hungrily by ship.

Jacob leaves his male seafaring comrades – “he turned to wave to the sloopmen, but because the mast had disappeared in the fog he could not tell whether they remained anchored or risked sailing on (10) – to explore the American landscape, maritime male adventure transitioning to terrestrial exploration. Morrison situates the reader in the world of a newly colonized continent: “picking his way with growing confidence, he arrived in the ramshackle village sleeping between two huge riverside plantations” (11). This “growing confidence” is the manifestation of Jacob’s male mobility as he forges his own pioneering path through the terrain, in complete control of his destination and future, and the description of “riverside plantations” evokes the theme of colonial “battles against nature” (Memmi 3) in

the same flowing terms that Winterson does; settlers have already begun to situate their exploitative structures near sources of water.

Jacob fuses the two main facets of male mobility accessible to him almost immediately, exercising his male economic power to purchase a means of transportation: the horse Regina. In fact, his signature alone proves enough to acquire the mare: “the hostler was persuaded to forgo deposit if the man signed a note: Jacob Vaark” (11). No other name than that of a white male at this time would warrant the immediate trust of a stranger, but Jacob utilizes the status and privilege afforded him without second thought. In fact, he prides himself on his endurance and strength for undertaking this distinctly male voyage: “despite the long sail in three vessels down three different bodies of water, and now the hard ride over the Lenape trail, he took delight in the journey” (13).

Continuing his expedition on horseback, Jacob begins to reveal the masculine adventurer/explorer mentality (the Hero gender role in the sense that Winterson articulated it) that underlies his constant internal dialogue and self-conception: “breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him. Once beyond the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking” (13). Beyond the admiration of natural beauty, the avaricious tone behind “rawness and temptation” and “for the taking” betrays the true intent of patriarchal venture and exploration: to conquer, claim, tame, and take for one’s own gain.

Despite his moral convictions and compassion, Jacob is entranced by the same patriarchal ideals of adventure and voyaging power which ensnare Jordan in *Sexing the Cherry*, a sense of masculinity reliant on proving oneself a Hero through enterprise: “it

was hardship, adventure, that attracted him” (Morrison 13). Jacob’s need to be recognized stems in part from his humble beginnings, a fierce desire to rise in society from a childhood tainted by abandonment: “here he was, a ratty orphan become landowner, making a place out of no place, a temperate living from raw life” (13). Jacob’s own desires, though stemming from a personal need to prove himself against his background, latch onto a hierarchal structure which grants him the independence, mobility and authority he craves, on the merit of his gender. Even from the very beginning of the novel, at his most innocent, Jacob’s motivations are already dangerously entangled with the toxic colonial mentality of conquest-driven, adventuring masculinity. He casts himself as the “noble adventurer” and “righteous pioneer” (Memmi 3), a frontiersman carving out civilization from wilderness, crafting a shiny future for himself from a bleak past.

Jacob’s participation in exploitative masculinity, despite heroic intentions, is made clearer as he arrives at the destination of this first voyage in the novel: he is a “trader” who has been “invited, summoned rather, to the planter’s house – a plantation called Jublio” (16). Morrison reveals that D’Ortega, Jublio’s owner, owes Jacob, his “client/debtor” (18) but is unable to pay him properly due to “disaster:” “a third of his cargo had died of ship fever” (18). As Jacob reports, the slave owner then refused to “cut his losses” but remained “waiting to fill his ship’s hold to capacity” until his ship “sinks and he has lost not only the vessel, not only the original third, but all” (19). In a tone reminiscent of Captain Canot describing his “calamities” (245), D’Ortega paints himself as victim of cruel fate, not the benefactor of a brutal and dehumanizing trade which exploits human bodies. His self-victimization here is partially in accordance with his

colonists' hero complex, and partially in an attempt to manipulate Jacob's emotions and delay paying what he owes. "Now he wanted more credit and six additional months to pay what he had borrowed," (19) Jacob dryly reports.

The gender hierarchy presents itself at Jublio as well, revealing D'Ortega's and Jacob's positions at the top of the social chain of authority. Jacob reveals a patriarchy-tinged mentality in his descriptions of the plantation owner's spouse (who remains nameless): "D'Ortega's wife was a chattering magpie...making sense-defying observations, as though her political judgement were equal to a man's" (20). Clearly, Jacob seems to believe, only men possess sound enough "judgement" to participate in political or economic affairs. This system of belief, which not only excludes an entire gender from major aspects of society, but deems them entirely incapable of (or at least substantially inferior to men in) certain patterns of thought, is a clear extension of patriarchal entitlement to authority and mobility at the expense of those deemed unworthy of these societal freedoms.

Of course, D'Ortega's wife is still privy to a wide array of privileges as the white wife of a wealthy plantation owner, and to a certain extent must willingly choose to participate in the very systems and mentalities which keep her dependent on white male authority. During Jacob's visit, both the slave owner and his wife reinforce the colonial myth of wild, unsettled American land made purer by Christian, European civilization: "they both spoke of the gravity, the unique responsibility, this untamed world offered them; its unbreakable connection to God's work and the difficulties they endured on His behalf. Caring for ill or recalcitrant labor was enough, they said, for canonization" (21). This self-righteous attitude goes far beyond justification, to the point of demanding praise

and respect for their exploitative lifestyle, granting themselves ultimate absolution by attaching supposed religious purpose to their actions.

Jacob displays acute awareness of the oppressive system underlying D'Ortega's social position. He states out rightly that "access to a fleet of free labor made D'Ortega's leisurely life possible" and that "without a shipload of enslaved Angolans he would not be merely in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of porcelain and sleeping in the bush of Africa rather than a four-post bed" (32). Vaark knows exactly what sustains D'Ortega, and despises him for it: "Jacob sneered at wealth dependent on a captured workforce" (32). He is personally "determined to prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience for coin" (32). However, no matter what he believes intellectually or morally, Jacob is already entrenched in the brutal colonial operations of the tobacco plantation. No matter how much he silently disapproves of D'Ortega, Vaark has already supported and furthered the slave driver's lifestyle by lending him money (presumably more than once already), maintaining relations with him, meeting him on his plantation, eating his food, envying his wealth, and negotiating payment with him.

Jacob's involvement deepens as it becomes "clear what D'Ortega had left to offer. Slaves." (25) In lieu of monetary compensation, D'Ortega intends to present Jacob with enslaved human beings to settle his debt. Vaark sticks to his convictions at first, refusing to accept any person D'Ortega offers him as payment, until Florens's mother (referred to only as "a minha mãe" (4) by Florens throughout the novel) catches his eye:

"a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip; one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a

whim, mostly to silence him and fairly sure D'Ortega would refuse, he said, 'Her. That one. I'll take her.'" (27)

Jacob's "whim" strikes a nerve with D'Ortega, and he indeed refuses, insisting that *minha mãe* is the plantation's "main cook, the best one" (27). Jacob keenly picks up on the atrocities really at hand, recognizing D'Ortega's own scent of "clove-laced sweat" on the woman, and quickly suspecting that "there was more than cooking D'Ortega stood to lose" (27). Jacob stands firm in his intent of rescuing the sexually abused woman from D'Ortega's clutches, and the two men engage in a tense stand-off for a while, until *minha mãe* herself begs Jacob to take her child: "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter" (30). The desperate mother kneels in front of him when he still hesitates, and Jacob finally agrees to accept Florens, which *minha mãe* praises as "a mercy" (195), constituting the pivotal moment from which the novel is titled.

Minha mãe's desperation to send Florens away with Jacob, though later interpreted as abandonment by Florens, is really a selfless attempt to save her daughter from the same sexual predation she suffers herself, which has already begun to be directed at her child: "a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor's eye" (195). The only escape from D'Ortega's monstrosity *minha mãe* can offer Florens is through the mobility of another white male, one holding high enough social position to interact financially with the plantation owner and the power to bring Florens to property of his own.

Gleeful to trade a child for all of his debt towards Jacob, D'Ortega is more than willing to employ his mobile authority to ship Florens to Jacob, one landowner to another: "I'll have them board a sloop to any port on the coast you desire" (31). While

white women, under the manifold hierarchy of colonial America, may be doomed to be left behind as men embark on pioneering voyages, minority/colonized women may be ordered at any time to be transported as cargo from one white man to another.

After making arrangements for Florens's transport, Jacob is then anxious to escape the plantation, already uneasy about what he's witnessed and his own involvement in D'Ortega's slave trade. Despite everything he's observed, however, he relates that on his way out, he "in spite of himself, envied the house, the gate, the fence" of the plantation, realizing that "only things, not bloodlines or character" (31) separate him from D'Ortega, whom he considers above his own "station" (19). He muses whether it might be "nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones in his own meadow? And one day, not too far away, to build a house that size on his own property" (31). This class envy and thirst for greater material possession, as he leaves D'Ortega's property having made an agreement to have a slave girl shipped to him, is a good indicator that Jacob's moral convictions surrounding wealth and the ways by which to attain it are flexible, to say the least. By his own testament, Vaark knows all too well that a lifestyle like D'Ortega's is only possible by exploitation, and he has just witnessed evidence of the sexual abuse the plantation owner engages in, yet he allows himself to lust after the same kind of existence.

Rattled by his encounter with D'Ortega and "the humiliation of having accepted the girl as part payment" (37) Jacob Vaark heads to a favorite tavern, where he learns more about the rum trade and the adventurer mentality which ensnares him. Already married to Rebekka, he tells us "he'd had enough, years ago, of brothels and the disorderly houses kept by wives of sailors at sea" (33). The left-behind women of

seafarers do not interest him anymore; at the moment, he is there to absorb the knowledge of wealthier men who have seen the world.

The discussion in the tavern centers around the rum trade, and Jacob immediately hones in on a man called Downes, “the man who seemed to know most about kill-devil, the simple mechanics of its production, its outrageous prices and beneficial effects” (35). Jacob is impressed by “the authority of a mayor” that Downes seems to wield, and his “aura of a man who had been in exotic places” (35). Colonial mythology converges here, as Jacob abandons conviction and lavishes admiration and adventurer’s mystique on yet another man who has gotten rich off of slavery.

There is no sensitivity around the subject from the slave-trade-funded men of the tavern themselves; they are perfectly aware of the brutal operations which uphold their lifestyles, but have justified their wealth and wellbeing past any sense of empathy. Downes even smiles while describing slaves as an endless resource (after Jacob inquires about deaths): “They ship in more. Like firewood, what burns to ash is refueled. And don’t forget, there are births” (35). Men like Downes and D’Ortega – the men that Jacob chooses to associate himself with – are men accustomed to “eliminating all arguments with promises of profit quickly” (36), of categorizing human beings as cargo, and slave bodies as a readily available resource. They are Captain Canot-type adventurers who consider only the contents of their pockets and the size of their homes in evaluating the quality of their lives, and regard their high social positions as reflections of their own hard work and good character, rather than of exploitative processes and systems which place them at the top of a hierarchy.

Jacob boasts a slightly stronger moral compass than most of these men, and executes the system of exploitation in a more humane manner on his own farm, but is all the same inseparably involved in the system of slavery which underlies the economy he longs to rise to the top of. Even before he begins to profit from the rum trade, his motivations stem from materiality and an acquisitive masculinity. He prides himself on “becoming a landowning, independent farmer” (39), one who’s done “what was necessary: secured a wife, someone to help her, planted, built, fathered” (39). He has worked hard to achieve stability in a humble agricultural lifestyle, but his notion of success, like the men of *Sexing the Cherry*, centers around forms of acquisition and ownership which necessitate asserting hierarchical authority over others. The ability to purchase land, to order a wife to be shipped to the same land, and “help” (42) to be transported in to maintain it, are all clear manifestations of his male mobility and authority.

However, even the position of authority over the women of his farm soon wears thin for Vaark. Without a male heir to pass the farm to, he grows restless and begins to hanker for more excitement and more money in his pocket: “knowing full well his shortcomings as a farmer – in fact his boredom with its confinement and routine – he had found commerce more to his taste.” (41) Like Jordan in *Sexing the Cherry*, Jacob gives little thought to the women who must necessarily be left behind, when he decides the farm life no longer pleases him and ventures out. These women, brought to his property for the sole purpose of maintaining the land, are doomed to a lifetime of the same “confinement and routine” Jacob so easily decides to abandon in search of “more satisfying enterprise” (41). While Vaark possesses the autonomy and mobility to shape

his fate and the content of his daily activities based on whim and satisfaction, his “steady female labor” (39) does not.

Vaark pretends to have “simply added the trading life” (39) to his agricultural lifestyle, but his earlier disgust for D’Ortega demonstrates his true knowledge and culpability. A striking instance of self-justification and intentional self-delusion makes clear that Jacob is more than aware of the moral corruption he undergoes by choosing to participate in the rum trade, but that his personal gain outweighs any ethical principles, or the stripping of others’ freedom, especially when exploitation occurs far away:

“There was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jublio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right, he thought, looking at a sky vulgar with stars. Clear and right. The silver that glittered there was not at all unreachable. And that wide swath of cream pouring through the stars was his for the tasting” (41)

Drawing an arbitrary distinction between backyard and foreign enslavement, Jacob Vaark allows himself to participate in the same exploitative lifestyle he earlier “sneered” (32) at, progressing quickly from any hint of moral self-examination to a truly colonial mindset of unfeeling entitlement, declaring the entire cosmos “his for the tasting.” Such a worldview, which claims pre-ownership over the entire observable universe, is distinctly colonial and male, one which assumes the world to be blank, potential territory lying open to any brave-enough adventurer’s claim. Acquisitive greed of D’Ortega’s and Jacob’s variety can only come about by ignoring the suffering of others in favor of one’s personal gain, and by assigning oneself success for wealth provided by the unrewarded and forced contributions of lower social categories.

During colonial times, no one but a white male would presume the world theirs “for the tasting” in the way that Jacob does. Only a position at the top of the social hierarchy allows for such a mentality of entitlement, and the quest for fame, greater authority, and cultural recognition that Jacob embarks on is only accessible to men, as Rebekka points out in her contemplation of the biblical story of Job,:

“Job was a man. Invisibility was intolerable to men. What complaint would a female Job dare to put forth? And if, having done so, and He deigned to remind her of how weak and ignorant she was, where was the news in that? What shocked Job into humility and renewed fidelity was the message a female Job would have known and heard every minute of her life” (107)

Jacob feels disenfranchised by his orphaned childhood, and entitled to recognition for the work he has put towards a higher standing in society. While his toil is certainly admirable, he allows this sense of personal accomplishment, and the greedy desire for further gain and recognition, to blind him to the exploitation and abandonment he must himself participate in order to achieve it, as well as the inherent freedoms he enjoys as a man. None of the facts of Jacob’s life which he deems personal successes – ownership of his farm, the structure of authority he establishes in order to maintain it, his financial negotiations with fellow men, or the ability to travel which allows participation in trading as a form of income – would be attainable for him if he were not a white man, and yet he never glimpses past his own self-glorification to acknowledge this. Quite the opposite, in fact: he never ceases to consider himself morally superior to men like D’Ortega and a hero, a rescuer, of the women he ships to his property.

Lina is the first of these women to arrive on Vaark's farmland, and unlike the "rescue" (40) of Florens and Sorrow, she is "purchased outright and deliberately" (40) by Jacob when he sees a bulletin advertising a "hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or spice" (61) in town. Jacob buys Lina for the pure purpose of labor, to prepare his farm for the arrival of Rebekka: "a bachelor expecting the arrival of a new wife, he required precisely that kind of female on his land" (61). The Native American woman functions by all tokens as a slave on his property, yet Jacob brushes this fact out of his mind, and Lina is never referred to as such.

Of all the women, perhaps because of her purely practical purpose on the farm, Lina acknowledges and confronts Jacob's corruption most directly, already aware of the colonial mentalities he subscribes to due to the destruction of her original community: "Europes," as she calls European settlers, "would forever fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god" (63). She is more than aware of what colonizers are willing to do for their own gain, and the "battles against nature" (Memmi 3) they are willing to engage in. As she and Jacob prepare the farm for Rebekka's arrival, she describes Jacob as "a hurricane of activity laboring to bring nature under his control" (57). Lina recognizes Jacob's darkest intentions and the influences he cannot help but cave to – even before he involves himself in the rum trade – the morally questionable purchases and sacrifices he is willing to make in order to construct his vision of an ideal life for himself.

Thus the prospect of "that third and presumably final house that Sir insisted on building" which "required the death of fifty trees" (50) upsets but does not surprise Lina. Her deep connection with nature in part allows her to see the truth of Jacob's actions: "he decided

to kill the trees and replace them with a profane monument to himself” (51). Unlike Rebekka, who “had sighed and confided to Lina that at least the doing of it would keep him more on the land” instead of “trading and traveling to fill his pockets” (51), Lina is not willing to justify Jacob’s actions as anything less than colonizer’s greed.

Lina analogizes this colonial mentality aptly in a fable she tells Florens about the “traveler” who strikes down a noble Eagle “protecting her born young” (72), again contrasting the natural with the destruction wrought by selfishness:

“One day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby. He stands at its summit admiring all he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow. The traveler laughs at the beauty saying, ‘This is perfect. This is mine.’” (72-73)

The traveler’s claiming of the beauty he observes echoes Jacob’s declaring the stars “his for the tasting” (41). This mentality – of the traveler, the adventurer, the explorer – is one that claims without thought of anything but personal gain. In the story, the word “mine” and the traveler’s greedy laughter echo louder and louder until they crack the eagle’s eggs. She “swoops down to claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound,” but he “strikes her wing with all his strength” and leaves her “falling forever” (73). No mother’s love can protect against “the evil thoughts of man” (72) when such men are so willing to take violent action without consideration of the brutal consequences they inflict.

Rebekka, the second of the women brought to the Vaark farm, comes from the place most dreaded by Lina: Europe. Her transport to Jacob by ship demonstrates a convergence of male authority and mobility between her own father and her husband-to-be:

“Already sixteen, she knew her father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her. A waterman, he was privy to all sorts of news from colleagues, and when a crewman passed along an inquiry from a first mate – a search for a healthy, chaste wife willing to travel abroad – he was quick to offer his eldest girl” (86)

The same nautical voyaging ability for men that dictates European gender roles in *Sexing the Cherry* holds true for the only European characters of *A Mercy*; at the word of her father the “waterman,” who obtains information no one else is partial to due to his seafaring journeys, Rebekka is loaded along with “seven other women assigned to steerage” (95) in a ship headed for America. Hierarchy manifests itself aboard: Rebekka and her companions are “separated from males and the better-classed women and led to a dark space below next to the animal stalls” (95), and Rebekka forges a memorable bond with the other “lower-deck passengers” (95), often flashing back to their conversations when she falls ill many years later.

Rebekka acknowledges “her own female vulnerability, traveling alone to a foreign country to wed a stranger” (96), but is grateful for “some kind of escape” (90) from her life in Europe as a member of the lowest class, and the upward mobility that Jacob offers in America. Describing her only three “prospects” in life as “servant, prostitute, wife,” she determines that “the last one seemed the safest” (91), though she has little say in the matter of becoming Jacob’s spouse. “As with any future available to her,” she recognizes, marriage “depended on the character of the man in charge” (91). Rebekka demonstrates clearly the restrictions placed on women, subjugated to a lower tier of social existence than men in the constructed hierarchy.

However, like D'Ortega's wife, Rebekka also must choose to accept and partake in the hierarchy in order to reap the benefits of marriage to a wealthy male landowner. Though situated below Jacob, Rebekka assumes a position of authority over the other, nonwhite women of the farm, by merit of codified legal attachment to the man at the top of the hierarchy. This unearned authority over others is what she terms "escape," but is simply the result of being inserted into the more complex hierarchy of race and gender in America, with an unprecedented power over women of lower categories. Instead of directing her own experiences of oppression into a sense of compassion for Lina, Florens, and Sorrow, when Jacob dies, Rebekka clings to the second-hand authority granted her as the widow of a landowner and becomes cruel and abusive towards the other women.

The next woman added to Jacob's collection is Sorrow: "accepted, not bought, by Sir, she joined the household after Lina but before Florens and still had no memory of her past life except being dragged ashore by whales" (60). Sorrow's existence is muddled and watery; she is found "treading water in the North River in Mohawk country, half drowned" after "living alone on a foundered ship" (60) that had been her father's, the "only home she knew" (138). She has an imaginary "Twin" (137) whom she invents to keep her company on the abandoned ship, but who disappears when Sorrow finds ultimate satisfaction in the "legitimacy" she achieves in "her new status as a mother" (157). Though she occupies the lowest rung of the hierarchy on the farm, Sorrow enjoys more freedom than most to do as she pleases, due to assumptions of inadequacy around her traumatized mental state. Though Jacob designates her role as providing extra "help" (60) around the farm while he travels, Sorrow often avoids her assigned chores by simply wandering off in reverie.

The last woman to join the farm is Florens, though her purchase is one of the first of Jacob's actions detailed, and her transport from D'Ortega's plantation to Jacob's property is described briefly by Florens herself early in the novel. Her voyage takes place by "ferry, then a ketch, then a boat" (8): a voyage in three nautical vessels, under the authority of three white men. It is D'Ortega's and Jacob's economic authority and mutual agreement which cause her transport in the first place, and the Reverend Father who actually oversees her journey.

Florens's powerlessness in her position as a nonwhite female slave, and a child to boot, being transported from one white landowner to another, is made apparent in an incident of theft: "a woman comes to me and says stand up. I do and she takes my cloak from my shoulders. Then my wooden shoes." (8). Florens's footwear is a crucial image of mobility and social hierarchy in the novel; she insists on wearing much-too-large high heels as a child – "the shoes of a loose woman" (195), as *minha mae* worryingly describes them – a bold quirk which unfortunately captures D'Ortega's attentions. She is also notably equipped with increased mobility on her own pivotal journey in search of the blacksmith, by donning "Sir's boots that fit a man not a girl" (4). The importance of these boots, and the male mobility they temporarily bestow on Florens, is reiterated on several occasions, by Lina – "She had Sir's boots, the letter, food and a desperate need to see the blacksmith" (78) and by Rebekka – "They'd stuffed her feet in good strong boots. Jacob's. And folded a clarifying letter of authority inside. And her traveling instructions were clear" (114). The authority conveyed by Jacob's boots and Rebekka's letter, claiming Florens as her property, allow the girl to voyage in search of the blacksmith, traveling on her mistress's orders and in an attempt to restore Rebekka to health.

The shoes Florens wears play heavily into her fate, reflect gender restrictions, and determine her mobility. It's no coincidence that during her time in the shoes most stereotypical of femininity – high heels – she is the most confined and subjected, vulnerable to a potential lifetime of sexual abuse and other countless horrors on D'Ortega's plantation, while in the shoes of a powerful man – Jacob's well-constructed, made-for-travelling boots – she achieves the most mobility and autonomy.

Given this imagery, the theft of Florens's shoes mid-transport to Jacob's farm demonstrates her complete lack of mobility in this instance, and a position lower even than that of the other (presumably white) woman. Luckily, the Reverend "takes rags, strips of sailcloth lying about and wraps [her] feet" (8), offering Florens a modicum of protection from his own position of authority. Florens tells us that "Reverend Father is the only kind man I ever see" (8), which does not bode well for the self-righteous Jacob, who, as we've seen, only descends further into greed and corruption after his acquisition of Florens.

Jacob Vaark is not satisfied with a loyal wife and a host of unpaid female laborers maintaining his farm property. Instead, "his dreams were of a grand house of many rooms rising on a hill above the fog" (41), built with the substantial earnings he acquires from the rum trade, in the image of D'Ortega's lavish plantation which he envies. "Jacob's determination to rise up in the world" (114) will stop at nothing, driving him well past his initial moral convictions into a frenzied routine of travel, trade, and disregard for the women he abandons on each voyage. He becomes a shell of the compassionate man he once was, during the construction of his third house, though he does not even live to see

its completion, and he is taken over completely by the colonial mentality of unlimited expansion and selfish gain at any moral cost.

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Conclusion

Both Jordan of *Sexing the Cherry* and Jacob Vaark of *A Mercy* begin their narratives with moral sensitivity, aiming for a noble and Heroic existence. However, the values of the societal systems they choose to participate in come at exploitative costs, and the two must necessarily claim exclusionary freedoms and mobility available to them as white men in order to achieve what they deem success. Jordan indeed becomes a seafaring adventurer and returns a Hero to England, but at the cost of abandoning Dogwoman and enforcing the “hero/home-maker” gender binary. Jacob achieves the wealth and status he dreams of, but at the cost of willing participation in the slave trade, and of deserting the group of women he has shipped to his farm.

The gradual moral decay of the two male protagonists of these novels demonstrates the true danger of the hierarchical structures that patriarchy and colonialism enforce. Not only do straightforwardly cruel men the likes of Captain Canot and D’Ortega abuse the systems for personal gain, but well-meaning men like Jacob and Jordan fall all too easily into the mythology of toxic colonial masculinity and heroism, self-justifying themselves as noble pioneers and agents for the good of civilization even as they benefit directly from highly exploitative structures which place white men at the top of a cruel hierarchy of authority.

Sexing the Cherry and *A Mercy* together provide a wholistic view of patriarchal colonialism, which inflicts multiple layers of oppression, and demonstrate the importance of an intersectional approach to feminism. In addition to the oppression of women long practiced in Europe (as Winterson makes clear), the colonization of America “produced new historical social identities” based on a newly invented “category of race” (Quijano 534),

justifying the dehumanization and exploitation of colonized nonwhites – primarily by means of Native American disenfranchisement and the forced enslavement of Africans.

The colonization of America established this new system of power and classification, bolstered by ideological and legal justifications of violence, which defined positions within a complex hierarchy, as “gender fuses with race in the operations of colonial power” (Lugones 186). This hierarchy fashioned new constructions of race and gender as socially limiting categories, and imbued whiteness and masculinity with ultimate power within the system.

The “idea of race, in its modern meaning, does not have a known history before the colonization of America” (Quijano 534), and its dehumanizing definition served as a means of justification for colonial violence which would otherwise be unthinkable, by crafting a mythology of heroic and superior European civilization.

It is this colonial mentality of inherent superiority, along with entitlement to mobility, success, and authority over others, which Jacob and Jordan unfortunately demonstrate. They “imagine themselves to be the culmination of a civilizing trajectory from a state of nature” (Quijano 542), exerting masculine control over water and wilderness in order to forge the adventurous lifestyle they believe themselves to intrinsically deserve, at the expense of mass exploitation and the forcible confinement of the women situated hierarchically under their authority.

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