

The Development of Femininity and Womanhood in the
Veiled Prophet Debutante Ball of St. Louis, Missouri: A Critical Analysis

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I. Introduction

“I know people talk in terms of rite of passage. But that bow to the guy in the pointy hat was obeisance.”

- Lucy Ferriss, 1972 debutante and author of “Unveiling the Prophet: The Misadventures of a Reluctant Debutante.”¹

“The Veiled Prophet was always an old white corporate guy who wore robes and covered his noggin with a funny-looking crowned veil. But nobody laughed at this getup. Young society women in white dresses actually had to bow down before him. Not just bow-- prostrate themselves to the floor. Would you let your daughter do that? You didn’t have to be Sigmund Freud to see the symbolism. Especially when the sons didn’t bow. To me, it looked like the rich families were saying they were willing to sacrifice their daughters to money and power.”²

-- Elaine Viets, fiction and mystery writer, from a recently written story set in St. Louis

This thesis examines a coming-of-age ritual within the community of Saint Louis, Missouri called the Veiled Prophet Ball. This debutante ball is a tradition that has existed within the community (mostly continuously, though it was omitted certain years) since its founding in 1877, run by a group of the most elite businessmen in the city of St. Louis. Following their sophomore year in college, daughters of members are invited to debut to and be presented as members of the Saint Louis elite society. The ball itself is highly structured based upon economic and social status within the community, culminating in the crowning of a Queen as well as Special Maids. The ritual is highly cloaked in secrecy, and, while it is not the only debutante ball to occur yearly in Saint Louis, it is the oldest in Missouri history and likely the most prominent and most controversial. However, my intention is not to attempt to write an all-encompassing history of the VP ball; there are several accounts of the tradition already in print. While both of these are valuable pieces of scholarship, these studies focus significantly on examining the racial

¹ Lucy Ferriss, Personal interview, via e-mail to author. April 3, 2011.

² Elaine Viets, “Issue 2” of *Francesca Vierling Mystery Series*, Random House Digital, Inc., 1998.

issues that have been raised regarding the existence itself of the Veiled Prophet society and membership within it. I instead intend to offer a modern feminist perspective on the issue, as well as to delve further into the issues it creates regarding gender dynamics and development of femininity. This thesis will examine, overall, how tradition and modernity intersect with the creation of a feminine identity regarding the Veiled Prophet ball, and how power dynamics within the ball itself contribute the reification of traditional “feminine” values and behaviors. Additionally, this thesis will scrutinize the ritual itself as well as how its significance within the Saint Louis community has changed since research has last been conducted.

The VP ball is not unique, in that it is a debutante ball and there are many that exist around the country. However, there are certain elements of the ball that are anachronistic, and only exist in St. Louis. For example, the organization is composed of only men, and only men plan the event; in other places, women in charitable organizations are in charge of the balls. Additionally, escorts at the VP ball are members of the organization (as in, other girls’ fathers) whereas escorts in most balls are men of the young women’s age. Most debutante balls do not have the myth-based (self-created) legitimacy that is present at the VP: others are more upfront about their origins and do not try to disguise their roots as the VP tries to do. Furthermore, the philanthropic elements of other organizations that hold debutante balls appear to be more strong than that of the VP. For instance, though the VP requires community service (and emphasizes sessions of it for debutantes today), as recently as 1972, there was no community service element at all for girls participating in the ball. Even for the girls today, community service is only required for a few days during the couple of summers before their debuts; other balls raise money for charity, do community service more frequently and are better known for their

philanthropic contributions than the VP. Also, other balls in many places are themed or directed at charity; the VP ball is by no means a charity ball, and does not pretend to be so. Additionally, sons have no part in the VP whatsoever, aside from attending the event or possibly joining in the future, to follow in their fathers' footsteps. In many other balls, the sons have a function within the production, as attendants or escorts. Lastly, there really is no debutante "season" preceding the ball; it is essentially the only event that is thrown for the debutantes (in many other places, organizations sponsor or plan meet and greets, cotillions and mixers for the debutantes and their dates; nothing like this takes place with the VP).

It is crucial at this time to continue to examine the implications of something such as the VP Ball, considering the climate in which women of my age are brought up. More specifically, I address the current relevance of the tradition, what it is emphasizing and teaching young women of today about identity and privilege, how it fits in with the present social climate (one that is constantly stressing female independence and individual choice), and the motivations behind why young women still participate in this event. How does an event like the VP ball, full of archaic traditions and conservative thought, sit with a generation of women fed messages of girl power, women's equality, and "firefighter, not fireman"? How can one justify participating in an event that tends to reify the traditional definition of femininity when she refuses to tolerate sexism and oppression in other aspects of her life, or for other groups of people? Elaborating on this, I will investigate the contemporary effects of privilege on the development as well as definition of womanhood, considering the most current of these two print resources concludes in 1995, leaving out the last fifteen years of the ball's occurrence, a gap of time that has seen the notion of femininity changing extensively. On this note, an investigation of how the Veiled

Prophet Ball functions socially and culturally to reproduce the idea of “femininity,” traditional or otherwise, is an interesting avenue that will be discussed.

I find this topic to be of personal relevance because I am from Saint Louis myself and have not only attended the VP multiple times but also count numerous debutantes among some of my closest friends and former classmates. I graduated from MICDS, a private, K-12 non-denominational high school, and the high school from which the majority of crowned Queens came. It is located in the heart of the most elite neighborhood of St. Louis, and many of the men in the organization send their children there. Because of these two reasons, I felt that my direct experience with the event was invaluable in creating such an account, as it offers an inside look into a ritual that most do not have the opportunity to observe or in which to participate. Since I am friends with many women who have debuted in the past, I am privy to a certain element of trust and confidence that an outsider would most likely not be able to achieve after meeting these women only once or twice. Most of the women I interviewed have been my friends for 15 years; we grew up together, we graduated together, and I watched all of them walk together.

Thus, I set about finding participants to interview. My interview participants were women I knew from high school, or knew through friends from high school. However, I had not discussed their thoughts about the VP before the interviews, so they were not selected based on any kind of preconceived notion toward the response my questions would elicit. All participants were informed of the general intention of my research (to discern how participation in the ball affected their conception of womanhood and what it meant to them as women) but not any kind of particular argument or direction I would take. All were informed that their responses would be kept confidential (I would be the only one to see them) and their identities would be concealed in

the final project so that they would feel comfortable being honest and speaking freely without fear of consequence during the interview. All of these women walked in the winter of 2008, following the sophomore years in college. That year, 46 total women participated in the ball.

I conducted 8 interviews in December of 2010; all were in person and tape-recorded, except for one that was done by email. They took place either in my home, or in the homes of those I interviewed. I personally transcribed all of the interviews, to ensure the privacy and quality of the transcripts. Interviews followed a list of questions that I had generated and edited previously. Participants were given as much time as they needed to think about and respond to the questions I posed. All of the women interviewed were white, and one self-identified as Jewish. Seven of the women I interviewed attended MICDS; one went to John Burroughs, our rival high school. However, both are private and elite. Three of these women spent their entire academic career (until college), 13 years, at MICDS. The other five women spent either 6 or 7 years at one or the other. Seven of the women I interviewed participated in the ball, while one chose to sit it out but offered an equally fascinating perspective from the sidelines. Of the women I interviewed, three had divorced parents. Four had sisters that would walk after them, and one had a sister who had already walked; one had a mother (and a sister) who had walked before her, and one had other members of her family (an aunt, a grandmother etc) participate. As far as paternal membership within the organization, four had fathers that had been members for more than ten years; four had fathers that had joined more recently. As far as professions go, four of these ladies' fathers were entrepreneurs; the four remaining's fathers were a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, and a financier. All of these women attend four-year colleges: one attends an Ivy League, five are at private universities, and two attend state schools. Many of these young women were

athletes: the sports they played ranged from swimming to diving to racquetball to horseback riding to cheerleading. Obviously, one need not know all of these details to comprehend their experience in the ball. However, they are included with the intention of providing a better picture of these women's backgrounds and what type of values they (and their families) have.

It must be said that I do not pretend to be writing an all-encompassing, generalized account of ALL debutantes who have walked in the ball since its inception, or in balls in other places. This thesis is the account and analysis of eight particular women who participated in the ball in 2008, attended two particular schools, and ran within a certain circle of friends; none of these women were crowned Queen of Love and Beauty nor chosen to be a Special Maid. It would be deceptive and ignorant of me to insinuate that this is the experience of debts everywhere; though inferences and ideas can be drawn from my research, the specific context and physical location in which they took place (and all of the particulars of the VP ball) need to be kept in mind.

While debutantes walking down a runway in front of all of their fathers' friends and families may not seem to be anything other than such, the issue at large is about communication and presentation of femininity, or what it means to be a woman (to the men of the VP, to the debutantes themselves, to the audience.) Sociologist Erving Goffman discussing how, in interpersonal relationships, face-to-face interactions are essential in understanding relationships between people.³ He delineates the differences between expressions given and expressions given off, two types of gestures that are present at the VP ball, and how people attempt to control these (in the form of their appearance, setting or behavior) to moderate what others think of them.⁴

³ Erving Goffman, *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

Because the setting of the VP ball cannot, in this case, be changed, this effort on the part of the debutante to control her appearance and behavior can be quite telling, as it not only says something about what she wants others to think of her, but also speaks volumes about how she feels she “should” appear, as per society’s conventions. While some of these gestures are subtle, others are inherent in the very nature of the ball itself, and how it is run; for example, Walking down that runway, on the arm of another man, is conveying a particular message about how and what it is to be a woman to the audience. Additionally, those in the audience are perceiving, from this gesture, a certain image, standard and idea about womanhood and femininity, creating a cycle that, to this day, has not been broken. In understanding these gestures from debutante to audience, audience to debutante, one can better see just how the ball reifies femininity, and why that is the case. Not only does Goffman’s idea aid in the understanding of how those within the ball portray themselves, but also, more importantly perhaps, it sheds some light on the relationship of performance and comprehension that exists between the VP organization and the St. Louis community at large. Because the organization portrays itself in such a way that it conjures images of wealth, power and royalty in the minds’ eye of many St. Louisans, it is often accepted as such; however, as Goffman continues, there are always gestures that one makes in response to another that are not picked up on.⁵ Many of the community’s reactions to the organization could be classified in that way.

Furthermore, certain elements of this ritual could be understood in the theory of social drama, developed by anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner posits that a social drama is cycle set into action by a rift between two factions within a group. While the whole of his theory is not

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

necessarily pertinent to the VP ball, the framework and language he develops for the groups in question can be applied to the Veiled Prophet Organization and those that walk. According to Turner, “social dramas occur within groups of persons who share values and interests and who have a real or alleged common history:” The VP organization.⁶ He continues, saying “the main actors are persons for whom the group has a high value priority.”⁷ Obviously, those to whom the group means the most will have the greatest stake in its future, and would be willing to engage in conflict to defend it. He describes groups such as this as “star groups,” or “groups to which [one] owe[s] [ones] deepest loyalty and whose fate is [one’s] greatest personal concern,” one in “which a person identifies most deeply and in which he finds fulfillment of his major social and personal desires.”⁸ It is one’s star group, like the VP, in which “one looks for love, recognition, prestige, office and other tangible and intangible benefits and rewards.”⁹ Turner continues to say that social drama happens within these groups when there is a conflict over a disagreement for these things. However, if one views performance as a type of social drama, as Goffman might, seeing the VP’s ball as a performance would qualify it to be a social drama, without the disagreement that Turner implies. I would argue such is the case with the ball. Combining the circumstance of Turner’s argument with Goffman’s theory of personal action, then, provides a good framework with which we can begin this discussion.

With these theoretical ideas in mind, then, the exploration of this myth-based men’s fraternal(ish) social organization and its yearly debutante ball can begin. With interview-based

⁶ Victor Turner, “Social Dramas and Stories About Them.” *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 1980, 149.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

research of eight 2008 debutantes (who also happened to be my high school classmates), I strove to evaluate the ball's current role as a transformative experience and if it or the rite-of-passage element of the ritual is pertinent to the development of a feminine identity or idea of womanhood in St. Louis society today. To that end, I wondered: Why do girls still walk in the ball? What does it mean to them? How important is it in their lives? What has, and has not, changed since the ball's inception? What elements of it are perhaps off-putting to young women? How does the cult of femininity pertain to debutantedom? To reach these conclusions, though, it is imperative to be familiar with the history of the organization, and where all of this debutante hoopla came from, which is exactly what will be explored in the next section.

II: History

“The Prophet’s intrinsic splendor and mystery would at first seem to betoken either a secret kindness, or, like Hawthorne’s veiled pastor, a secret shame with which we’ll identify in the end. Soon enough, however, we learn that, far from being more benign than he appears, Mokanna [the prophet] is nastier than the reader can possibly imagine. His ‘silver veil’ symbolizes evil’s tendency over love, self-destruction over all. We are left with the chilling possibility that, in the ruined lands of the Caliph’s dark people, the terror of whiteness may one day return...Black is set against white. Power wins. The girl dies in the end, and the boy matures.”

- Lucy Ferriss, description of the original poem, “Lalla Rookh,” by Thomas Moore, upon which the myth of the Veiled Prophet is based¹⁰.

The history of the Veiled Prophet organization is one that is unfamiliar to many, St. Louisans themselves included. As it is a secretive, male-only organization, the information about it that has become public is few and far between. Regarding its origins, however, basic details are well-documented and available; they are actually made public by the organization itself.

¹⁰ Lucy Ferriss, *Unveiling the Prophet: The Misadventures of a Reluctant Debutante* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 22.

According to their website, in 1878, St. Louis, once prominent in the nation's trade, was declining in importance, overshadowed by larger cities with more active economies¹¹. In an effort to revitalize the city itself and reestablish it as an economic power, a group of twenty local businessmen, led by Charles Slayback (a prominent grain merchant) brainstormed ideas for St. Louis to attract the attention they felt it deserved¹². As Thomas Spencer describes, "Only their ambition and class background united these men. Most of the founding members came from upper-class or upper-middle-class families¹³." The Agricultural and Mechanical fair, a longstanding community event that used to attract many visitors and business, had seen a recent decline, and the group felt the fair could be an avenue of potential revitalization¹⁴. Recognizing the popularity of success of New Orleans' Mardi Gras, Slayback proposed borrowing the idea and re-imagining it in St. Louis, in an effort to interest the public and raise attendance at the annual fair. At the same time, Spencer continues, those participating in this forum, who eventually became the founders of the organization that was soon to follow, had ulterior motives; as he says, "Striving to become successful businessmen at a time when boosters called St. Louis the 'Future Great City of the World,' they saw their destinies as linked to the city's growth¹⁵" Thus, while the revitalization was touted as an effort to improve St. Louis, these prominent men were also concerned about their own futures.

¹¹ "Veiled Prophet Organization- History," <http://www.veiledprophet.org/content/view/37/41/>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Thomas Spencer, *The St. Louis Veiled Prophet Celebration: Power on Parade, 1877-1995*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 12.

¹⁴ "History of the Event," Jefferson National Expansion Administrative History, http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/jeff/adhi2-3.htm

¹⁵ Spencer 13.

However, Slayback's brother, Alonzo, thought that a new version of Mardi Gras simply would not be interesting enough for the public. To that end, Alonzo Slayback, inspired by the work of poet Thomas Moore, borrowed a character entitled "The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan." Disliking a few attributes of the character in the poem, Slayback made a few changes, including altering the character to be less of a "war-mongering trickster," transforming him into "an entrepreneur who wanted to share his personal happiness with another part of the world."¹⁶ In Slayback's version of the tale, this "Prophet" "travel[ed] the world in search of a suitable location to share his good will," eventually adopting St. Louis as his own¹⁷. According to the myth, the Prophet would return once a year to check up on the progress of his city, and around him, a secret organization of the St. Louis elite was formed, calling itself "The Mysterious Order of the Veiled Prophet;" they would oversee the goings-on of the city to ensure the Veiled Prophet would be pleased upon his next visit. According the Veiled Prophet Organization's official website, the society was to remain secret "to ensure the focus of the Order's good deeds would not be on any of its members but rather on the Organization as a whole."¹⁸ As time passed, it became more clear that this was not, in fact, the meaning behind the secrecy. Rather, in the eyes of many St. Louisans and critics, the organization remained "secret" as the decisions and policies it adopted were considered unpopular and discriminatory, and it appeared members could hide behind the secrecy of the organization to avoid blame.

At the same time, the organization was valuable to its members for another reason, as it was a framework that created and reified them as the upper class of St. Louis, allowing them to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "Veiled Prophet Organization- History,".

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

control circumstances in the name of civic progress. As Spencer describes, it was, and still is, “an elitist organization that was important to its members because it demonstrated they were at the very top of St. Louis’s white male aristocracy.¹⁹” The elitism demonstrated by the selection of members to the organization, a process that excluded not only women and racial minorities, but also lower-class white men, helped to put into place a social hierarchy. It is one that placed this group at the top of the social pyramid, and one that, arguably, remains to this day, though it has become less influential over St. Louis over time. As Spencer describes, the development of a fictitious Prophet who visits the city once a year lends a sort of historical legitimacy to the group, as they have cultivated their own origins to which others citizens give credence²⁰. At the same time, the Prophet’s visit to check in with the group allowed the “members [to portray] themselves as the hereditary aristocracy of St. Louis²¹.” Being considered the fathers of the city and the pillars of rightful morality and economic development was extremely important to members of the Organization, and its relevance developed further with the creation of the parade and passing time. The Organization, then, took all of the steps it could to position themselves as rightful and legitimate holders of power over many aspects of St. Louis society.

As a result of this, an annual parade and ball was developed, with the intention of celebrating the yearly arrival of the Veiled Prophet. However, though not expressly stated, the parade and ball were intended additionally to promote and commemorate St. Louis’s civic progress, as well as the accomplishments of its elites. In the past, the parade and ball were

¹⁹ Spencer 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19; After many years of this, it is worth noting that many people were critical (to say the least) of allowing venues funded by public tax dollars holding private, exclusionist events; this is what forced the move of the ball from the Kiel Auditorium (a publicly owned sports arena, shut down for weeks at a time to facilitate preparing for the ball) to the Adams Mark Hotel, where the organization rents out space on its own dollar.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

surrounded by “Veiled Prophet Week,” a time during which various other organizations in St. Louis (the Historical Society, Shaw’s Botanical Gardens and the Art Museum, to name a few) dedicated time and space to highlighting accomplishments of the Organization²². The Organization desired the parade to become a rallying point around which St. Louisans could come together to celebrate their city; as they selected what would be portrayed in the parade, though, the Organization was able to redeclare their power by pronouncing what the city was to see and to believe. Spencer asserts this, in saying, “by having a parade every year that showed a make-believe Middle Eastern king and his court, the St. Louis elite asserted the value of social hierarchy both in the mythical kingdom of Khorassan and in the real world of St. Louis.²³”

An important idea that must be stated, as it contributed to the success of the parade, is the fact that the it was always intended to be, and did in fact become, a public spectacle. Thousands of people attended the parade annually, and the Organization felt very much that it was their responsibility to, and that they in fact did, educate “the masses,” as they were more informed with the culture, history and goings-on in St. Louis. This was done through the presentation of floats and tableaux that advocated and showed successful examples of progress; it must be said, though, that all the figures portrayed during the first fifty years of the parade were done so by men. Women functioned to represent ideals, like “wealth” or “industry,” but women themselves did not portray these roles, instead replaced by members of the organization, who felt women on floats would be inappropriate²⁴.

²² Business Men’s League of St. Louis, “Main Attractions of Veiled Prophet Week,” *Forward St. Louis*, September 21, 1914, p7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

Furthermore, underscored by their invented connection to the Prophet, “linking themselves with their famous ancestors, the members of the organization showed they were worthy of the same respect as their ancestors and that the bloodlines of St. Louis’s leadership remained unadulterated, thus lending themselves a sort of historical legitimacy.²⁵” As these facts were portrayed blatantly and obviously to the parade attendees, the masses couldn’t deny them, and in that, the Organization’s elitism and belief that power was rightfully theirs was again reified. Thus, the Organization declared itself implicitly as leaders of society, by controlling the parade and denying all women, all black men and even white men of a lower socioeconomic standing from membership, but also explicitly, in its creation of the Prophet and “connections” to the founders St. Louis that gave them the right to rule over St. Louis.

The organization today can best be described as, in the words of one of my interviewees, “a fraternity for dads.²⁶” Another woman informed me that “they have monthly ‘den parties’ which are like frat parties,” and another chimed in, telling me that “they have philanthropy, they have socials....they have meetings [but] they don’t have letters...they get drunk and act like idiots and dress up....it’s pretty much the same.²⁷” However, the organization is (reportedly) chock-full of secret rituals, ceremonies, and even has their own language for the titles of reigning executive board members (much like my own sorority, in fact.) Though the process is top-secret, from my research I have gleaned that, in order to be initiated into the organization, one needs to be in good standing within the community and “vouched for” by men who are already in the organization, much like what I have learned about the process of finding new members in the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁶ EY, Personal interview, tape-recorded by author. December 19, 2010.

²⁷ CL, Personal interview, tape recorded by author. December 20, 2010; HC, Personal interview, tape-recorded by author. December 19, 2010.

Greek system on Tufts' campus. Once you are in, you must pay annual dues to keep the organization afloat. By admitting new members as such, the organization has complete control of what kind of image it projects to the community, and its according reputation. Thus, the organization was, and continues to be, the epitome of patriarchal control in St. Louis society, with its white male supremacist tendencies and its exclusion of all who are not such.

III: The Ball

“Some years ago I was sent by the Globe- Democrat to report that annual recrudescence of hopeless ennui, that intumescence of anthropoid idiocy known as the Veiled Prophet's Ball. Everybody who entered that Circean circle was required to personate an ape—to wear a fulldress suit. I sacrificed on the altar of Col. McCullagh's "Temple of Truth," hired that same outfit which John Temple Graves leases when he tries to lecture, and attended the alleged festivities, looking like a combination undertaking-shop and shirt-factory ‘ad.’ skipping about or Cork-screw legs. I hid behind a fat man who was en regie, but by no means " out of sight" and resembled nothing so much as Mark Twain's frog with is belly full of bird shot. I took a brief survey of the assembled imbeciles, beat a hasty retreat, threw my borrowed plumage into the wood box and turned in a two-column "roast" that would have created a riot had it not burned a hole in the waste-basket. Thenceforth I was not detailed to spill social slobber over full-dress ‘functions.’²⁸”

-- William Cowper Brann, 19th century journalist and anti-elitist, self-proclaimed “iconoclast,” published 1919

More relevant to this discussion, though, is the founding of the yearly ball, the first of which also took place in 1878. As the official website reports, the ball was designated “to honor young women for their commitment to community service.²⁹” It became clear soon after its

²⁸ William Cowper Brann, *The Complete Works of Brann, the Iconoclast* (New York: The Brann Publishers, Inc, 1919), 231.

²⁹ “The Veiled Prophet Organization- Ball,” <http://www.veiledprophet.org/content/view/63/147/>; It must be said here that the community service aspect of the organization is evidently one that has been recently founded; I interviewed a 1972 debutante, and she had no recollection of community service playing a role in the organization whatsoever.

establishment, though, that recognizing community service was not the solitary nor most important goal of the ball; despite the organization's efforts to tout it as such, most agree with and recognize the legitimacy and truth in Spencer's statement, "the Veiled Prophet Organization's ball was founded specifically as a debutante ball," regardless of other claims of its intention³⁰. The ball soon evolved into more of a "coming out" ceremony for the teenage daughters of the members of the organization, giving society a chance to take a look at how they had turned out. Yearly, a new young woman was crowned "belle of the ball," a title eventually renamed the "Queen of Love and Beauty" (when the first official Queen was crowned in 1894), to serve with city of St. Louis along with the Veiled Prophet. As Life magazine described in 1946, the ball was "probably the most socially opulent function in the midwest," and it "attracted the creamiest layers of St. Louis society."³¹

The ball was never intended to be public, or to be seen by anyone else other than the elites of the organization and their families. This helped to increase public envy of the elites, as Spencer describes, and to motivate the lower classes to become like the economically powerful, so they would be allowed to participate, again reifying the social power structure the organization itself created³². However, it must be noted that, though it was a private ritual, the spectacle and what it stood to represent did not diminish in the slightest. Regardless of the event taking place solely in front of the elites, it has always been an opulent, lavish function- reminding the guests what they have (and what they deserve) while others don't. Though girls were being presented to society, and the marriage market, the process was equally important to

³⁰ Spencer 55.

³¹ Life Magazine, "Life goes to the Veiled Prophet Ball: St. Louis society turns out for its biggest event," October 28, 1946, 144.

³² Spencer 53.

their fathers, as it said something of them as well. This aspect is crucial to understanding the existence and continuance of the ball as an institution up until this day.

It appears that, in its early incarnations, a daughter's participation in the ball had much of a greater effect upon her father than anyone else. The first of the roles that the daughter played was as a representative of her father's economic status³³. As Spencer continues, the ball "was originally conceived as a place where women in a prominent man's family would act as public 'symbols of wealth' for him," so that everyone in attendance could make note of his prosperity³⁴. Additionally, as the debut of these young women marked their passage into adulthood and according newfound eligibility as wives, the balls provided an important venue by which they could be courted; this created an interesting kind of power for the fathers, as Spencer describes, because "by controlling the situations in which his daughter would meet members of the opposite sex (including, presumably some control over the list of young men invited to the ball), the father could make sure that she met the 'right kind' of man, someone from the same social class."³⁵ While participating in an important social ritual that celebrated the wealth and power of their class, elite St. Louis men could ensure that the same prosperity would come to their daughters, and additionally, that they would marry off respectably and not let their fathers down. A third important part of the ball that benefitted the fathers was the networking that a social event of this caliber could provide, as well as what could come from the coupling of a son and daughter of two powerful St. Louis families. As economics served to be the most important and most unifying common element of this group, it should not go unsaid just how important the formation

³³ While this was also the case then, this aspect of the ball has not evolved much, as these young women are still very much markers of their fathers' wealth.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

of business contacts was to these men. However, one must remember that many of these elements of the Organization and the ball are anachronistic to St. Louis; while other debutante balls exist around the country, it can be safely said that few, if any, have this unique history and procedure, as well as attitude, toward debuting.

However anachronistic the ball is, it has remained consistently so since its founding. While the ball itself has evolved over the last 125 years, it is still held to a particular custom and script that has not changed all that much as time goes past. Even watching footage of balls from anywhere from forty to fifty years ago, much of the dialogue is the same. All of the balls I have attended (three in the last five years) have been essentially identical. The entire event is white-tie for all in attendance, and despite its long existence in St. Louis, has only changed physical location three or four times. Taking almost two hours in total length, many aspects (production-wise) of the ritual are monumental; essentially, it is an elaborate on-stage play which the viewer is unsure whether to take seriously or not, a fact that is very telling about current attitude toward this tradition. As one of the debutantes I interviewed said, “there’s some other mumbo jumbo [in the announcements that are made]...all I know is Christopher and Curtis [her out-of-town cousins] thought it was hilarious. I did too. I was in the front row...and like, trying to stifle my laughter, and it was real hard³⁶.” As another woman continued, “my cousin Suzanne and my cousin Kimmie [both out-of-town cousins] went...and they were just like blown away they were like, what is going on here, they had never seen anything like it³⁷” Another deb said, as far as thoughts on the anachronisms,

³⁶ EW, Personal interview, tape-recorded by author. December 16, 2010.

³⁷ EB, Personal interview, tape-recorded by author. January 8, 2011.

“Well, going to school in the south, people know what debutante balls are...everybody knows what they are. And so when I was describing it, I was just like, I don’t know how much different this is from a normal debutante ball, but I’m gonna go with ‘take a normal debutante ball and make it weird.’ Like I mean the whole walking thing....it’s a two hour production. And most of it’s not the girls walking. Most of it is the crazy pirate looking guys that [march]³⁸.”

While it seems the ritual of the ball appears a little strange to visitors from out-of-town, clearly there are elements of the ball that seem idiosyncratic, anachronistic and peculiar to women participating as well.

An element of the ritual that is intended to be serious and traditional that is often not taken seriously is the gift given to debutantes by the Veiled Prophet. When the debutantes reach the end of the runway with their escorts, “your escort introduces you to the Veiled Prophet and says “Dear Grand Oracle, may I present to you Miss E E W” and then the Grand Oracle has some little cheesy thing prepared and hands you a token of his affection.³⁹” From my research, I’ve learned that the Prophet’s gift was presented at another time, and was something that people cherished for years to come- crystal ash trays, letter openers, other keepsakes to put around the house and remind you of your debut. While this tradition has continued to the present day, the importance the trinket holds and what it symbolizes has declined significantly. Recently, women have received a pendant, engraved with the letters VP and the year of their debut; nearly every woman I spoke to said she either lost it, misplaced it, or left it at home (while she returned to college). No one mentioned wearing it, or desiring to. One woman called it “stupid,” and another asked, giggling, “what, am I gonna wear a Veiled Prophet pendant around?”, as if to do so is the

³⁸ EC, Personal interview, tape-recorded by author. November 20, 2010.

³⁹ EW

most ridiculous thing ever⁴⁰. Furthermore, if another woman was seen wearing a VP pendant out around town, (though many people wouldn't know what it meant) people familiar with the ball might think she is obsessed with her social status and the fact she's a member of the elite, in that she felt the need to advertise it by wearing a VP necklace. Thus, some elements of yesteryear, like the gifts given by the VP to the girls, that the organization has attempted to hold on to and perpetuate today are clearly outdated and accordingly, hold little meaning to today's debutantes, because they seem silly or pointless, if not strange, and are, as a result, dismissed almost immediately.

More important than the Veiled Prophet's gift is the general outline of how the ball proceeds. As far as process of the ball goes, formality and procedure are very important, while at the same time, it is unconventional and vaguely quirky. The ball opens with a gaggle of court jesters and other animal wrangler types (though they only possess stuffed animals) that are intended to entertain the audience and remind them of past leisure activities while everyone files in. Following this, there is a large amount of marching: men in the Organization dressed as what can only be described as "assistants" to the Veiled Prophet are escorted in (by other members): they are the male members of his Court of Love and Beauty. One could surmise that these men are those who are influential in the organization, and these are honored spots to hold. Following them come the Bengal Lancers, a group of men from the Organization dressed as some kind of militia men of an earlier time, with red coats and faux mustaches, as well as large furry hats, whose responsibility, it seems, is to guard the Veiled Prophet. Additionally, they carry the flags of St. Louis, Missouri and the United States, and act as a kind of color guard. After them, the

⁴⁰ EC, EW

Prophet himself, also called the Grand Oracle or His Mysterious Majesty, is led down the runway, escorted by a few other men and pages (little girls, in costume, from local dance studios), who carry his robe (purple with ermine fur) so it won't trail on the ground, and to remind the audience of his elevated status. The member who will act as the Veiled Prophet for each year is selected by the organization in a secret ballot election, and he is supposedly the member who did the most philanthropic work for the group that year.

It must be noted here that both the Veiled Prophet and his assistants wear white lace masks that cover their faces, as well as pointed hats. Over the years, many comparisons have been drawn between the Organization and the KKK. As Eddie Silva describes in his article in the *Riverfront Times*, a local St. Louis newspaper, the original drawing of the Prophet, published in *The Missouri Republican* in 1878 with the announcement of the founding of the organization, depicted a man “[standing] in a white sheet and a white pointed hat; in one hand he brandishes a pistol, in the other a shotgun, with yet another shotgun leaning nearby at the ready:” this is obviously a description of, simultaneously, an armed Klansmen, and the Veiled Prophet⁴¹. As Spencer sees it, it is almost impossible to envision “how the KKK reference could have been more blatant.⁴²” Though the VP Organization explicitly denies any kind of connection between the two, it is not unnoticed by the public at large. Indeed, many groups have protested and picketed the ball over the years, beginning in the first year the event happened (with African Americans picketing the dominance of the white elite) continuing into the 1960s, when the ball was picketed by civil and women's rights groups⁴³.

⁴¹ Eddie Silva, “Behind the Veil,” 28 June 2000, <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/2000-06-28/culture/behind-the-veil/>

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Spencer 74.

From my firsthand observations, this processional is to be very rigid and closely follows a script, as if the time-honoredness of this tradition gives it legitimacy. Interestingly, though there is an announcer for the rest of the ball, this procession is done only with the accompaniment of a band. Following this, former queens who are in attendance and desire to do so are escorted down the runway to seats up on stage. All of the women who are presented at the ball, either former queens or current debutantes, are escorted by a member of the organization; this member is not allowed to be the father of the girl walking. After the former queens comes the retiring queen, or the girl who was crowned the year before. She begins by bowing to the audience, and then is escorted by a man and accompanied by pages, who are responsible for holding her train. Upon reaching the end of the runway, she bows to the Veiled Prophet and takes a seat next to him; the two are presiding over the event. After she is presented, the current debutantes begin to “walk,” the verb that is used colloquially to indicate participation in the event. While the girls are presented in alphabetical order, certain women are selected to walk out first (ignoring alphabetical order); these are the daughters of prominent members of the organization. However, these ladies are not to be confused with the Special Maids and the Queen herself, the women who make up the Veiled Prophet’s Court of Love and Beauty. Each year, five or six women are selected to make up this Court: four or five Special Maids, and the Queen of Love and Beauty.

IV: The Current Relevance of the Ball

“As far as I could tell, there was only one ceremony in the world that rivaled the Veiled Prophet Ball, and it as the coronation of Elizabeth I. What would it have been like to be the darling of that ball? To have a rich father who wanted to show you off? To walk like a queen through a crowd of well-wishers?”⁴⁴”

⁴⁴ Joanna Campbell Slan, *Photo, Snap, Shot: Book 3 of Kiki Lowenstein Scrap-n-craft Mysteries*, (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2010) 114

-- Joanna Campbell Slan, author, quoted from *Book 2 of her Kiki Lowenstein Scrap-n-craft Mystery series*.

Today, the relevance of the existence of the ball, let alone the organization, is a sensitive issue that has become divisive within St. Louis society. Though no one can abolish the organization aside from the organization itself, today's ball is an event marked by disapproval by many. This is because the purpose of the ball at this moment has evolved from that of the original at the time of the ball's founding. Even though the *Ladue News* describes the event, for the young women, as "marking their formal entrance into society," it has become clear that for the women who participate, that is not the case⁴⁵. There are many other ways in which girls can be noticed by society other than being a debutante: athletic, academic and community service achievements, to name a few examples. When the ball took place in the 1950s, and the years before that, for example, it was very important to upper-class St. Louis life, and had a real purpose as a coming-of-age ritual for those women who participated. It had many functions: it was often an avenue in which women found their future husbands, it marked them as "adults" within the community (creating new opportunities for them) and it was an opportunity for people to make social connections (especially the fathers of the debutantes). With the evolution of the ball through time has come a decline in its functional significance as a ritual. The ball is no longer needed to find marriage prospects, and girls have been on dates long before their debuts. The large-scale social ramifications that once came with walking have almost virtually disappeared, leaving in their wake the ball as an avenue for fathers to lavish upon their daughters and present them, with no consequence if the girl opts out. There is not, nor ever was, a counterpart male ritual so daughters remain posited as the primary social representative of the

⁴⁵ "2009 Veiled Prophet Specials and Queen," *Ladue News*, December 23, 2009, <http://laduenews.mycapture.com/mycapture/folder.asp?event=914479&CategoryID=50191>

family, leaving them as the main means by which these wealthy men display their efficacy in creating their own families. More clearly put, in the past, the debutante and the father would gain social leverage from participating; now, the daughter already holds that leverage because of the social changes that have happened. All that is left is the glory that will come to a father for having his daughter presented, and one must ask, is this done at her expense?

This ritual, then, only holds significance in that it brings esteem to the father and it satisfies the girls' desire for attention and a fun evening about them; its original function as an avenue in which girls are revealed to society as women has almost disappeared. This was made abundantly clear in the work I did speaking to recent debutantes. As one interviewee, when asked if being a debutante has a particular significance to her as a woman, said, in a rather drastic assessment,, "No...I couldn't give two s**ts;" when pressed about if she felt different after, she replied with "Hmph, no." and said that it played no role whatsoever in her life⁴⁶. Other women had similar responses, though perhaps not to the same cynical degree. All of the women interviewed basically flat-out agreed that no, they did not feel more womanly after; as one girl stated, "It wasn't a coming out into society; I didn't change or anything⁴⁷." Another said, "it was just kinda a fun thing but I don't feel like more or less of a woman because I did it⁴⁸." It is interesting that at this time, women seem to feel almost snarky and disdainful toward the idea of the ritual, when in the passed sentiment toward it was marked with awe and reverence. What is the reason for the change? Perhaps because women today have always been taught that we can achieve as much, if not more, than our male counterparts, we do not dream as much, or think as

⁴⁶ EW

⁴⁷ CL

⁴⁸ HC

highly, of becoming Queen of the VP ball; we do not need the connections it brings to be successful in the world. Because the ball is now much more of a leisure activity or optional evening of fun than a transformative experience, the seriousness that the event had previously has declined. Though it once was a ritual that marked the turnover of young girl to woman, the VP ball has lost some of its importance in that aspect.

The same kind of attitude pervaded the interviews regarding the ball as a transformative experience from adolescence to adulthood in general. As one woman noted, other life experiences were more transformative than this one, saying “I feel more like an adult because I’m 21 than because I went through debutante-hood⁴⁹.” This attitude came up more than once in my interviews; as another woman said, “[it’s] maybe sort of a rite of passage, but...I would see other things as much more so, like graduating high school or college or something like that.⁵⁰” Another woman continued this idea, in saying “it’s not like graduation where you’re like, omigod moving on to the next thing...it’s just like, oh, here I am world. Look at me.⁵¹” Clearly, the fact that girls have other life events to commemorate and celebrate their achievements has contributed to the decline in importance of this debutante ball.

The ball seemed to be more important to many girls because of its function as a marker of the passage of time. As one woman said, the ball was more a milemarker of growing up than a transformative experience, as “you realize you’re growing up just because you have been looking for that day for so long” and it finally arrived; as she continues, “it’s not because I’ve presented myself to society that I am a grown up,” but she realized she was an adult “because this has been

⁴⁹ CL

⁵⁰ EY

⁵¹ LH, Personal interview, tape-recorded by author. December 21, 2010.

something I always planned on doing and watch[ed] other girls do when I was younger.” and when it was her turn, it felt like, “I’m them [the older girls] now.⁵²” Other girls have noted its importance because it’s “something to feel connected to [one’s] youth,” and to the city of St. Louis itself⁵³. As another woman said, “the VP is that thing like holding everyone on to St. Louis, and then after sophomore year when you come out, it’s almost like okay, now I can do whatever I want,” that as a woman, you’ve been recognized as such by St. Louis society and no longer “need to be in front of all of St. Louis again.⁵⁴” By participating, you’ve acknowledged your place in St. Louis and it’s role in your life; after doing so, you can “cut strings from St. Louis” and move on with your life⁵⁵. After all, as another woman said, “you can’t be a debutante forever.⁵⁶” In this way, then, the ritual does have a symbolic purpose: it is a reminder of where you came from and where you been, but at the same time, a reminder that you are ready to leave that place and can start a life elsewhere.

These girls seem to have a very lighthearted view of the ball, seeing it as something that is fun and commemorates youth, but not as something holding a large amount of purpose or sentimental value. This is not the case for all debutantes: many women to whom I spoke mentioned “girls who take it seriously” in our conversations. Though I have not yet figured out exactly who those girls are, it appears that, for them, the issue of being a debutante is life-or-death; they’re the girls who have dreamed about it since they were young, who want everything to be more than perfect, whose year is resting on this night. As one of my interviewees said, “if

⁵² HC

⁵³ CL

⁵⁴ EB

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ HC

they're ["serious" girls] not one of the first ones announced, like the special ones, and if they're not a special special special one or like, queen or whatever, it ruins their year.⁵⁷ Clearly, for these women, the ball holds an essential place in defining their understanding of their importance as woman and as people, and furthermore, that they care about what such a title would mean. In her essay "Miss America: Whose Ideal?" Dawn Perlmutter juxtaposes a discussion of the Cinderella story with that of beauty pageants, creating an analogy useful for the analysis of "serious" girls, noting "the stepsisters...who flock hopefully to the ball leave empty-handed, their self-esteem diminished along with their resources. This is the fairy-tale version of a beauty pageant, where young bodies are displayed, paraded and then divided into winners and losers⁵⁸." If one sees being awarded the title of Special Maid or Queen as "winning," then the majority of women participating in the ball are, in fact, losing. But, to most of them, it doesn't matter, because the experience either has little transformative value, or because titles aren't of importance to them; they appear to be more concerned with having fun than being the star of the show. However one sees it, this divide in theories of importance and unimportance as far as the ball goes shows how it is a different experience for each woman that walks, and how remnants of attitudes towards the ball that were prevalent fifty years ago still exist.

As positive changes have happened over the course of the last fifty years, for example the movement toward garnering equal rights for women, and more of a concept of equality between women and men in society, changes in treatment of women in the ball have followed. However, this evolution cannot be attributed to changes in the ball itself, but rather to changes in society.

⁵⁷ EW

⁵⁸ "Miss America: Whose Ideal?" Dawn Perlmutter in *Beauty Matters*, edited by Peg Zeglin Brand, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2000, 68.

And, must be said that this is a situation that possesses both positives and negatives, as it creates an expectation of a traditional type of behavior on the part of daughters, and encourages conventional and “appropriate” womanhood, while at the same time, gives girls their “moment in the spotlight.” As one of the girls who chose to sit it out said during her interview, when asked if she felt left out, “it wasn’t even like, I felt left out, I remember actually feeling relief when I saw everyone walking, I was like, thank goodness I’m not up there⁵⁹.” At this moment in time, there are no strings attached to participating (or not participating) in the VP ball; if one chooses not to walk, she doesn’t lose any kind of social standing-- while she might miss out on a fun experience (as most I interviewed reported the event was), there are no serious repercussions, meaning, it’s not as if she will not find a husband because she doesn’t participate. One would not lose any kind of legitimate life opportunity if she were to choose not to walk.

However, one must still wonder to what degree the objectification of debutantes as women has continued. While the situation of women who are participating the the ball has changed significantly in many ways, primarily in its meaning to those who walk and the social ramifications the event causes, it must also be said that many elements of the ritual that have continued to this day function to objectify these woman, and reify not only traditional patriarchal systems, but also the conventional definition of what it means to appropriately be a woman, as many parts of the ball, from the idea of escorts to the preparation that these girls do, perpetuate the traditional discourse on what it means to be a woman-- passive, beautified, aesthetically attractive, servile. Why then, do girls desire a “moment in the spotlight” in this atmosphere? What are the repercussions of being the agent of representation for their fathers? Why do girls

⁵⁹ EB

continue to walk if there is little social significance of the ritual? These are important questions that are difficult to answer; in short, though, one could surmise that these desires exist because these women are playing into the traditional conventions of womanhood, and what it means to be a woman. At the same time, representing their fathers economic welfare is not an empowering force, but instead, one that subjugates them to patriarchal control.

V: Image and Presentation

“Cinderella could never have been loved by the Prince while dressed in rags..packaging counts, no matter how worthy the inner woman⁶⁰.”

“Because beauty is asymmetrically assigned to the feminine role, women are defined as much by their looks as by their deeds. To be womanly is to be beautiful and conversely, to be unattractive is to be unwomanly. Good looks are prerequisite for femininity but incidental to masculinity. This asymmetry produces different social expectations and different psychological consequences for each sex⁶¹.”

*- Rita Jackaway Freedman, author of many books about women's lives today, quoted from her book *Beauty Bound, an analysis of how beauty controls women's everyday lives**

Regardless of the lack of value in the ball, girls who participate still have significant concerns about how they are perceived by those watching. One of the most bothersome (though unsurprising) concerns that these women had regarding their walking experience was the reaction of the audience toward their appearance and how they would be seen during their presentation. This ties in with Goffman's theory of how social interaction is developed based on what gestures one makes, and what one gives off. Clearly, giving off a certain kind of appearance is essential to these women, as it affects how those watching will perceive them, and the

⁶⁰ Rita Jackaway Freedman, *Beauty Bound*, (New York: Prentice Hall, 1985), 66.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

conclusions that will be drawn accordingly. These concerns about appearance ranged from preoccupations about perceived physical “flaws” to worries about posture and poise.

Everyone was very concerned physically about how they would appear; one woman, who reported feeling “self-conscious about [her] arms” started lifting weights before the event, and “drinking SlimFast shakes” to keep her weight down⁶². Another woman described the agony of thinking “F***, I'm fat” right before the ball, because she “had to have [her] super nice extremely fancy pants dress let out because [she] gained four (read: at least seven) pounds between summer and Thanksgiving break, thank you, college,” a fact that proved to be traumatizing for her self-confidence⁶³.

The same woman, as she is a swimmer, expressed concern about how her swimmer body and the affair were related, as far as glove selection goes. Inheriting them from her grandmother, a “size 00” who “definitely didn’t have swimmer arms,” she described how fighting her “man arms into girl gloves” was a difficult process, one that her family helped her with “by physically pushing [her] arm fat into [the] kidskin leather gloves,” resulting in her “arm “muscle” explod [ing] out of each button.⁶⁴” Stating that “swim season and deb balls are like oil and water,” it is clear that this trying experience was significantly frustrating for a young woman trying to appear “appropriate” socially, and that as time has passed and women’s bodies have changed, it has become more of a struggle for women to conform to traditional standards of beauty, and additionally, that society expecting them to do so is unrealistic and furthermore, unfair, as it is

⁶² HC

⁶³ CM, Personal interview, via e-mail message to author. February 3, 2011.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

detrimental to these women's self-confidence and self-esteem⁶⁵. Because of this woman's move away from passivity to a participation in sports and being active in life, her athletic body became a difficult thing to negotiate with traditional aspects of female beauty, included emphases on a petite size, an unimposing physique, and little muscle tone-- things that made wearing her grandmother's gloves difficult.

However, gloves are a difficult (but necessary) accessory- as the ball is white tie, everyone wears them, even men. Gloves are also a good indicator of social status; guests with less money purchase less expensive gloves, perhaps satin or cotton. The debutantes and others who can afford to purchase white leather gloves; the more buttons, the more expensive the glove, and the more difficult to put on. According to my research, these can cost five hundred dollars or more. Gloves are very particular, must be tailored, are quite expensive, and once one puts them on, she needs people to help her with things, for fear that they get stained. And once you put them on (I can tell you from personal experience) you do not take them off until the event is over. As Rita Jackaway Freedman describes in her book Beauty Bound, "Victorian women wore gloves both indoors and out. The covered hand (like the bound foot) signaled leisure even while requiring it⁶⁶." Gloves effectively connote passivity, as they restrict a woman from performing even the most basic actions: eating, drinking, fixing one's makeup, checking one's hair. The last thing anyone would want to do right before their big walk (aside from soil her dress) would be to spill on or discolor her gloves.

As far as other beauty preparations go, every woman I spoke to reported getting a spray tan (or spending time in a real tanning bed), which apparently took a lot of effort. A woman

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Freedman 88.

reported doing “a “test run” before Thanksgiving that year to see how many days “post-tan” would look the most “natural”,’ though she noted that “until they learn to spray-freckle us, spray-tans will never look “natural” on we redheads.⁶⁷” Additionally, every woman went out and had her hair and makeup done; the hair process also was difficult for many. Although most people did a “test run” for hair as well, one woman had to have her hair done twice as it wasn’t right the first time, another had to have hers cut precisely a certain number of days before, and a third said that “by the time [she] left [the hair] studio, she looked like she was on [her] way to an audition for a role on *Real Housewives of Dallas*,” with her large hair and “oompaloompa skin⁶⁸.” As Freedman says, ““What’s on a woman’s head may be judged as critically as what’s *in* it.⁶⁹” Thus, hair is to be something that is essential to girls for two reasons: a) it is one of the first things noticed on the female body, because it is so obviously there, and b) the way which one styles her hair says something about her social location, and perception-wise, how much she cares about herself. For example, someone with frizzy hair is perceived to be the kind of woman who does not care to take care of her locks, is unkempt or sloppy, or is unfamiliar with proper styling techniques, connoting ignorance and laziness. As Debra L Gilman says in her book *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture*, “women’s physical deficiencies (such as unruly hair, cellulite, wrinkled skin, or excess weight) have come increasingly to be viewed as evidence of moral weakness⁷⁰.” Obviously, one would not want to appear to have compromised moral values in front of all of St. Louis society (those that matter, at least); it would reflect poorly on

⁶⁷ CM

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Freedman 82.

⁷⁰ Debra L. Gilman, *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 4.

her parents and imply something negative about her upbringing. Gilman continues with another valid point, saying “women value hair that coincides with identity. If their hairstyle misidentifies their age, income, occupation or education, they feel unsettled and self-conscious⁷¹.”

It is not only hair on one’s head that can make women uncomfortable about their appearance. The woman who was quoted, the debutante who is also a swimmer, continued, saying “the most stressful part of the evening was reconciling with the fact that, because it was swim season, [she] was not going to be shaving [her] legs for my formal debut into society,” remarking sarcastically, “very ladylike, indeed.⁷²” Shaving one’s legs and other areas of the body is conventionally taken as a sign of womanhood; even if no one sees them (which people wouldn’t in a full length ball gown) the omission of this ritual could render a woman uncomfortable, which, in turn, could affect her self-esteem and demeanor on the runway, as it appeared to for this young woman. Freedman affirms that, “a woman who rejects makeup, stops shaving her legs or stops wearing a bra redefines herself and is relegated to a special category. Her pale lips or hairy limbs are an anomaly⁷³.” To participate appropriately, appearance wise, in the VP ball, one must buy into all of the conventions of traditional womanhood and the appropriate grooming techniques that come with it.

Lucy Ferriss, author of the memoir Unveiling the Prophet: The Misadventures of a Reluctant Debutante, who walked in the ball of 1972, describes in detail a contentious issue about which she butted heads with her mother before the ball: appropriate undergarments. As she describes, after purchasing her dress, her mother demanded ““Will you need a padded

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷² CM

⁷³ Freedman 51.

bra?...Sometimes the shape isn't right...without a proper bra⁷⁴." Clearly, Ferriss' mother was concerned about the appearance of her daughter's self-confessed "small breasts," and whether or not they would look socially acceptable during her debut⁷⁵. Freedman continues this thought, describing how preoccupation with one's breasts reifies the idea of what it means to be an appropriate woman:

"Having been taught that feminine beauty means having full, softly rounded breasts, women judge themselves against this standard. Missing the mark, they put on padded bras or suffer silicone implants. As flat chests disappear, reality is replaced with a replica, and the truth of the [idyllic] myth is confirmed. Myths thus function as self-fulfilling prophecy and are therefore dangerous self-perpetuating⁷⁶."

By wearing a padded bra (in order to appear "womanly") Ferriss perpetuated the standard of what is considered an acceptable demonstration of femininity. Even though Ferriss "broke one of the clothing rules that my mother had set for me," she herself was concerned about how she would look, saying "I prayed I would look pretty in my dress.⁷⁷" Her mother was very precise and shamelessly told Ferriss about what she should wear to look appropriate: as she describes,

"I ought not to wear purple, my mother had cautioned me in high school, because it made my skin look sallow. Likewise, I was not to wear low scoop necks that exposed my unsightly collarbone. V-necks drew attention to my weak chin. Dirndl skirts poofed out in front and made me look as if I had a belly. My hair must be kept trimmed above the shoulders lest anyone see how thin and fine it was. Best not pull it back either, for fear I might expose my ears, which stuck out a bit...I did a funny thing with my mouth that made me look unattractive. I must never wear high heels, which made me taller than any boy I would ever have the luck to meet.⁷⁸"

⁷⁴ Ferriss 9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁶ Freedman 14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 28, 40.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

She too participated in the traditional womanly preparation rituals as the women who walked almost forty years after her did, describing how before the ball she “began the methodical process of getting ready: hair, nails, face” and “roll[ing her] hair onto blue Velcro tubes.”⁷⁹ Clearly, though Ferriss walked in a different decade than my interviewees, the experience is similar across the board. Her concerns, and ones similar to them, still exist to this day, exemplifying how the cult of female beauty has not changed at all.

Additionally, much concern was described by the debutantes regarding their behavior while walking and at the event. All the women expressed feelings of wanting to make their parents proud by carrying themselves “appropriately.” One girl commented that, while walking “you can’t look down, because that’s disgraceful,” and another described wanting “to get to the end as quickly as possible so that [she] didn’t fall⁸⁰.” In short, concerns of looking like “a buffoon” pervaded the experiences of many⁸¹. Ferriss herself describes how she “walked as [her] mother had taught [her] as if a string suspended [her] through the center of [her] head,” and was able to bow properly because she and the other girls “learn[ed], in Upper School dance class, [how] to bow to the floor and rise again without [their] hips wobbling or [their] knees cracking,” ie how to accurately represent feminine virtues of grace and poise; cracking knees and wobbling hips, it is implied here, would be dreadfully unladylike.⁸² Additionally, many women commented that they were apprehensive about tripping and falling while walking, and what an embarrassment it would be to do so. Many girls described feeling nervous, for various other

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁰ EW, CL.

⁸¹ CM

⁸² Ferriss 111, 57.

reasons, one even stating that walking down the runway was especially nerve-wracking because she's "not a model," implying that they are the traditional standard of acceptable beauty within this country.⁸³ Another woman joked how she "gave [her]self a little pat on the back" for being "poised" during her walk⁸⁴. Other girls rehearsed walking in heels and practiced bowing, so they "would be able to keep [their] shoulders back and walk gracefully⁸⁵." Other concerns about walking down the runway included "smil[ing] and try[ing] to look pretty because [that] is when your picture's getting taken," and behaving "appropriately" once you get to the end of the runway, when you take your seat down⁸⁶. One woman noted that once she got there, she tried to keep in mind that she should "[sit] patiently, like a grown woman," which evidently proved to be a difficult task for most, despite their best intentions to appear as such (the whole affair is a quite long one, lasting almost two hours- for the girls who walk first, that is a long time to sit on stage).⁸⁷ Furthermore, that is the prime time to judge those coming down the runway after you and gossip with your neighbor about it, and a likely time to be struck with the giggles, as the pomp and circumstance continues as the event goes on-- two things that would prevent you from sitting collectedly with poise and grace. Clearly, the concerns of the debutantes in this case relate to whether or not they would encompass successfully the trappings of appropriate womanhood to a degree which would be considered acceptable to the community.

VI: Judgement and Appearance

⁸³ CL

⁸⁴ CM

⁸⁵ HC

⁸⁶ LH

⁸⁷ CL

“Beauty is more salient in the perception of femininity than masculinity... A woman’s beauty is constantly anticipated, encouraged, sought and regarded in a wide range of situations... beauty transformations are used to help women look more womanly, and therefore, more acceptable⁸⁸.”

The same kind of attitude, one of concern about one’s image and how she was being presented, was prevalent with regards to dress selection, a part of the process that most girls considered to be the most important element. The dress is one of the most time-consuming and expensive elements of the whole process--girls start planning their dress at least six months prior to the event, if they haven’t already been dreaming about the dress for their whole lives. As one of my interviewees put it, “I do not want this dress to be better than my wedding dress, like wedding dress is like the top, and then there’s VP;” clearly, though it should not top one’s wedding dress, it is most likely a very close second. From my research, I have learned that most women have their dresses custom-designed and custom-made at a shop called R&M Designs, by a woman named Connie. Evidently, she has been doing dresses for years and is therefore the person to go to, the best of the best. Additionally, (and speaking of wedding dresses), some women try on bridal gowns, from either boutiques or department stores like Saks Fifth Avenue or Neiman Marcus, and have them dyed the color of their choosing. However, sometimes, the color a woman ends up with is not her first choice. The most popular shops that sell dresses, as well as the ones that make them, keep track of what colors debutantes have already chosen, and other women are not allowed to choose that same color. As one woman described,

“The sales associate at Berrybridge [a bridal store] had another client...who was choosing between two dresses. The one she ended up choosing was made by the same designer (Romona Keveza), [as my dress] and, because she had made her appointment first, she got first choice of fabric. I would have liked to wear the dress I got in a crimson raw silk,

⁸⁸ Freeman 10, 51.

but wound up getting it in champagne because I wasn't allowed to purchase the same [color or] fabric as another girl⁸⁹.”

Additionally, no one is permitted to wear purple, because that is the color the Veiled Prophet wears, and no one is allowed to wear colors that are “too dark,” like black-- I never managed to figure out why that was the case. Some women choose to purchase their dress “off the rack,” but it is not a common occurrence; when I asked one interviewee why, our conversation went like this:

NCC: Did it ever occur to you to look in a store?

ETC: Um no.

NCC: You never thought about picking something off the rack? It never even....

ETC: No, no. Just because, *nobody* does⁹⁰.

Thus, it is clear that most women choose to have their dresses made, and it must be said here that these dresses can cost thousands of dollars; often, there is no budget at all. As the same woman just quoted told me, “I was given a \$1000 budget, which for those kind of dresses is not much⁹¹.” It makes sense, though, that fathers would spend so much money on these dresses, considering these girls will be presented in front of all of St. Louis and they want to appear as affluent as possible.

Perhaps more important than the price of the dress is the importance it held for the girls walking. One woman went so far as to say it getting to have a dress made was the reason she was participating in the event⁹². Four others said it was the most important part of the whole process. Out of the eight women I interviewed, four made comments along the lines of “I wanted to

⁸⁹ CM

⁹⁰ EC

⁹¹ EC

⁹² EC

design my own custom-made dress-- how many people get to do that?" For these women, this dressmaking process was a chance to feel like a celebrity, be treated like a princess, to dress themselves up like we did Barbie as children. They were, essentially, playing dress-up, reflecting traditional attitudes toward girlhood and femininity- that we like to look pretty, that we dream of fancy occasions, that we are personally invested in our appearances being aesthetically pleasurable. Most women were very particular with the designs of their dress, and many had specific demands about how they would look, and how they would be perceived, in the final product. The process of designing their own dress gives these debutantes the power that being a debutante suggests they deserve: they have the resources-- both economic and social-- to command respect, be catered to, and have their wishes granted. Designing their own dress made these women feel special, a fact that is obviously noted in the above-quoted statement, when these women acknowledged that they were in a unique position, one that is rare and exclusive, as most others do not have the need or resource to do the same. The focus on the dress, then, is one of the most telling aspects of the whole event, as far as how it speaks to contemporary femininity, in that we see conventional qualities of womanhood reified in the fervor of the debutantes to dress up, to be treated like a princess, to essentially take interest in all things most people have associated as in the women's sphere.

When discussing taste level as far as dresses go, one woman reported that they must possess a certain level of conservativeness, and though no one actually approves the dresses, neither the dressmakers nor the stores would ever "let someone wear something that, like..."

could be considered too risqué⁹³.” Clearly, you want to present yourself as a pure, elegant, mature woman who others should think highly of-- not cheap, or easy. As Dawn Perlmutter says,

“It is socially acceptable to be displayed before the public as a beauty object and socially unacceptable to be displayed as a sex object. The distinction lies somewhere in the patriarchal definition of “wholesomeness” which perpetuates the ideology of the good girl versus the bad girl or, more accurately, the virgin versus the whore⁹⁴.”

Thus, one must look like a ‘good girl’ on stage, by appropriately covering the correct places and styling herself conservatively, not showing too much cleavage or makeup that could be considered “slutty,” not wearing “hooker heels” or having “sex hair.” Frankly, these women are asked to desexualize themselves, causing them to appear more as girls than actual women.

Juxtaposed with the expectations of these women and the ball as a testament to their upbringing, an interesting and confusing space is created- they are supposed to look grown up, but not too grown up. It is one that exists socially (in all its complexity) today, with the tough transition that many women face at a similar age (sans the presence of a debutante ball), or even with young teen girls’ fascination for things that many would consider “too old,” (like musical artist Ke\$ha’s lyrics about partying and drinking, or all the sexual references in music today).

Not only was age-appropriateness thought of when dresses were being selected, but virtually every woman I spoke with mentioned a physical concern she had in mind while designing her dress. From lankiness to “arm fat” to wide hips to pale skin, these women went to great lengths to tailor their dresses around their perceived flaws, while maintaining that they wanted to look anywhere from hot to elegant to classy. Why? Because they know that they’re

⁹³ EC

⁹⁴ Dawn Perlmutter, “Miss America: Whose Ideal?” in *Beauty Matters*, edited by Peg Zeglin Brand, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2000, 164.

going to be walking in front of hundreds of people who will be judging them, and many consider the dress to be the most important part, the thing upon which all of the judging that comes with the ball rests. As Freeman says, “Makeup and stylish clothes demonstrate that a woman is committed to femininity, cares enough to look her very best, wants to be attractive to others, and is willing to take pains to prove it⁹⁵.” By being attentive to their appearances and what kind of dress they choose (and being *very* particular about it), these women are reifying the typical cult of femininity.

Though judgement proliferates the ball as an experience, the dress is often the most notable and outstanding thing about the girl wearing it- and she knows it. As one of my interviewees put it, “everything rides on the dress, like that’s what people look at, they’re not like, “oh she’s really pretty naturally,” it’s like, “look at that dress,” so you wanna be the one [whose] dress is the best.⁹⁶” Though they themselves are being judged, the debutantes I spoke to had no problems being critical of others. One woman described how, while sitting on stage after walking, she and one of her friends “channeled [their] inner Simon Cowells and made “refreshingly honest” comments about people’s taste levels. Just like fashion week, but better!⁹⁷” Here one can see an example of value judgements made by appearance- poor taste is not desirable, and deserves a harsh critique. Another woman follows up, saying how when the ball starts “suddenly everybody is the fashion police and everybody judges you⁹⁸.” As one woman puts it, the ball “is basically a fashion show,” where “you judge people by what they’re

⁹⁵ Freeman 51.

⁹⁶ LH

⁹⁷ CM

⁹⁸ EW

wearing....it's not mean judging, it could be if you want it to be...but it's kinda good to see how girls choose to portray themselves⁹⁹.” As one of my interviewees who didn't attend this year, though her mother did, described,

“I can tell you the day after all this happened, my mom called me...she was telling me about all the dresses, and [how] surprisingly [she] really liked AW's dress ...meaning it in a way [like she] wouldn't have expected her to have good taste, [and] EB looked like such a slut, she came out there sticking her boobs out, she was flaunting around [and] Mrs. R [said] that that's not a new thing for her,...and then LH, [she] was the queen this year...she was like, L looked so gorgeous, she was so simply dressed, she looked amazing...[and XYZ] overdid themselves, [B] tried to look too dressy....C is so large she had no right wearing that dress...¹⁰⁰”

With this, we reach the crux of the issue: the outfit that a girl chooses to wear is an entity that reveals something about her. To be a woman, to please your parents, to look appropriate, you need to send across that sort of message, by dressing that way. For example, one woman said, “I mean honestly I just wanted something that would make me look good and not like I was five years old;” she wanted her dress to reflect how she felt on the inside, and what kind of self she was trying to present¹⁰¹. This was even better emphasized when a interviewee described how she wanted her dress to “be....symbolic of [her]. Simple, yet elegant but...[cobalt] blue- you know, like still in your face¹⁰².” Clearly, when thinking about what she wanted her dress to look like, this woman made sure that she had formed a conception of how she wanted others to perceive her, decided on what kind of self to put forward to be judged. After doing such, she could design a dress that fit in with this perception. This ties in with Goffman's theory of relative perception:

⁹⁹ HC

¹⁰⁰ EB

¹⁰¹ EW

¹⁰² HC

she is sending off signals of simplicity and elegance, as well as ones that imply boldness (bright blue) but at the same time, restraint. While the audience sees her dress, this is what they are intended to understand. However, if she does not accomplish the message of simplicity and elegance that she desires, she might just be perceived as dominant, bold and brazen- traits that are not typically very feminine. Clothing, and appearance in general, is very important to women- not only because society mandates it, but also because of the psychological effects it has on one's person. It's been said many times before that when you look good, you feel good; that could be the case here.

Being put together, wearing tailored clothes, paying attention to hair and makeup- these are all signifiers of a successful, well-adjusted woman, one who knows how to interact with society and fit in appropriately: the same message that women walking in the VP are trying to convey about themselves. As Freeman describes, "good-looking people associated with good things," and "as judged in numerous studies, attractive people are thought to have greater warmth and poise, to be more sensitive, kind, sincere and successful, and to lead more fulfilled lives."¹⁰³ If this is the case, then one better appear attractive, so that those watching perceive her as a woman who has been raised successfully and appropriately; walking in the VP is expressing a desire to impress the community and be validated by it. One will only receive this validation and create the right kind of impression if she appears put together, attractive, and accordingly, well brought up. Furthermore, she notes, "in young women, beauty correlates positively with their degree of happiness and self-esteem and correlates negatively with their degree of neuroticism." Thus, if one is to be seen as well-adjusted and enjoying life aka, a "perfect daughter," she must

¹⁰³ Freeman 7.

appear beautiful. While most people are probably not consciously aware of these facts, they have internalized them to a large degree, or at least understand the implications of being attractive. No wonder, then, that these women are so preoccupied with their appearances!

Many insecurities that women have can be reduced with beautifying practices; as Freeman continues, “Women enact the popular image for the pleasure of being like others and being liked by others. Beauty transformations produce the security of group acceptance while they reduce the fear of social rejection¹⁰⁴.” She continues, noting how “girls report that peer and adult acceptance are the main factors that make them feel important. They are less likely than boys to name competitive achievement as a source of personal esteem. Their fantasies are dominated by themes of beauty and popularity.” Being beautiful means being liked, being accepted, being well-raised; essentially, all of the things that the VP ball is trying to show. And furthermore, if these things are validated by the ball, girls feel rewarded and successful. If peer and adult acceptance are most important to girls, the VP ball is a legitimate place to find it; being beautiful in order to win it? Well, that’s the price one has to pay. As Freeman says, “responsible women are told they owe it to themselves and to their families to make the effort. Those who ignore their potential have only themselves to blame.¹⁰⁵” In saying this, she describes the pressure and obligation that many women feel to appear attractive, one that is demonstrated by the concerns of the debutantes I spoke with regarding their appearance. If one has greater “potential,” as an elite woman does, the consequence is greater for ignoring it. Because this would be identified on the VP stage in front of all of elite St. Louis, one most likely should not take the risk because of the serious implications of appearing anything less than perfectly

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

groomed. People already gossip about and judge beautifully put together debutantes enough; the degree to which whispers would permeate the room should an unkempt, unmade-up, ill-dressed “woman” stomp down the runway is unthinkable. One can see here that being beautiful, being put together, being well-dressed all mean being womanly. Thus, in order to look like they’re “turned out right,” to make their parents proud, these debutantes must be attractive- from head to toe, from their dress to their hair to their makeup to their shoes to their gloves- so that society perceives them as such, bringing all the implications that come with such beauty.

VI: The Queen and Special Maids

“Connie nodded. ‘I researched the Veiled Prophet shortly after we arrived. The Queen of Love and Beauty serves as the Veiled Prophet’s emissary. She’s chosen from hundreds of young maidens--’

Maidens? The last time I heard that word I was reading Shakespeare. I laughed out loud and Connie did, too. ‘Goodness, me, I got carried away. See, the Queen wears white at the Veiled Prophet ball like a bride does.’

‘Sort of like a city-wide beauty pageant?’

‘You haven’t seen the photos, have you?’ Connie brayed with laughter. ‘It is certainly not a beauty pageant. The Queen is a symbol of power and purity, from her bloodline to her conduct. Someone explained to me that the purpose of the Queen is to show the ‘less fortunate’ what they can aspire to. Ha! Ha!’¹⁰⁶”

Another aspect of the ritual that need be discussed, as it affects the gender dynamics that exist at the ball, is the crowning of the Queen. The Queen is supposed to be “selected by the Prophet as his most admired partner” but instead of being chosen for her own personal valor or significant accomplishment (as a woman or even human being) she acts merely as a puppet to

¹⁰⁶ Slan 109.

represent her father's success¹⁰⁷. Lucy Ferriss, who was the niece of a former queen, describes the crowning of the 1970 queen, Phoebe Mercer Scott, as an action that "attested to her father's success in the business world.¹⁰⁸" As Spencer describes, the "method of using the daughter's title (as 'belle of the ball' or, in later years, the 'VP Queen') as a 'reward' for her father's efforts has continued to the present day.¹⁰⁹" This is shown by Spencer's description of many a Queen "feeling uncomfortable and unworthy of her position," as it is not anything other than a marker of her father's achievements, while the title in fact catapults her to a "semicelebrity status" complete with responsibilities¹¹⁰. As Ferriss describes in her book, as she is interviewing the Queen of 1959, Laura Rand Danforth, who now goes by Laura X, the Queen crowned two years before Laura "was a person who was awkward and so everyone cruelly made fun of her, but it was an honor to her father, she had no choice.¹¹¹" Being Queen is not simply sitting on a throne: it is an active role in the public eye, one that will not be soon forgotten in St. Louis elite society. As one of the women who participated in my interview process described, "you have to go to events and have your picture taken all the time, and people are gonna ask you about it for the rest of your life...it does come with some social bearing, but, like, I would not want to be queen... everything about it is too much¹¹²." In the past, Queens would put their whole lives aside to serve the Prophet: Lucy Ferriss, describes in her book a conversation with her father, where he says her

¹⁰⁷ Spencer 56.

¹⁰⁸ Ferriss 35.

¹⁰⁹ Spencer 56.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56, 57.

¹¹¹ Ferriss 149.

¹¹² HC

aunt “took the year off from Vassar, of course...to attend to her queenly duties.¹¹³” Ferriss additionally chronicles the struggle of Laura X, who was a dedicated Vassar student when she was crowned; because she was “the eight-third Queen [Vassar had] had,” and since many girls did not return after their reign (because they got married), the school was reluctant to give her the year off, and she and her family had to do intense negotiating to win her the permission to do so¹¹⁴. To be Queen then, it seems, was a full time job; While the obligations of Queendom are still hefty, they are more manageable, though no less significant, today.

The Queen wears a white full-length gown, very similar to (and often, in fact, is) a bridal gown; in the past, she would wear an elaborate crown or tiara on her head, but recently this has been replaced with a small jeweled headband and large white ostrich feather. As was described in *Ladue News*, a local newspaper of an elite neighborhood in St. Louis (where many of the members live), the Queen’s dress in 2009 was “white silk duchesse satin ball gown with rouched bodice, crystallized neckline and bow with jeweled insert at back” and a “train, 5 yards of silk duchesse satin, with two puff bows with jeweled centers.¹¹⁵” The Queen is supposed to represent aspects of a traditionally conservative and exemplary woman: purity, grace, chastity and above all, virginity. Historically, a Queen is single, never has been married, and in the past, one Queen even lost her title when it was discovered that she had eloped before the ball; the woman who did so, Mary Ambrose Smith, Queen of 1928 (whose name has since been stricken from the list of Queens as punishment for her grievous offense and to maintain the purity of the office) went to great lengths to “[keep] her [marital] status secret from the prophet organization and from J.

¹¹³ Ferriss 70.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹¹⁵ “2009 Veiled Prophet Specials and Queen”

Sheppard Smith [her father],” because he “had counted on this moment to enshrine his place in the business world” and needed her crowned as Queen to do that¹¹⁶. There is something revealing about the process by which one becomes Queen, one that need be explored because of the unique situation it creates for the girl who assumes the role.

What, then, does it take to become Queen? The consensus of my interviewees was unanimous; as one of them says, “it means you’re the richest person in that grade¹¹⁷.” The honor, it appears, is reserved for someone whose family is “rich and influential,” and is generally a part of one of the “old families in St. Louis.¹¹⁸” It remains, however, that the money has nothing to do with the girl: the honor is about her father, and though it is bestowed on her, it is intended to glorify him, or as it was said during an interview, “It’s not about what..what [the 2008 Queen] did, it’s about what her dad did.¹¹⁹” Ferris describes it thus: the father of a Queen is a “man whose wealth or power, or fund of favors owed, [earns] his daughter a tiara¹²⁰.” As was said in a separate interview, the Queen has “a dad the with most connections” and one whom “puts the most time into the organization¹²¹.” As time generally equals money these days, it can be summed up thus: the fathers “who [have] the most time to put towards [the Organization]....are obviously the people with the most money...who don’t really have to worry about working” on other things aside from VP¹²². The Queen, then, is the elite of the elite, the girl whose “daddy

¹¹⁶ Ferriss 69.

¹¹⁷ HC

¹¹⁸ EY, CL

¹¹⁹ EY

¹²⁰ Ferriss 40.

¹²¹ CL, EC

¹²² CL

does the most philanthropic works which means [her] daddy has the most money¹²³.” In this situations, daughters are no more than objects to represent their fathers wealth and are treated as such, regardless of their attitude toward the position, which one participant describes in saying a dad “basically buy[s] that slot for that girl.¹²⁴” As another woman continued, “I feel like almost anybody could be queen if dad tries hard enough.¹²⁵” Everyone familiar with the ball is aware that this is the case, though it almost always goes unsaid. By using their daughters as stand-ins for their economic power and worth, father are dehumanizing and reducing their daughters to no more than objects of representation, like a nice house or a fancy car.

Ferriss describes, in her book, how many aspects of her life were dictated by her father’s desire for her to become Queen. She discusses her alma mater (Mary Institute, where I also attended) and how “academics had nothing to do with [her] being placed at Mary Institute,” telling the reader that her “father’s sisters had both attended Mary Institute. Of the eighty-eight Veiled Prophet Queens crowned up to 1972, eighty-three of them had attended Mary Institute. Even today, this continues: seven of the Queens in the last ten years are MI alums. This fact, [she] also took for granted, was the main reason [she] had been sent there.¹²⁶” Ferriss was sent to MI to become a caliber of woman suited to the throne, to learn how to be proper and ladylike, to mix in the proper circles that would provide her father with networking he needed and connections required for success in business, and in the VP organization. Though Ferriss was never crowned, she makes it very clear how she possessed (and sometimes, did not) certain

¹²³ EW

¹²⁴ EC

¹²⁵ HC

¹²⁶ Ferriss 56, 55.

elements of character that were needed for Queenhood. Ferriss uses an anecdote from her childhood to emphasize this: she discusses the pages, or the young ladies from local dance companies that volunteer to participate in the ball and parade and carry the Prophet's and Queen's trains. She describes how,

“A couple of years earlier I had wanted to be a page, but she [her mother] had laughed at the idea. At first, I took offense-- I thought I was a pretty good dancer' I'd studied four years of ballet. Now, squatting on my parents' beige carpet, I was beginning to understand: the Queen had never been a page, the pages wouldn't grow up to be Queens.”

It becomes obvious here how the women who are to become Queens are set apart from others from a young age to do so; if you look over the list of former Queens and know a little bit about St. Louis, for example, it can be surmised that about 90% of the Queens have come from the same families. It can be said, then, that regardless of the money your father has, you are either Queen material, or you aren't-- this fact is not dictated by what kind of person you are, but who you are, who you came from.

Ann Chittenden Ferriss, Lucy's aunt, was crowned Queen in 1931, and Ferriss grew up knowing that she herself would walk. Relating a conversation she had as a child with her brother to the reader, it becomes clear just how important the status of one's family, in addition to money, is to win the slot: just because you might have the money and your daughter might have gone to the “right” high school and be calm, cool and collected does not mean the crown will come to you. Ferriss writes,

[her brother says] “You won't be Queen.”
 “Aunt Ann was Queen”
 “You won't be. Dad's not Grampop. Grampop was head of the Investment Bankers Association. Dad's just a judge.”
 “A judge is something.”

“A judge isn’t much.”

Because her father’s profession wasn’t “much,” regardless of his money, Ferriss was out of contention for the title. As Ferriss elaborates, “By his status was my status determined:” because here father wasn’t *that* important, she was *only* a regular maid¹²⁷. She continues, saying “Had my father possessed his own father’s ambition and drive, he might have continued in private law practice. He might have garnered the reputation and fortune that would have boosted me to the rank of Special Maid...¹²⁸” In crowning Queens and selecting special maids, the VP looks to men who are considered community leaders, who have “improved” the city of St. Louis, who are “civic-minded.” They also, however, are the richest members of the organization. Crowning their daughters as queen is a gesture of acknowledgment, a pat on the back, by the other most industrious men of the city, for a hard day’s work.

Ferriss also writes in her book about Laura X’s description of how she got to be Queen, and all the work she had to do in preparation, to guarantee she appeared ladylike and respectable, saying,

“Dad was selected to be the father of the Queen....I was just not the daughter for it. My father told me that his father, who had died while I was in boarding school, would be very proud of me for doing this and that it was my civic duty and it would take up my academic year....and in my free time I had to practice with Madame Kassan, with this girdle on and a bedspread for the train around my waist and carrying a five-pound something, I forget what it was, to simulate the orchid bouquet, and the scepter in the other hand, which also weighed a lot. I was trying to learn to curtsy to the floor, and to be graceful. I’m a complete klutz...¹²⁹”

¹²⁷ Ferriss 11.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

Here you can see firsthand not only the pressure put on a woman to not only walk, but to serve as Queen, how she is a representational agent for her fathers wealth, and what it means to possess grace and poise. However, whether or not the daughter wants to be, being Queen requires more than money on the part of one's father. As a woman I interview stated, "I also think that it needs to be somebody is poised, and able to handle that kind of commitment because it comes...it comes with responsibility;" your father's money might buy you in, but it's probably not going to get you out¹³⁰.

Additionally, the creation of the "office" of Queen creates a unique power dynamic between young women, both inside and outside of the family, as it develops inherently negative competition and can spur envy between women: only one daughter per family is currently allowed to receive the "honor" of being crowned Queen (though in the past, this used to be different). Because of this, and the fact that "the VP usually saves the highest honor for the youngest daughter," a father with more than two girls is forced to pick upon which he will bestow the crown, which daughter will represent his wealth the best. Furthermore, the ball is more important as a ritual to those whose fathers are more prominent members of the organization; more than a few girls are certainly disappointed when they are not selected to be Queen. By creating the position of the Queen of Love and Beauty, the Organization is inherently placing value judgements on the worth of the young women who participate in the ball as objects reflective of their fathers' economic status: the girl whose father is richer is more "worthy" of the title of Queen, and is, for some reason, accordingly "better" and "more appropriate" than the other ladies who walk.

¹³⁰ HC

What, then, becomes of the Queen after her reign? In the past, Queens would immediately marry after turning over their crowns, moving from the bride of the Prophet to the bride of another man. Ferriss describes how most Queens “seem to have gone on like [her] aunt Ann, marrying after their appointed year and locking the skeletons in the closet, looking forward to an obituary that notes their brief reign in Khorassan, their husband’s profession and the number of their children¹³¹.” Ferriss, as only a maid, notes how she “was more free to choose [her] path,” because “the burdens of privilege rested more lightly on [her] shoulders than on the shoulders of the Queens¹³².” As is described in one comment on a VP video posted on YouTube, most Queens “are never heard from again because they are mostly too dim to contribute;” as for the future of the Queen, the writer continues by saying, “most marry a dim-witted male from the upper crust, creating a level of inbreeding not unlike the European royal houses” and spend their lives “[writing] checks to a few pet charities in between appointments with cosmetic surgeons and AA meetings¹³³.” The afterlife of queendom, then, is not quite as illustrious or glamorous as their time spent on the throne of Khorassan.

More puzzling than the Queen, though, are the role of the Special Maids. The best way to describe the Special Maids is the “almost-but-not-quotes,” akin to bridesmaids, or “being named first runner-up in the Miss America Pageant¹³⁴.” A difficult-to-define role that does not seem to signify anything terribly meaningful, the existence of the Special Maids only seems to be so to give more fathers an opportunity to show of *their* wealth as well, to create another space in

¹³¹ Ferriss 145.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ “NitneLiun,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMS0Ou3odqA>

¹³⁴ Kitty Kelley, *The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty*, (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 29.

which daughters can represent their fathers' economic achievement- though they didn't contribute enough to buy the title of Queen, and as if it doesn't already say something about their economic standing that they're in the organization in the first place. As one woman describes, "the whole idea of Queens and Special Maids and then Maids, it's such a social hierarchy, and it's point-blank social hierarchy, it's whoever pays, whoever "contributes" the most to society¹³⁵." Here again the value of a woman is judged by the financial standing of her father, and she is classified as more worthy than others of an insubstantial title because of it.

An interesting anecdote as far as Queens and Special Maids are concerned is worth sharing. While asking women I knew to participate in my interview process, I asked the 2008 Veiled Prophet Queen, with whom I graduated from high school, and one of the Special Maids, who happens to be her cousin, and a fellow classmate. While both were initially very courteous and agreed to sit down and chat, neither ever got back to me when I followed up about scheduling a time. Then, when I saw them both at this year's ball, I asked again, only to be told that they would get into contact with me-- neither ever did. Perhaps they were busy and could not find the time. Perhaps they were disinterested and trying to let me down easy. While both of these are plausible options, I would argue that the reason neither would do an interview with me is that it could be considered inappropriate to discuss money and status when you've achieved it. It might look arrogant and snobbish to discuss their father's lofty placement within and their support of the VP, as well as tactless and ignorant. Furthermore, while I did attend 13 years of school with both of these women, I am not a close confidante of either--perhaps it wouldn't be acceptable to share intimate details of the experience with those on the "outside." Perhaps

¹³⁵ EB

discussing the pros and cons of debuting is not a topic worthy of discussing with a simple commoner like me. Also, the hesitation on their part could have come from a fear that I was planning to write a biting critique of the VP, and neither wanted to nor thought it was appropriate to be included in such a thing. Isn't the Queen supposed to serve the city of St. Louis? As one of her constituents (who saw her get crowned, no less), I have to say I was slightly miffed.

Whatever the reason, the fact that these two women declined from participating in this project says a great deal- more than their interviews probably would- as it reveals just what kind of insider attitude exists, and what some of those higher up in the organization consider to be (and not to be) "appropriate" and "womanly" topics of discussion.

VII: Father/Daughter Relationship

"Fathers seem to sex-type youngsters even more consciously than mothers do [and] actively encourage [femininity] in daughters. Wives report that husbands urge them to keep their daughters' hair long and to 'doll them up' even when the mothers themselves don't feel that these things are very important¹³⁶."

- Rita Jackaway Freedman, from "Beauty Bound"

One of the things that my interviewees reported as the most important and most influential element of their decision to walk was the bond that it established with their fathers. As one of them reported, in addition to being an avenue of exposure to the St. Louis community, the organization is "a father daughter thing.¹³⁷" As one girl said, she knew "it meant SO much to my dad, like so much, he...really, he would get teary about it¹³⁸." When asked what it was about the process that made him so emotional, she continued "it meant something to him...just to see me as

¹³⁶ Freedman 119-120.

¹³⁷ EC

¹³⁸ HC

a woman and that I'm turning out okay¹³⁹." Another stated that "the big part for me, though, really was doing this whole thing for my dad," and that "it wasn't walking down [the runway] in front of everybody that mattered" to her, it was participating for her father¹⁴⁰. Why, then, would participating in an archaic ritual like the VP ball matter to fathers? According to one interview participant, it's important for fathers to see their daughters because it reminds them "omigod [she] is growing up, omigod she's so beautiful." As is demonstrated here, again, the daughter's worth is quantified in her physical appearance, and that fathers are proud of their daughters when they look conventionally attractive. Furthermore, perhaps fathers like to see their daughters participate because it is confirmation that their daughters are "turning out okay," as was already said, and that, in being "presented" to society, the world sees that their fathers have been adequate parents and taught these girls how to be, or at least appear as, conventional women in front of the elites of St. Louis, their fathers' social peers. By doing this, the traditional role of a father being the head of household is reified, and furthermore, as membership in the organization is based upon a father's economic success, his role of traditional breadwinner is also confirmed: Thus, daughters here are again reflections of their fathers, and used to demonstrate their fathers' success.

Additionally, the community service element of debuting is one that girls share with their dad. In an effort to dispel the image of elitism and economic success, the organization posits itself as "philanthropic;" evidently "the organization has made investments of more than \$1.75 million in the city, and VP volunteers have given service projects more than 1800 man-days of

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ EC

sweat equity¹⁴¹.” Accordingly, in order to walk, the organization requires that girls and their fathers fulfill certain community service requirements, such as landscaping around St. Louis, and fixing up schools in low income areas. Additionally, one can fulfill this requirement by participating in the annual Fourth of July parade planned by the VP Organization. According to the interviews, girls are supposed to participate in community service events for the three summers leading up to their debut, but no one checks on their progress: when asked what would happen if a girl does not complete the required hours of community service, one interviewee said, “Nothing. But you’re supposed to.”¹⁴² So, while the VP Organization supposedly has a dedicated intention of improving St. Louis, it does not appear that it is to such a degree as to monitor the participation of the debutantes. Many girls report that this time spent with their fathers provides them with an opportunity for bonding that they would not otherwise have; however, this raises the question of the actual closeness that these fathers and daughters share. If it were not for the organization and the desire of their daughters to walk, would the two spend time together? This is problematic, as the only reason for this bonding time is, in the end, so that their daughters can serve as representatives of their fathers to the St. Louis elite. Thus, while this bonding seems to be a positive thing, the underlying role it has in the larger picture does not appear to be so.

Girls also spoke positively of moments spent during the ball with their fathers, including meeting their fathers after they walked in what only can be called “the champagne room,” walking into dinner with their dads, about which one girl said, she “want[ed] this moment with

¹⁴¹ <http://poesdeadlydaughters.blogspot.com/2010/05/veiled-prophet-lives-on.html>

¹⁴² EC

her dad,” and she “want[ed] this memory with her dad.¹⁴³” Others reported the father daughter dance as a particularly memorable moment in their evenings: one woman said “that was the most fun part, cuz [her dad] was cracking jokes¹⁴⁴.” The question here, though, is this: why is such a performance and ritual, as well as significant economic contribution, needed for these girls to spend time with their fathers? Are other milemarkers in life, like graduation from high school, for example, insufficient? Furthermore, why is this time spent together more significant than day to day time spent with one’s father? Though there are no obvious answers to these questions, perhaps one conclusion can be drawn: this “father daughter time” is more significant because it happens in front of people, again giving the St. Louis elite to see that these daughters have become successful in their fathers’ eyes, and that their fathers, accordingly, are successful as fathers.

However positively girls reported the bond created between them in their fathers was, it must also be said that a significant amount of pressure came from fathers for daughters to participate. Though most girls reported that their fathers would not have been disappointed if they had not participated, one girl did say that she got the “your father’s worked so hard” statement from her mother, when she said she was on the fence about participating, and as she continues, she was reminded how “he joined this for [her],” and it was her obligation to participate¹⁴⁵. One girl stated that, because “dad was paying for it,” she acquiesced to his wishes (as far as choosing an escort or even participating goes) and as another girl reports, “my dad’s paying for my dress, my dad’s been paying to be in this organization for so long” so she “did it

¹⁴³ EC

¹⁴⁴ EW

¹⁴⁵ EW

as a ‘let’s please my dad situation.’¹⁴⁶ It must be kept in mind what kind of inner turmoil this causes for girls; they are, today, constantly forced to negotiate their own desire for independence with the expectations of their family; indeed,

“For girls and young women there are increasing tensions between their simultaneous but contradictory positions within the family as ‘dutiful daughters’ and ‘autonomous young adults.’ Girls have to balance the gender-neutralizing neo-liberal ideas of individualization and of exercising independent rights in society with the recognition of the continuing importance of family as a community, and the multilayered gendered interdependencies between family members that require constant renegotiation¹⁴⁷.”

Family dynamics in and of themselves are a confusing and powerful thing: add the burden of obligation or guilt to a relationship that is not terribly close to begin with, and it can be understood why a girl would walk to make her parents (primarily her father) proud. Overall, then, girls who were not sure about their desire to participate in the event did so in an effort to please their fathers and make them happy.

Lucy Ferriss describes in depth her relationship with her father and what kind of effect it had on her participation in the ball. She notes that she “had tried to style [her]self as the kind of woman [her] father might love,” and growing up, “the affection for which [she] played was [her] father’s.”¹⁴⁸ Though her father teased and poked fun at her for being “brainy (a term laced with poison)” despite her attempts to win his approval, “still and always, [she] wanted to be the daughter he loved.”¹⁴⁹ As Peggy Orenstein notes, “a father’s loving regard and interest in a girl, as the first man in her life, is crucial”- if we don’t have it, we continue to search for it, to try to

¹⁴⁶ CL, EC

¹⁴⁷ Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick and Anita Harris, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 86.

¹⁴⁸ Ferriss 30, 31.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

win his love¹⁵⁰. Because of this relationship, it is obvious that a large reason for her participation was that it would make her father proud of her. She notes that “he [had] given up the country club to afford having [her]” and when prompted by social activists to boycott the ball, she “cited” what she saw as “the debt that [she] owed [her] father” as a primary reason not to boycott, and instead, to attend¹⁵¹. She continues, saying “my father has been shelling out money since I was born so that he could see me walk out on the carpet at Kiel Auditorium...I cannot let him down,” despite the fact she had no interest herself in participating¹⁵². She puts it best in saying, she “had let him down so much, in so many ways. Surely [she] could give him this. Surely for once [she] could do the right thing, could be beautiful in the right way.¹⁵³” Ferriss extrapolates to juxtapose this with a more general situation, describing how, for her and the girls she went to high school with “attendance at Junior League dancing lessons, allegiance to certain brands of clothing, and acquiescence to the rituals of ‘coming out’ amounted to a role...performed for the benefit of [their] elders¹⁵⁴.” It is clear here that Ms. Ferriss’s experience and her feelings of obligation were very similar to that of the sentiments expressed by my interviewees, a problematic situation considering she walked forty years before they did. From looking at her experience to that of the younger women I interviewed, it can be concluded that even though years have passed, the situation has not changed.

¹⁵⁰ Peggy Orenstein, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the front lines of the new girlie-girl culture*, New York: HarperCollins, 2011, p 137

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32, 33.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

Sense of obligation as a motivating factor for these women to participate is slightly disturbing, as these are women who are actually adults, and are bending to their father's will as they would one hundred years ago (or even, as few as forty). Haven't these women done enough to make their fathers proud without participating in an event that portrays them as markers of wealth and more basically, objects? All achievements aside, displaying their daughters as debutantes still holds meaning for fathers, because of what it implies about them as men.

Something else problematic (in my feminist eyes) about this process, and the organization as a whole, is the exclusion of women from roles of power. As one interviewee reports "moms don't really play a part in" the process¹⁵⁵." While this is bothersome for many reasons, one which is particularly troubling is the fact that, in this statement, the reification of the traditional, nuclear family is demonstrated. As mothers are not the ones upon which the economic standing of the family is determined, regardless of how money in the family is made by them, fathers are yet again posited as the money makers within the family. While this may be the case for some, it is a rather archaic and dated stance for an event happening right now. Furthermore, it is disconcerting, as these bonding events are evidently so important to girls, that their mothers are eliminated from participating in them. Additionally, as girls are given the access to be presented because of their fathers, the mother is left entirely out of the picture as parenting goes. Not only does this, in essence, reestablish fathers as heads of household, but furthermore, entirely negates the role of parent that a mother has upon her daughter. What is more, what of the girl who does not have a father? For daughters who live in a single-parent household, one led by the mother, the option of debuting is out of the question. Because of all of these elements, then, it

¹⁵⁵ CL

becomes obvious that the organization is championing the traditional family and traditional gender roles, and functions as exclusionary for those who divert from them.

VIII: Escorts

“Like the curvy lines of a sports car or yacht, a lovely date or mate proclaims a man’s virility to the world. ‘His’ woman is an extension of himself and becomes another asset¹⁵⁶.”

Another aspect of the event that demonstrates how the will of a daughter is bent to appease that of her father is the selection and existence of escorts. The existence of escorts is not anachronistic in principle, but in the way the VP structures them-- in most other debutante balls, the escort is a man of the young women’s age; in the VP ball, it is another member of the organization. However, I still find it problematic: girls (all women, in fact, even the older queens) are accompanied down the runway by an escort. The part of it that many girls found troublesome is that “it cannot be your father” who walks with you down the runway¹⁵⁷. As another girl describes, “it’s not [your] father presenting you to society, it’s some other man that you *might* be close with, an older man,” a fact that is uncomfortable for many¹⁵⁸. The same kind of thing happens at the Fourth of July parade, where a dad is paired with a daughter (not necessarily his own) and as an interviewee reports, “that’s the awkward thing about the parade...you’re paired [with] a fifty year old man, it’s so awkward, it’s so weird.¹⁵⁹” While this part of the ritual makes girls feel uncomfortable, there is really no way to escape it. The reason

¹⁵⁶ Freedman 12.

¹⁵⁷ EC

¹⁵⁸ EB; italics my own

¹⁵⁹ EW

behind this process is not clear, but even the basic need for an escort is one that is troublesome. Is a girl of 19 or 20 years old not capable of walking herself down a runway? By keeping the tradition of the escort intact, girls remain subservient to and dependent upon men-- in the broader sense of needing them to “come out” and in the more specific sense of needing them to actually participate in the event itself. The fact that there are strict rules about the process are off-putting to many: as one girl reports, it is troublesome that “it can’t be somebody your own age, like your date, walking you...it has to be a member of the VP...it can’t be your father,” it’s also not supposed to be a blood relative¹⁶⁰. Who else, then, are you supposed to choose? The only option readily available is a male family friend who is a member of the organization, but do girls of this age actually have those? Most likely not, and as my interview participants reported, making the decision of an escort was a tough one, as they did not know anyone from which they could choose. This is doubly compounded by the fact that, as one interviewee describes, “the fathers you know best are the ones who have daughters walking your year but you don’t want to ask one of them because they have a very bad view of the walking,” so they wouldn’t be able to see their own daughters¹⁶¹. Many girls, then, had no idea who to pick, and as the majority of my interviewees report, the ultimate decision was made by their fathers, as they were the ones with close relationships to other members of the organization. Lucy Ferriss, who walked in 1972 said, when I asked her how she chose her escort, “I have no idea why he was my escort. Wasn’t something you chose¹⁶².” This is yet another example of the event demonstrating total patriarchal control over women, and their own decisions being shunted aside for the desires of the father.

¹⁶⁰ EB

¹⁶¹ EW

¹⁶² Lucy Ferriss

Furthermore, many women felt obligated to choose a friend of their father's because of guilty feelings about everything their fathers had done to allow them to participate, or, indirect pressure coming from their fathers.

During the actual event, the escorts are the people in control: they are the only ones who have rehearsed how the walk will proceed (the girls themselves never rehearse, they just follow their escorts' directions), the escorts link elbows with the girls and lead them down the runway, and when the duo arrives at the Veiled Prophet himself, the escort introduces her to him. Many debutantes reported feeling nervous and terrified until they met their escorts right before the walk, because they had no idea what to do. Here, then, male dominance over these young women and their reliance on the escort, a male, can be clearly delineated, reifying typically traditional gender roles. As Freedman says, "men commonly direct women's movements, steering them gently but firmly across streets and through doorways [*and down runways*]. The withdrawal of such gallantries at critical moments can poignantly remind a woman of her real helplessness¹⁶³." What would happen if an escort gave up halfway through one's walk? I can't think of any debutante who would desire that type of experience. However, it is useful to remind us just how much power the escort possesses, and how that is at odds with the fact that the debut is supposed to be, ironically enough, about the girl.

Furthermore, as a man is presenting a young woman, she almost becomes an object he is showing off. As Freedman describes in her book, the way the woman appears can largely affect the way that the man is perceived: "when an unattractive man is seen coupled with a more beautiful woman, he is judged to be more intelligent and more successful than when seen with a

¹⁶³ Freedman 88, italics added myself.

plain one. The women's beauty does not increase perceptions of the man's attractiveness but elevates perceptions of his character, likability, and competence. It is as though people think he must be doing something right in order to get such a dandy prize¹⁶⁴." Thus, it is imperative that a woman be attractive so she upholds the social expectations of men in the VP organization, and to help bolster the reputation of her escort; this is a large part of the reason why men feel "honored" to escort these women, because it says something positive about what kind of men they are.

Put more simply, one girl describes the whole process as one where "you kind of feel like a show dog," as "you get paraded out there, then you stand and stick your arm out and know that your 'handler' will come get you, and then you get presented to the judge," or the Veiled Prophet, who "has some cheesy little thing prepared" upon your introduction to him¹⁶⁵. Overall, many people described their relationship with their escorts as awkward, which they, in fact, are. Not only is an escort a man other than the deb's father, but the power balance that is created as a result of his existence is an uncomfortable one: girls are reliant on an almost total stranger to tell them what to do. What, then, is the purpose of an escort? What does a man get out of escorting a deb? Many girls spoke to the sense of honor and luck that an escort feels upon being selected, and how it often means a similar amount to the escort as it does to the debutante's father. Perhaps the feelings that an escort has toward the process, then, are similar to that of the father's: the escort feels a sense of pride in escorting a young woman who is considered to be a "success," and feels honored to be important enough, to her family, and therefore to the organization, to present her. In this case, he is successful because of his close role to another man, the father, who has achieved in parenting a daughter of the right social caliber; he is successful because he

¹⁶⁴ Freedman 12.

¹⁶⁵ EW

is standing next to a conventionally groomed and beautified woman, which implies a praiseworthy character.

IX: Myth

“Anyone who was anyone claimed to know who the veiled bigwig was, [but] the VP’s name was supposed to be a secret from us little people. To know his name was a sign you belonged to the city’s ruling class. At a features meeting, I told our then managing editor...we should print the Veiled Prophet’s name. He was as shocked as if I’d wanted to run nude photos of the Prophet’s Queen of Love and Beauty.¹⁶⁶”

Essential to understanding the status that the Veiled Prophet Organization has within the St. Louis community is an understanding of the myth that it evolved from. The figure of the Veiled Prophet is one that is borrowed from a poem by Thomas Moore; in his original incarnation, though, the Prophet is neither benevolent nor doting, as he is constructed to be today. In writing her memoir, Lucy Ferriss did research into the topic, concluding that the original prophet in the poem “is an evil white sorcerer who rapes innocent maidens¹⁶⁷.” Obviously, this figure would not do well to spread messages of progress and perfection throughout a growing city. But, the organization like the language, symbolism and mythical qualities of the story. So, they did some editing, fashioning the prophet instead into a man cloaked in white, veiled in secrecy, with nothing but love in his heart. As Ferriss describes, “the authors [of the myth] had the violent [Moore] epic before them and were consciously cribbing from it. They were not fooled, as I had been, into thinking that the original prototype of their Prophet was a slender

¹⁶⁶ Viets

¹⁶⁷ Ferriss 20.

Santa Claus or a beneficent Merlin¹⁶⁸.” Thus, this conscious change was necessary to make their Prophet more family-friendly and easier to digest.

After establishing this myth, that the Veiled Prophet was a ruler in a faraway kingdom called Khorassan who visits once a year to check up on the progress of his fair city of St. Louis and choose a new Queen of Love and Beauty to serve with him, not much else was done. Altering a myth would tie someone human to it, would give it roots in the fallible and erring, give it reason to be struck down- in short, everything that the organization did not want to happen to its budding fairytale. However, the myth as it was was great! It was a myth, so it didn't need to make sense. And by declaring themselves as the organization trusted with the responsibility of ruling over St. Louis until His Mysterious Majesty's next return, the elite of St. Louis had as much authority to “rule” as they could possibly have hoped for. Thus, they perpetuated the myth themselves, announcing it (identically) year after year at the ball, depicting it on early parade floats, and putting down on paper.

This myth is huge for the perpetuation of the organization, because it keeps up their heritage and gives them roots in St. Louis that they otherwise might not have. Seeing themselves as the great-great-great whatever descendants of the first and founding members gives these men the privilege to continue believing that they have an inherited and legitimate reason (aka not just right because of money) to “rule” the city. Furthermore, in the name of tradition, one is permitted to do many ridiculous things that would just be considered bizarre (for example, as I am writing this, a twenty year tradition of running around this campus naked has just been kiboshed. However, for twenty years, it was acceptable, in the name of tradition!!) The organization has a

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

fair share of things about it that would be considered strange, if not downright creepy. But, they are tradition, like the “home-made archaic language” in which they speak¹⁶⁹. With tradition comes infallibility, and as Ferriss describes, “If you *were* infallible, you could choose a moment, two or three even, of expensive silliness. The men in the Veiled Prophet organization could *choose* to play dress up and to have a secret language. They could prance around with the pomposity of the Bengal Lancers and tout the gossamer ‘wisdom’ of the ‘prophet.’ But to be silly by accident was a cardinal sin¹⁷⁰.” Thus, their deeply-rooted “history” in the city lends them legitimacy and permits them to engage in this sort of behavior, which, I can personally confirm, proliferates the event.

One year, bigwigs within the organization wrote and published a children’s book for the members, their families (and a token copy to the Missouri Historical Society). It discussed the myth and the history of the organization (in its own eyes), and was meant to be read to children, cherished, and passed on to them when they had their own kids. Lucy Ferriss’s father owned a copy of the book, and in her memoir, she discusses her memories of it as a child. She describes how it was “just like [her] book of Bible stories and seemed to serve the same purpose,” and, in it, “The Veiled Prophet took his place alongside the Old Testament Noah and the Do Bee of Romper Room, one of those dull people it would do you good to hear about.¹⁷¹” In publishing this book to be read in this way, the Organization was attempting to instill within future members and future debutantes, the future elite, just how important the Prophet was, describing him in

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁷⁰ Ferriss 76.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

biblical-like proportions, making the “Prophet’s chosen city...on a par with Bethlehem¹⁷².” The organization, then, made a clear and concise effort to instill the myth within children from a young age, because it was the tool they could wield against claims of illegitimacy and evidence of their appointed place. As Freedman says, with this kind of defense, “myths are thereby ‘proven’ as fact and adamantly defended as truth¹⁷³.”

A book like this was never published again, and girls today are as woefully uninformed of the myth as someone who has never heard of the VP. When I asked one of my interviewees what she knew about the myth of the Veiled Prophet, she responded honestly, without blinking an eye, “What myth¹⁷⁴?” Another response the question elicited was, “I don’t know anything about it. The what? I have no idea, no. No.¹⁷⁵” This is astonishing. Other women were equally unfamiliar with the myth; most knew that it exists but no one could actually tell the story. Another woman said she knew “bits and pieces, but really it’s only from what [she’s] googled,” and most agreed that the minor details they were familiar with were the things that are announced at the ball (“...blowing of a trumpet. ‘His Mysterious Majesty! The Veiled Prophet! Welcomes! To his Court! Of Love! And Beauty! Miss! Lucy! Ann! Ferriss!’”)¹⁷⁶. The interesting thing is, though, that a few women openly admitted to finding the myth and terminology creepy, and two informed me of its parallels to the KKK. Yes, the organization did a sufficiently good job branding itself, in that by using such a distinct figure (for better or for worse) people knew what to think of when they saw “the Veiled Prophet.” Only the problem was, many people thought of

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁷³ Freedman 14.

¹⁷⁴ EY

¹⁷⁵ LH

¹⁷⁶ Ferriss 17.

the KKK, because of the similarity between its white robed and hooded figures, and the white *veiled*, robed Veiled Prophet. The VP has tried to put distance between itself and this image, but rumors and references will always abound, especially in such a unilaterally minded organization who chose to discriminate against so many. Even though one woman (who did know the myth as her family has been walking for generations, the longest of those I've interviewed) describes the myth as "horribly offensive," and a part of the experience she isn't proud of, she is quick to defend it, because it is a part of her family tradition¹⁷⁷.

Has the myth declined in importance since the days of debs forty years ago? I would argue that it has; though the physical ritual of the event has remained the same, and the same script is read during the ball, the meaning of the words do not impact the debutantes as it did in the past; many of my interviewees described trying to stifle their laughter while sitting on the stage after they walked, because the whole thing seemed a little silly. No one today grew up reading Veiled Prophet-themed bedtime stories. Perhaps because the myth is so incredibly controversial, the organization has redirected the attention toward it to other things, like increasing its contribution to community service organizations. Or, perhaps girls are walking for different reasons today than they were forty years ago. Maybe the myth is no longer a factor. Maybe the myth is no longer relevant.

But, what becomes of a tradition without a myth? Would it change perception of the organization today without the myth, in the past or present? My answer is no. The myth is no long as relevant for the organization or for the girls that participate in it because the St. Louis community at large at this point does not look to the organization to further civic progress as it

¹⁷⁷ CM

did in years past. These men are the most economically successful in St. Louis, but aren't asking anyone to worship that aside from other elites. They don't need the myth to give them legitimacy within the city, because they're no longer asking for praise due because of it. They have established their image and how they want others to perceive them. When I asked my interviewees what they think that the VP organization represents to St. Louisans, the responses were some combination of the following: wealth, power, money, aristocracy, elitism. None of these are inherently negative. More interestingly, however, one can forget how ubiquitous a group may (or may not be) when one is inside of it. Though everyone in the VP assumes that all of St. Louis knows what it is, that is definitely not the case. As one woman I interviewed said, "I go to Mizzou [the University of Missouri, in Columbia], so fifty percent of the people I know are from St. Louis, and I would say that only 20 percent know what it is, and those 20 percent went to a private school in St. Louis. The rest are like "what is VP? BP? You mean like, the gas company?" and I'm like, "no, Veiled Prophet," and even if you say Veiled Prophet ball they still sometimes don't even know what you're talking about."¹⁷⁸ Thus, while these debutantes think that they're on the center stage of the world during their big walk, it might actually just be a stage in a room in a hotel in a city in the middle of the country, with only your family and their friends (not the whole world) watching. Many girls felt their walk was a big "hello world, look at me!" moment; personally, I think it's better described as a "hello group of people who make as much money as my father, look at me to validate his success as a father and a businessman, and to validate me for looking like a woman" kind of moment.

¹⁷⁸ HC

X: Conclusion

“I would not want my daughters to get wrapped up in debutantism. I still disapprove of the gender and racial stereotyping of the whole deal. [But] if I had daughters who loved pink and frills and wanted to be “presented,” well, I suppose I wouldn’t stand in their way. I don’t suppose it would do them any lasting harm¹⁷⁹”-- Lucy Ferriss

Many conclusions can be drawn from the research I’ve done to write this project. While I did go in with expectations as to what I would learn, it must be said that, honestly, most of them were not accurate. Originally, I’d thought that this ritual held a large amount of sentimental value for these women, and that coming out as a debutante had a significant impact on their lives and their conceptions of self. However, that does not seem to be the case. For the most part, the experience for these women proved to more of an entertaining one, a nice event to commemorate their youth and a fun evening to spend with their friends and family, people they do not see as often as they at college away from home. Furthermore, the event allowed them to remember the ties they have to the city of St. Louis, and after participating in it, they felt that the community was able to realize their role within it, and they were able to move on and do other things in other places. As far as the ball itself goes, it has become obvious that for many women today, elements of the procedure are outdated and archaic, rendering it entertaining for the sheer bizarreness of the antiquatedness of the event. The myth, another element that is traditional, seems to have become more and more ridiculous as time has passed, and the ignorance on the part of recent debutantes of the history of the organization and the myth it invented is testimony to the decline in importance of the roots of the ball and the implications the past has, as well as their connections to it. Many of these “outdated” procedures that are left in place, like the idea of the escort,

¹⁷⁹ Lucy Ferriss

though, still prove to be very telling about what kind of power dynamics exist between these young women and the members of the organization. While these young women are independent and accomplished people, in the eyes of the organization, a man is still needed to accompany them in their presentation to society. Additionally, the refusal of the organization to incorporate women into the group also speaks to the sexism that continues to exist.

The information I learned about the organization as well as its history goes to support Turner's theory of star groups and how they exist within a group of people; obviously, these men share common interests and have common goals, which is the reason that they joined the group. From it, as Turner supports, they are able to form connection and find support. At the same time, though, one could extrapolate that the fortysome women who walked in 2008 are also a star group. They share a common experience and are looking for recognition within that group, as well as feeling an allegiance to it. Perhaps this is an overstatement; for many of these women, being a debutante did not hold a great importance. But, for better or for worse, these women participated, which does say something about the event being a priority in their lives. Turner's theory of social drama, then, is one that is supported by the group-based nature of the organization and the ball itself-- remember, though these women walk as individuals, the ceremony is about their recognition as a group; even though a Queen exists, the ball is not all about one women.

More than anything, what I have learned from these interviews is just how important conventional beauty and the cult of femininity has continued to exist. From hearing about the process of dress selection to how one goes about styling oneself before the ball and all of the preparation it takes to get ready for something like this, it has become clear just how important

looking good is to these women. While society prides itself on having evolved enough to be a more accepting place, clearly certain sanctions still exist that propel these women to maintain a certain kind of appearance. This is where Goffman's idea of interpersonal relationships is so incredibly useful. All of this work that these women put into their appearances can be seen as a gesture in the name of eliciting a certain type of response from those watching, an effort to create a certain type of perception by others. The desired type of perception is one that is particular: these women want to appear classy, well-adjusted and put together (aka, appropriate members of the elite) so that others perceive them as being raised successfully, which will bring honor and esteem to their fathers. This is all a reminder of how we are all guilty; though we don't think much of it, the steps we take every day are ones defined by classic definitions of femininity, and what it means to be woman. These exist to varying degrees in society-- we don't all wear our ball gowns around every day-- but when occasion mandated it, these women rose to the occasion (and then some). It may seem incredibly vain and narcissistic to be so concerned about one's appearance; it needs to be realized, though, that in this setting, that is the norm, not the deviation from it. Because the bar is set so high, these women have no choice but to comply, because so much is at stake, for both them and their families. If they were to come across as anything but perfect, their reputation would be affected negatively and socially, they would suffer. While I assumed that appearance would be important to the debutantes, I always thought that it would be personally motivated, and did not expect to discover the kind of pressure that came with debuting.

The crowning of the Queen, something I always had trouble reconciling, was an aspect of the ritual that most women did not seem to have a problem with, though they all admitted point-

blank that her crown is about the money her father has. This widespread knowledge that being Queen is more of a representation of economic status and a reward for the father definitely affects its legitimacy in my eyes, as well as the appropriateness of the office. Personally, giving a girl a crown because everyone knows her father is the richest in the city is an act done in poor taste; how ironic that it is the group of people who claim to be the elite of St. Louis, who would be expected to have the best taste, that does such a thing. Furthermore, I find it insulting that she is a stand-in for her father's money, and is not crowned Queen for any of her own merit whatsoever. Crowning a Queen is an encouragement of the chaste, passive, porcelain-doll version of woman. Her seat next to (and subordinate to) the King, the Veiled Prophet-- whose face you cannot see, allowing him to be any man, every man-- is testimony to that.

The father is an interesting figure in this picture. Debutantes spoke positively of the time they spent with their fathers preparing for the ball, and how happy and proud their fathers were when they saw their daughters walk, and the community validate their upbringings. In this situation, it is most striking that these girls are so obviously posited as representational agents of their fathers' wealth, and are intended to show off his success as a parent. As no equivalent event for sons exist, daughters remain as the sole public markers of these fathers' prosperity. It must be asked, then, why are daughters put in such a position? Why not sons? Perhaps because, in the past, sons could make their own names for themselves; daughters did not have those kind of opportunities and could only garner praise by doing "womanly" activities. Additionally, once a son left home, he had his own name to promulgate, and would cut ties with his natal family. Daughters, in the past, were tied to their fathers until they got married-- they couldn't get married until after they debuted, so they could represent their fathers until that occasion ended. Though

the VP ball is no longer a marriage market, it still creates an interesting dynamic between men and women, as women are put on display to be critiqued for their appearances (as they are the only things perceptible by sight only, which is all that you have) and men are doing the critiquing and receiving praise for the “achievements” of their daughters.

This project, then, has obviously been an interesting experience, one that further opened my eyes to the injustice that exists at the Veiled Prophet Ball today. While I always thought it was a little strange, a little anachronistic, with something out of whack, I have now realized what it is that puts me off from the ball completely: the inequality that exists between men and women there, and the objectification and commodification of daughters as representatives of economic agency. Sure, it’s a whole lot of fun. But it must be asked, at what price is this fun had? It’s a great evening to see people, to commemorate youth, to get gussied up. Will I ever go again? I’m not sure, but if I ever did, it wouldn’t be with a clear head or innocent conscious- too many elements of the ball are offensive and regressive that the tone they create cannot be ignored. While the event is a time-honored tradition, it must be recognized that time has changed, and it needs to, too.

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