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University of Nevada, Reno

Chick Lit: Tales from a Third-Wave Feminist Perspective

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by

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
Abstract	iii
1. Introduction	1
2. Third-Wave Feminism	3
2.1 Three Third-Wave Feminist Voices	4
2.2 Main Principles of Third-Wave Feminism	8
3. Chick Lit	19
3.1 The Chick Lit Genre	20
3.2 History of Chick Lit	22
3.3 Opposition to Chick Lit	28
4. Third-Wave Feminist Influences in Chick Lit's <i>Queen of Babble</i> Trilogy	38
4.1 Girl Power	39
4.2 Traditional Femininity	47
4.3 Individuality	54
5. Conclusion	64
Works Cited	68

Abstract

Written by women, for women, chick lit has become one of the most popular and best-selling fiction genres in the world of literature. Its quirky and fallible characters are frequently easy to identify with. Additionally, the literature's humorous tone and seemingly commonplace situations (finding a job, chasing one's dreams, searching for love, etc.) often create plots and characters that mirror one's own, even though at times mundane, life. The genre, while entertaining, is heavily influenced by a very academic ideology—third-wave feminism. In this project, third-wave feminism and chick lit are defined, and Meg Cabot's chick lit trilogy, *Queen of Babble*, is used to represent how third-wave ideology impacts chick lit. This thesis argues that modern chick lit texts, such as the *Queen of Babble* series, are influenced by third-wave feminism as evidenced by chick lit embracing girl power, traditional femininity, and individuality.

1. Introduction

Many readers are unable to articulate a definition for what "chick lit" is or describe its characteristics. Instead, some, particularly academicians (such as Kerstin Fest), write off the genre as shallow "fluff" that has the sole purpose of entertainment. This assertion, however, is incorrect. Chick lit is based in, and exemplary of, third-wave feminist ideology and provides examples of female empowerment. Chick lit is a realm in which women writers celebrate a female character's individuality, what the character herself finds empowering, independence, freedom to choose, and mistakes that stem not necessarily from societal or patriarchal oppression, but from the choices that she has made by her own volition. In concordance with the tenets of third-wave feminism, chick lit presents characters who exude girl power by choosing to partake in conventional femininity while simultaneously pushing some of the societal boundaries via incorporating a multiplicity of diverse aspects (such as varying beliefs, values, and actions) into one's individuality. In general, modern chick lit texts, such as Meg Cabot's *Queen of Babble* trilogy (*Queen of Babble*, *Queen of Babble in the Big City*, and *Queen of Babble Gets Hitched*), are influenced by third-wave feminism as evidenced by chick lit embracing girl power, traditional femininity, and individuality.

Although girl power, traditional femininity, and individuality are discussed and analyzed later in this thesis, it is still prudent to define them at this point as the definitions will facilitate a greater understanding of third-wave feminism and chick lit. Additionally, the words "patriarchy" and "girly" are defined in order to promote clarity in this thesis. This project uses the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of girl power: "power exercised by girls; *spec.* a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested

in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism." Girl power emphasizes a woman's choice, confidence, and self-reliance. Traditional femininity refers to pastimes and customs that are often attributed to women and are sometimes branded as "girly." While "girly" has pejorative connotations (as in "girly magazines" that feature nude women), this thesis aims to reclaim "girly" by using the word's meaning that is free of male influence—"characteristic of or befitting of a girl," "girlish," "involving girls or women and girlish or female concerns," of or pertaining to females ("Girly" 1). Individuality is "the aggregate of properties peculiar to an individual; the sum of the attributes which distinguish an object from others of the same kind" and "individual characteristics" ("Individuality" 1). Feminism, as a general term, I define as a concept that celebrates women and that aims to provide women with a means of pursuing equality (particularly in political, economic, and social realms), obtaining access to opportunities, asserting women's individualities, and attaining the same respect and human rights that are given to men. Lastly, this thesis uses Leslie Heywood's definition of "patriarchy" in *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism* because of the definition's comprehensiveness and clarity. She describes patriarchy as a system in which "social practices, institutions (church, family, state), and cultural images organize the power that men exert over women" and in which "'feminine' is defined in terms of, and subservient to, 'masculine'" (239). These integral definitions are used to investigate broad concepts such as third-wave feminism and chick lit.

To demonstrate third-wave feminist influences in chick lit, this project first discusses the history and main ideological principles of third-wave feminism. Then, chick lit is defined by exploring the issues that the genre addresses (such as female

sexuality, consumerism, and female roles), chick lit's history, and the opposition to chick lit. The third and final section of this thesis demonstrates the influences of third-wave feminism on the chick lit trilogy, *Queen of Babble*, particularly with regard to girl power, traditional femininity, and individuality.

This project argues that chick lit is not merely entertainment, but a manifestation of another step in the evolution of feminism. Thus, the genre is worthy of further study and of more academic and literary respect than chick lit is currently shown. This thesis also adds to the existing research in third-wave feminist theory and increases the amount of academic research addressing chick lit.

2. Third-Wave Feminism

Third-wave feminism formed in the United States during the 1990s, but has no one single source; rather, the ideology's origin is multifaceted. Jo Reger writes that included in third-wave feminism's influences are "the challenges made by women of color to the second wave [of feminism] for its lack of racial-ethnic inclusivity" and for women of color's push for more ethnic diversity in feminism (xxiii). Additionally, there are three women who are widely credited with influencing the ideology and are among the first and most prominent voices of the third wave: Naomi Wolf, Rebecca Walker, and Barbara Findlen. These women set the theoretical foundations for both third-wave feminism and for modern chick lit. This section discusses the aforementioned women, the main principles of third-wave feminism, and some of the opposition to the third wave. Third wave's influence on chick lit is analyzed in section three of this thesis.

2.1 Three Third-Wave Feminist Voices

Naomi Wolf is one of the first authors to use the term "third wave" and attempt to define the ideology. In Wolf's 1991 book, *The Beauty Myth*, she first mentions third-wave feminism in the context of the "beauty myth" (which is a backlash against feminism and "uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement") (10). Wolf writes that in order to destroy the beauty myth, there must be "an electric resurgence of the woman-centered political activism. . . a feminist third wave—updated to take on the new issues of the nineties" (280-281). Wolf further develops the concept of "a feminist third wave" in her 1993 *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*. In this 1993 book, Wolf claims that a "victim feminism," which she contends has pervaded academia and society as a whole, portrays "women as beleaguered, fragile, intuitive angels" and encourages women to seek "power through an identity of powerlessness" (136). As an alternative, Wolf advocates a "power feminism:" "No one should stand in my way because of my gender, and no one should stand in anyone's way because of this race, gender, orientation" (139). This power feminism is also very inclusive because it is "a theory of self-worth, and the worth of other women" (139). Wolf writes the following about feminism,

On this level, saying "I am a feminist" should be like saying "I am a human being." It is on this level that we can press for women who believe anything they want to to enter public life; this level wants the world thrown open to all women regardless of their goodness: On this level women should be free to exploit or save, give or take, destroy or build, to exactly the same extent that men are. This is the level of simple realization of women's will. (139).

This passage portrays power feminism as accessible to all women. Wolf advocates that women be seen as humans with the same capabilities as men, instead of being viewed as determined by, and products of, their gender. Thus, power feminism, which would later be called "third-wave feminism," is critical of second-wave feminism's supposed exclusivity of identities (such as the housewife) and intense focus on gender. This critique is embodied in third-wave ideology via third wave's strong emphasis on individuality and choice, which are discussed at length later in this thesis.

The term "third-wave feminism" became popularized after Rebecca Walker's 1992 *Ms. Magazine* article "Becoming the 3rd Wave." In this article, Walker concludes, "I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the Third Wave" ("Becoming" 87). By Walker asserting that she is not a postfeminist, she implies that she is not "against feminism," and she suggests that her generation is still in need of feminism ("Post-feminism, n." 1). Her words connote that feminism continues to live on and influences her life and her generation. She does not break with feminist thought; instead, she helps feminist ideology to continue and adapt to the needs of the current generation. Walker, however, is not a second-wave feminist (the feminism of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s). Instead, Walker is part of a new feminism that is built upon the foundation of past feminist thought— she is the third wave of feminism.

Walker later produced one of the first anthologies that endeavors to define third-wave feminism and provides literary examples of the philosophy. Her 1995 *To be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* "explore[s] how younger feminists [define] themselves against both traditional stereotypes of race, gender, sexuality, religion, and class, and the ideas and ideals of second-wave feminism" (Heywood xix).

According to Walker, third wave provides a space in which younger feminists, who perhaps feel as if they do not or cannot belong to feminism, find acceptance. She writes in "Being Real: An Introduction" that second-wave feminism causes many young women to struggle with what the "ideal" feminist should be like and act like, particularly when the "ideal" conflicts with who these young women truly are and how they desire to act. Walker asserts that desiring something that is generally accepted as opposing second-wave feminism (such as desiring to marry, to have children, and be treated "like a lady") can lead women to believe that they cannot be feminists and that their voices cannot be heard or make a difference in feminist ideology ("Being" xxxii). However, Walker declares that contemporary feminist women can commit actions and have yearnings for aspects of life that contradict second-wave feminist thought. In order to do this, though, she calls for feminism to encompass more than just gender and be more inclusive in general. She believes that this need for feminism to expand its scope stems from the different ways in which many younger women view feminism, compared to the perspectives of past generations of women. Walker writes, "Young women coming of age today wrestle with the term [feminist] because we have a very different vantage point on the world than that of our foremothers" ("Being" xxxiii). In third-wave feminism, Walker asserts that writers seek to embrace all aspects of the individual and to reject any bonds that a feminist ideal may impose. She states that as the writers "struggle to formulate a feminism they can call their own, they debunk the stereotype that there is one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment, and instead offer self-possession, self-determination, and an endless array of non-dichotomous possibilities" ("Being" xxxiv).

Barbara Findlen's 1995 anthology *Listen Up: Voices From the Next Feminist Generation (Listen Up)* also addresses the issue of third-wave feminism's acceptance of multiple (and sometimes seemingly contradictory) identities. To illustrate the diversity of identities in the anthology, Findlen writes,

Women in this book call themselves, among other things, articulate, white, middle-class college kid; wild and unruly; single mother; Asian bisexual; punk; politically astute, active woman; middle-class black woman; young mother; slacker; member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation; well-adjusted; student; teacher; writer; an individual; a young lady; a person with a visible disability; androgynous; lapsed Jew; child of professional feminists; lesbian daughter; activist; zine writer; a Libra; and an educated, married, monogamous, feminist, Christian, African American mother. These identities all coexist (to varying degrees of comfort) with feminism. (xiv)

These diverse identities all fall under the same ideology (feminism), even though they may be seemingly contradictory. Such a convergence implies that third-wave feminism is inclusive and welcoming of most sexual preferences, religions, ethnicities, professions, classes, etc. Third-wave feminist scholar Heywood interprets Findlen's anthology as discussing "issues such as blending careers and family with feminist politics, the inability of a single feminism to speak for all women, the ways in which traditional culture and third-wave sensibilities can intersect, and the connections between sexuality, identity, and ideas about gender" (Heywood, "Introduction" xix). *Listen Up* also addresses how women practice and view feminism in light of second-wave feminism's contributions (such as pushing for equal opportunity in the workplace, sports, etc.)

2.2 Main Principles of Third-Wave Feminism

Today, third-wave feminism's main principles are 1) including diversity via welcoming multiple identities (meaning beliefs, values, actions, and desires combining in various ways) , 2) conducting political activism through "everyday" activities, and 3) embracing contradiction. Despite the aforementioned principles, the exact borders of third-wave ideology are, admittedly, often hazy and cause third-wave feminism to seem somewhat amorphous. However, this obscurity is often embraced rather than rejected, because it, at least in part, allows for a large degree of inclusivity. Thus, because third-wave feminism has few identifiable borders that promote exclusivity, the ideology is amenable to many beliefs, approaches to life, values, actions, and people. Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards write in *Hypatia* that

This definitional ambiguity allows individuals to challenge old notions, sample competing interpretations, create new meanings, and revel in a multiplicity of identities. Third wave feminism is confronted with the challenge of including women and men who share feminist ideals, but who have been unwilling to call themselves feminists because they do not feel that they meet some stringent definition of a feminist or are averse to the perceived "radicalism" of feminism.

(Renegar & Sowards 6)

In other words, Renegar and Sowards claim that the fact that third-wave feminism cannot be completely placed inside of a definitional box allows people (particularly women), in a way, to define their own means of asserting feminism. Participants in the third wave are not restricted to choosing among stereotypes. Rather, they can select whatever they

desire to incorporate into their individualities, thereby creating their own diverse identities—"a multiplicity of identities."

Third-wave feminism's emphasis on the first main tenet, inclusion, may stem from the inclusivity "perceived to be lacking in many dominant strands of second-wave feminism" (Dean 336). Some women, such as Rebecca Walker, Vivien Labaton, and Dawn Lundy Martin (Labaton and Martin are the authors of the third-wave feminist anthology *The Fire this Time: Young Activists and the New Feminism*), assert that second-wave feminism shuts out those who wish to be part of feminism but do not believe that they "fit" feminism. Martin writes that she herself felt out of place in a second-wave feminism that did not seem to include her unique combination of a young, lesbian, African-American female (Labaton & Martin, "Introduction: Making" xxii). These scholars believe that traditional second-wave feminism does not allow admission to anyone who has beliefs, has identities, or partakes in activities that seem "to clash with feminism" (Heywood xx). Rebecca Walker writes in *To be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* that

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad . . . For us the lines between US and Them are often blurred, and as a result we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our

multiple personalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving. (xxxiii)

It is important to note that the "us" Walker uses refers to the new generations of men and women—those who have grown up with the fruits and phrases of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s feminist revolution. Walker insinuates that these new generations need a feminism—their own feminism—that will allow growth for a multiplicity of identities that includes seeming contradictions. In the current world of globalization and cultural intermingling, Walker might be correct in stating that the lines are "often blurred." Thus, a new feminism (third-wave feminism) must have its "borders. . . split open" and be receptive to voices of different belief systems, political ideologies, social classes, sexualities, genders, and ethnicities (Labaton & Martin, "Introduction: Making" xxvii). This ideological elasticity also broadens the appeal of feminism so that others, who may have previously felt ostracized by feminism, can join the movement. Walker even suggests that third-wave's openness can keep feminism "alive." She writes,

These [diverse] voices are important because if feminism is to continue to be radical and alive, it must avoid reordering the world in terms of any polarity, be it female/male, good/evil, or, that easy allegation of false consciousness which can so quickly and silently negate another's agency: evolved/unconscious. It must continue to be responsive to new situations, needs, and especially desires, ever expanding to incorporate and entertain all those who wrestle with and swear by it, including those who may not explicitly call its name. ("Being" xxxv-xxxvi)

This passage indicates that feminism must shed notions of polarity, and free individuals to have identities that are multifaceted, seemingly contradictory, complicated, and not always saturated in traditional notions of feminism.

Understandably, third-wave feminism's claim of third-wave inclusivity and second-wave exclusivity is not accepted and embraced by all feminists. In fact, some, such as the well-known second-wave feminist Gloria Steinem, reject the accusation that the second wave is exclusive to identities and people. In the foreword that she provides for Rebecca Walker's aforementioned anthology (*To be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*), Steinem first admits that second-wave feminism is often seen as excluding or rejecting some groups of women, particularly homemakers. She states that there is a stereotype that a second-wave feminist cannot be "any woman who [enjoys] sex, or even [looks] sexual" (Walker xvi). However, Steinem asserts that such a stereotype is incorrect and that "feminism has always stood for the right to bare, decorate, cover, enjoy, or do whatever we damn please with our bodies" (Steinem xvii). She continues, stating that with regard to meshing seemingly opposite identities,

It has always been feminism's task to put these [identities] back together again by creating a fully human paradigm of "masculine" and "feminine" together.

Imagine how frustrating it is to be held responsible for some of the very divisions you've been fighting against. . . . (Steinem xxiii)

Yet, Steinem unknowingly points out one of the third wave's objections to second-wave feminist ideology—the focus on "masculine" and "feminine." Rather than concentrate on gender, third-wave feminism wishes to broaden its scope to incorporate all that can make up an individual (e.g., beliefs, actions, and characteristics). While possibly tingeing

subjects to some degree with the hue of gender, third-wave feminist ideology attempts to look into all of the complexities and seeming paradoxes of female individuality, not just whether a characteristic, action, or entity can be considered masculine, feminine, both, or neither.

Other feminist authors, such as Amber Kinser, argue that excessive inclusivity is even more detrimental to feminism than exclusivity. Kinser states that although third-wave's acceptance of diverse identities is a strength, it could also be a weakness. She writes the following:

Third-wave feminism's openness to multiplicity is potentially one of its greatest strengths. But multiplicity in the company of postfeminism¹ puts the third wave at risk of being expected to welcome, and itself wondering why it should not welcome, all voices no matter what utterances they are making, resulting in . . . a "feminist free-for-all. . . ." *Everything* cannot be feminism. (Kinser 145)

Kinser may be correct in stating that "*everything* cannot be feminism"—certainly, misogyny cannot be considered feminism. However, a person who holds a non-feminist viewpoint is welcomed into third-wave feminism. Perhaps "*everything* cannot be feminism," but everyone is encouraged to partake in third-wave feminism—while the viewpoint may be rebuffed, the person is not.

Kinser is not alone in her concerns over third wave's large welcome mat. Astrid Henry critiques third-wave ideology for being too open to others. She writes that "feminism loses its critical political perspective" when the third-wave tries to "redefine"

¹ Kinser uses "postfeminism" to refer to the "reaction against feminism, esp. in acceptance of masculine ideals or of aspects of the traditional feminine role" ("Post-feminism" 1).

feminism in order to "make feminism an open space, one which is available to all" (Henry 84). Henry continues, "Without its critiques of white supremacy and privilege, heterosexism, and capitalism—not to mention its continued insistence on examining the ways in which sexism and misogyny continue to operate in the world—feminism becomes nothing but a meaningless bumper sticker announcing 'girl power'" (Henry 84). Henry misunderstands the goal of third-wave feminism. The ideology does not seek to eliminate critiques of the aforementioned entities. However, the third wave does aim to include previously alienated groups that perhaps do not necessarily agree with the traditional second-wave feminist stance on the issues outlined by Henry. Additionally, by asserting that feminism is at risk of becoming "nothing but a meaningless bumper sticker announcing 'girl power,'" Henry misses the point of "girl power." The concept should not be treated with derision, because girl power is actually a source of female empowerment. As previously stated, girl power encourages female ambition, assertiveness, individualism, choice, confidence, and self-reliance. Certainly, such aspects of freedom and upward mobility (societal, cultural, and economic) are not "meaningless."

Henry also criticizes third wave's openness to diversity on the grounds that it makes the ideology too individualistic. She writes,

Third wave feminists rarely articulate unified political goals, nor do they often represent the third wave as sharing a critical perspective on the world. Rather, third wave texts are replete with individual definitions of feminism and individualistic narratives of coming to feminist consciousness. . . . Where the third wave has often appeared stuck, however, is in moving beyond self-

expression to developing a larger analysis of the relationship between individual and collective experience, culminating in theory and political action. (Henry 83)

What Henry fails to realize is that, in its individualistic nature, third wave is collectivist, which is perhaps counterintuitive. By allowing each woman to define what feminism means to her, she becomes part of the feminist group. She is not denied entrance into the ideology because one or more of her beliefs does not seem feminist (such as being pro-capitalist). Accumulating a diversity of identities into the feminist arena demonstrates that women are not restricted in their identities—no one and nothing, including feminist ideologies, tells women who they are and what they can and cannot believe. In welcoming a broad range of women and men, feminism is not weakened; rather, it is only strengthened because the support base is bolstered.

The second tenet of third-wave feminism is that political activism is primarily conducted through "everyday" activities and choices. Unlike second-wave feminism, which focuses on changing institutional structures (such as governing bodies), lobbying, and working through formal organizations, third-wave feminism concentrates on everyday actions and decisions as sources of protest and political action. Reger writes that

. . . the everyday is. . . the site of feminist activism. Some third-wave activists talk of doing feminism by playing with appearance through makeup, hair, clothing, and piercings as a way to construct and transmit a political message.

One expression of this is "girlie feminism," labeled by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, where activists seek to reclaim the femininity and joy they

perceive as missing in second-wave feminism by embracing "disparaged girl things [such] as knitting, the color pink, nail polish, and fun." (Reger xx-xxi)

In this way, some feminists, such as Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner (author of *The F-Word: Feminism in Jeopardy—Women, Politics, and the Future*), believe that social change is effectively accomplished via cultural action. She writes in the aforementioned work that

The essence of the third-wave philosophy, though hard to pin down, is that real social change is achieved indirectly through cultural action, or simply carried out through pop-culture twists and transformations, instead of through an overtly political, electoral, and legislative agenda. There is certainly power in these pop-culture changes: they are creating spaces for women to be seen as individuals rather than solely as members of their sex, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientations; claiming the voices of young women in music, art, and the written word; and turning traditionally confining pop-culture images of women around to empower.

(88)

Rowe-Finkbeiner and other feminists, such as Ricia Chansky, believe that since the foundation of liberties laid down by the second wave emphasizes choice for women, modern change and activism are best accomplished through exercising this freedom of choice and self-determination. Chansky put it best: "Pink is a choice" (684).

Some, such as Iris van der Tuin, argue that women may not truly have unadulterated freedom and self-determination because they choose from a set of options determined by patriarchy. Thus, a woman's supposed "freedom of choice" may equate to her ability (or tolerated liberty allowed to her by society) to choose from a predetermined set of alternatives—she, therefore, only chooses what kind of patriarchal chains she will

don. Indeed, the freedom of choice may be circumscribed for women. In her *Australian Feminist Studies* article, van der Tuin asserts that the realm of women is still "a place secured by patriarchy" (van der Tuin 28). Therefore, women's ranges of choice are still decided by men rather than by women, and women do not have complete freedom. While this circumscribed set of choices may be true (the extent to which is beyond this paper's scope), women can still be said to have a degree of free will and self-determination because they themselves choose, even if it is in an already established context. So, while a woman might only have the options of "A" and "B," she is the one who chooses "A" or "B." For instance, with regard to wedding vows, a woman can choose to a) incorporate the use of the word "obey" in the vows, or b) not use the word "obey." Additionally, as women push this established context further, more and more options (and freedoms) will be available to them, thereby expanding their liberties. In other words, as women challenge the predetermined collection of options via political activism (either through everyday choices or traditional second-wave activism) and embracing seemingly contradictory identities, women will win more choices and be presented with a more diverse selection. Thus, female self-determination increases along with a decrease in restrictions on female freedom.

The issue of choice spills into third-wave feminism's third tenet: embracing contradiction. Valerie Renegar and Stacey Sowards outline how contradiction facilitates choice, self-determination, and even political activism. They write,

Contradiction is not just a statement of opposition, but rather functions as a transcendent term that includes a myriad of other strategies such as ambiguity, paradox, multiplicity, complexity, anti-orthodoxy, opposition, and inconsistency.

Contradictions found in third wave feminism are often designed to challenge traditional notions of identity and to create ambiguities, divergences, incompatibilities, and different ways of thinking. In other words, contradiction is a deliberate strategy that includes interplays of oppositions. These performative and participatory contradictions create possibilities for self-determination, transcendence, and counter-imaginings that foster and rely on a sense of agency.

(6)

Contradiction allows women to explore identities that may have been previously unavailable to them. This not only allows women to revel in the complexity of identity and life, but contradiction also effectively expands the number and variety of options for women, thereby increasing their power of self-determination. Additionally, by embracing contradiction, women can "develop new ways of thinking and new forms of social action," thus partially constructing their own realities (Renegar & Sowards 15). By embracing contradiction, women are not forced into either/or situations. Instead, they are free to choose from multiple combinations of belief, identity, and activity. In a way, the flexibility of contradiction allows third-wave feminists to subvert traditional societal structures by crushing stereotypes. For instance, a "Goth" girl is free to have pink as her favorite color. A competitive mixed martial arts fighter is at liberty to wear makeup and high heels (although perhaps not during her competitions). A woman who "loves misogynist hip-hop music" can still advocate equality among the genders (Walker xxxii). A homemaker who enjoys the seemingly mundane tasks of housework and cooking can read feminist theorists like Walker or Steinem and participate in the feminist movement. A woman who considers herself a feminist and advocates equality among the genders can

be a capitalist and the chief executive officer of a multi-million dollar corporation.

While these examples seem trivial on the surface, they are actually quite significant; collectively, they work to push the limitations of societal acceptance for women. With each contradiction that is embraced, the boundaries of the established context within which women must function are eroded. Thus, the arena of female freedom and the choices available to women are enlarged and extended. In sum, the elasticity that contradiction gives third-wave feminism allows women to face "new and complex social circumstances" in this ever-changing world (Renegar & Sowards 16).

The three main principles of third-wave feminism—the inclusivity of diverse identities, the accomplishment of political activism via "everyday" activities, and the promotion of contradiction—give the ideology the flexibility that is necessary in the modern, globalized world. Third-wave feminists such as Rebecca Walker, Naomi Wolf, and Barbara Findlen do not wish to dispose of second-wave feminism, nor do they attempt to minimize second wave's contributions. Rather, they are building upon the liberties won, and foundations set, by second-wave feminists such as Gloria Steinem. Third wave should be viewed as another step in the evolution of feminism. Third-wave ideology is the new generation's feminism, and it has become necessary in order to keep feminism alive and adaptable to the modern world.

To gain insight into how third-wave ideology influences chick lit, the genre must be defined, explored, and analyzed. The following section aims to accomplish these goals and provide an overall description and explanation of chick lit.

3. Chick Lit

Chick lit is fiction writing that is geared toward women readers (particularly women in their twenties and thirties), and it is extremely popular and commercially successful. In 2002, chick-lit novels grossed more than seventy-one million dollars, and there is typically some sort of chick-lit book on the *Publishers Weekly* best-seller list or the *New York Times* best-seller list (Ferriss & Young 2). Kerstin Fest writes in *Women's Studies* that chick lit "has become a brand, instantly recognizable by the cover designs sporting pastel colors and drawings of graceful, girlish silhouettes" (44). While it is true that chick lit is often associated with "girly" motifs and the color pink, female authors writing about contemporary issues that are applicable to women are at the heart of the genre. In other words, it is a literary realm that focuses on "women's perspectives" with regard to sexuality (heterosexuality, homosexuality, and everything in between), love, community, self-image, identity, work, etc. (Davis-Kahl 20). In *Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel*, Cathy Yardley writes that "As a general rule, Chick Lit deals with topics that affect a woman's life. So: friendship dynamic. Glass ceilings. Over nurturing. Kids and biological clocks. And, of course, love" (Yardley 5). In a way, chick lit is made up of stories that, according to Cecilia Konchar Farr, "are coming-of-age fiction, bildungsroman, Joseph Campbell's hero's journey with a feminist slant" (211). Additionally, as this section argues, chick lit provides a safe haven from the demands of patriarchy, contains fallible and realistic female protagonists that audiences can identify with, has deep historical roots in literature, and has meaning behind the alleged shallowness of the genre.

3.1 *The Chick Lit Genre*

Chick lit contends with social, economic, and political issues such as culture, class, commercialism, consumerism, and femininity. According to Stephanie Harzewski, chick lit addresses "long-standing tensions among gender, commerce, and literary culture" in modern contexts, particularly because the genre tends to "embrace. . . shopping, femininity, and mass culture" (43). Chick lit addresses these "tensions" by having protagonists partake in the capitalist system and consumerism via shopping for clothes, makeup, and jewelry. Additionally, chick lit presents such "tensions" by protagonists balancing, rejecting, and embracing who they wish to be and who society pushes them to be. By investigating the tensions outlined by Harzewski, along with the relationships that women develop with others, the genre aids women in locating themselves in the evolution of the feminist movement. Goren asserts that "by exploring the relationships today's women have with work, food, shopping, men and romance, traditional roles, and our own bodies, chick lit. . . can help us understand where we stand after the feminist revolution" (202). This is not to say that chick lit wholly embodies feminist values and is not tainted by patriarchy. The works are produced within an arguably male-dominated culture, and are thus liable to show such influences. However, chick lit allows women to explore how they move between and amongst (meaning how they are affected by and what they take from) patriarchy and the freedoms won by second-wave feminists. Additionally, the genre provides a space in which women can freely attempt to reconcile their desires and societal constraints. A. Rochelle Mabry writes that "Chick novels. . . provide spaces for the expression of women's experiences and desires, suggesting possibilities for women outside the role of girlfriend, wife, or

mother" (205). For example, chick lit protagonists can be business owners (Lizzie Nichols in the *Queen of Babble* trilogy), creative (again, like Lizzie Nichols), or journalists (Carrie Bradshaw in the *Sex and the City* series).

In general, chick lit comprises stories with humorous and lighthearted tones, plots that incorporate both a heroine's love and work lives, and female protagonists with whom audiences can identify and sympathize. These lighthearted tones "[lend] the novels an identifiable, friendly voice and approachable comfort level" and make chick lit enjoyable and accessible to the general public and are, at least in part, responsible for the genre's commercial success (Ferriss & Young 38). Additionally, chick lit often employs first-person narration. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young argue that this type of narration is appealing to readers because it creates "the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to readers," which aids in creating relatable protagonists (Ferriss & Young 4).

Mabry writes:

Like their forebears, chick lit and chick movies usually focus on a female main character and use a variety of strategies to make her desires and motivations the focus of the story. *Bridget [Jones's Diary]* and many of the chick novels produced by publishing imprints like Red Dress Ink are written in first person, in the heroine's voice, conveying the notion that these novels, although fictional, are authentic, in-depth accounts of women's experiences. . . . The move toward first-person voice in most contemporary chick novels not only strengthens the heroine's voice and increases the reader's opportunities to identify with her but also offers at least a temporary escape from the feeling of constantly being watched or controlled by a male-dominated society. Of course, this doesn't mean

that a female author or main character, or even the use of first-person narrative voice guarantees that a particular film or novel is a "real" representation of a female experience. Most significant here is how hard these texts work to present themselves as authentic stories of women's lives and feelings. (195-196)

Thus, chick lit acts as a place in which women can try to be themselves. Moreover, chick lit allows women to explore who they are when they are bounded by patriarchy and society, and when they are away from societal and patriarchal constraints. If a woman is "constantly being watched or controlled by a male-dominated society," it stands to reason that the woman would need a safe haven in order to escape the omnipresent patriarchy or at least patriarchal elements. Chick lit provides this haven. In fact, some chick lit novels, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, are written like diaries, which implies that women are able to confess their true feelings and desires in the chick lit genre. After all, diaries are a safe place, free of judgment, and few, if any, ever lie in a diary. The literature also allows a woman to enjoy aspects of patriarchy (if there should be any that she takes pleasure in), and chick lit allows her to escape from male domination. Within the realm of chick lit, women do not need to fit a certain role or stereotype. Characters may fit a type of "chick lit" stereotype; however, chick lit characters are constantly evolving. Nevertheless, women can revel in their wants and desired roles without worrying about societal or patriarchal constraints; they can explore who they can be and what they can do. They are able to dream freely without being told how to dream or what to dream.

3.2 *History of Chick Lit*

While the genre has gained popularity in the recent decade, chick lit is by no means a new phenomenon. Chick lit has deep roots in literary history. Harzewski states

that the central love plot (typically, but not always, a woman and man falling in love) of chick lit stems from the traditional romance novel. She writes that such a love story "draws from the standard romance plot, where two people fall in love and must complete a quest or overcome some sort of obstacle before they finally marry" (37). Chick lit, however, seems to be more realistic than typical Harlequin romance novels, because chick lit does not always end in "happily ever after." Harzewski asserts that "Frequently, Mr. Right turns out to be Mr. Wrong or Mr. Maybe" (37). The realism, according to Farr, also stems from chick lit's "candor about the challenges [the] young heroines face," not just with regard to love, but concerning friendships, family, and especially careers (202).

Scholars, such as Shanna Swendson, claim that the chick lit genre goes back as far as the 1800s with Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as the first chick lit novel.

Swendson asserts that the novel sets the template for chick lit's heroine. She writes that throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet (Lizzy), must

. . . come to terms with her family complications, her friend's choices, and her own misguided prejudices as she finally discovers what (and who) she wants out of life. Even her romance with Mr. Darcy is part of this story arc, showcasing how she has changed as a person. Lizzy herself admits that the change was not in Mr. Darcy himself, but rather in the way she learned to see him.

This sets the pattern for the chick-lit heroine, whose story is about how she interacts with her world and the people who inhabit it. She may have a romance, but the story is more about how she has to grow and change in order to open to that romance when it comes along than it is about the relationship itself.

(Swendson 65).

Additionally, Lizzy's sympathetic, intelligent, clever, and fallible character is arguably the template to which most modern chick lit protagonists aspire. Like Lizzy, chick lit heroines such as Bridget Jones (of *Bridget Jones's Diary*) are upbeat and witty. No matter how calamitous her situation is, a chick lit heroine will tend to find humor in the state of affairs. Additionally, she consistently employs self-deprecating humor, which not only demonstrates her wit, but also adds to her likeability as a character, her ability to connect with audiences, and the comfort level of readers. Chick lit heroines often contend with financial, career, family, and friendship issues in addition to romantic entanglements. Also, like Lizzy, chick lit protagonists are not perfect. They are not stunningly beautiful, wholly virtuous, or completely feminine characters. Swendson writes that "This blend of good qualities, quirks, and flaws adds up to a heroine readers of any century can relate to, someone you'd want to be and someone you could imagine yourself being" (65). Indeed, the fallibility and imperfection of characters aid in making chick lit enjoyable and a genre with which readers can identify. Ferriss and Young assert that the flawed chick lit heroine elicits "readers' compassion and identification simultaneously. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humor that not only entertains but also leads readers to believe they are fallible—like them" (Ferriss & Young 4). Protagonists' abilities to connect with audiences often allows chick lit authors to discuss contemporary issues pertaining to modern women. After all, it logically follows that if the protagonist is realistic, then the issues that she must tackle and the solutions she finds will be believable as well and may seem applicable to readers' lives.

While chick lit's roots can be traced back to *Pride and Prejudice*, the genre's name of "chick lit" originates with Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell's 1995 anthology, *Chick-*

Lit: Postfeminist Fiction. The works in the aforementioned anthology perhaps represent an evolution of fiction written by women during the 20th century (chick lit), particularly in the blunt candor of the stories. Mazza insists in the anthology that the women's writings are representative of women no longer being "afraid to honestly assess and define themselves without having to live up to standards imposed by either a persistent patriarchal world or the insistence that we achieve self-empowerment" ("What" 9). She continues by asserting that chick lit is:

. . . writing that says women are independent [and] confident, but not lacking in their share of human weakness & not necessarily self-empowered; that they are dealing with who they've made themselves into rather than blaming the rest of the world; that women can use and abuse another human being as well as anyone; that women can be conflicted about what they want and therefore get nothing; that women can love until they hurt someone, turn their own hurt into love, refuse to love, or even ignore the notion of love completely as they confront the other 90% of life. Postfeminist writing says we don't have to be superhuman anymore. Just human. ("What" 9)

In other words, in third-wave feminist writings (such as chick lit), women are allowed to be flawed. Additionally, women can have multidimensional lives, meaning, for instance, that they can be empowered and still have weaknesses. By ridding third wave writings of polarity (i.e., either/or choices), women are given the freedom to be complicated, complex, and, most important, human.

Mazza also asserts that *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* is meant to point out the incongruity between fiction written by men and fiction written by women. She writes that

. . . writers with double-X chromosomes have been set apart, frequently called "women writers" while others remain, simply, wholly, "writers." What these women writers produce has been "women's fiction," and the rest, unconditionally, is "fiction" (or even "literature"). The translation to me has always been that men write about what's important; women write about what's important to *women*. So our title of *Chick-Lit* was meant to point out this delusion, this second-class differentiation, not pretend it isn't there. ("Who's" 27-28)

Although Mazza implies that she desires to rid the literary world of the perverse distinction that men write about "important" topics and women write about subjects that are only "important to women," this dichotomy arguably still remains. Indeed, the chick lit genre is often viewed as a space in which women write for women, about women, and about matters that relate to women's lives. This concentration on the female need not, however, denigrate the genre. Rather, this emphasis on the female can be regarded as a push against patriarchy and male domination. Instead of males dominating the focus of the literature, women grab the spotlights. A male may act as a foil to a female character, but the man is not the focal point of the plot. This female center implies that literature, and much of life (finances, politics, beliefs, etc.), need not concentrate on the male. A woman is perfectly capable of carrying a plot on her own; and, in light of chick lit's commercial success, a female focus is even desirable. This female center also gives power to women. If the world has been oriented towards males, then it is empowering to

have at least one arena (chick lit) tailored for women and pushing societal boundaries in favor of women. This is not to say that chick lit is not influenced by consumer culture. Consumerism is often a part of women's lives; therefore, it would be logical for a space customized specifically for women to incorporate aspects of life that women partake in, such as consumerism (often represented by shopping and an interest in fashion and makeup). This incorporation encourages women to explore the ways in which they are influenced (good, bad, and in between) by the goods and services that they consume—chick lit provides an area for female exploration. For example, a woman investigating how she is influenced by the goods and services she consumes can decide whether or not she is asserting her individuality or promoting male domination. One concrete example would be a woman buying a string bikini. A woman can view this purchase as either showing her pride in her body, or portraying herself as simply an object of male lust.

With the massive consumerism of global powers, such as Great Britain and the United States of America, it comes as no surprise that chick lit's origin of popularity traces back to these locations. The explosion of chick lit's popularity during the 1990s stems particularly from the publication of Helen Fielding's (who is English) 1996 *Bridget Jones's Diary: A Novel (Bridget Jones's Diary)*. In fact, according to scholars like Ferriss, Young, and Farr, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is the "urtext" of chick lit, even though the novel "parallels Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in plot and characters" (Goren 201). Other texts that are considered foundational to the chick lit genre include Candace Bushnell's 1997 *Sex and the City*, Sophie Kinsella's 2001 *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, and Lauren Weisberger's 2003 *The Devil Wears Prada: A Novel*.

While chick lit does have roots in the romantic novels of yore and frequently parallels *Pride and Prejudice* in characters and plot, chick lit also addresses the freedoms women won during the second-wave feminist revolution and the 1960s sexual revolution. Unlike the majority of previous literature about women, chick lit often explores female sexual freedom and desires. Harzewski writes that chick lit ". . . responds to upheavals in the dating and mating order through a mixed strategy of dramatization, farce, and satire. Daughters of educated baby boomers, chick-lit heroines, in their degree of sexual autonomy and professional choices, stand as direct beneficiaries of the women's liberation movement" (Ferriss & Young 37). Chick lit also diverges from the romance novel's "stipulation that a romance focuses only on one male complement for the heroine" (Ferriss & Young 38). Sometimes the protagonist must choose between more than one male. This choice suggests that women have gained a freedom with regard to significant others. Rather than the man constantly choosing the woman, the woman is now able to choose the man. Additionally, chick lit novels, such as *The Queen of Babble* trilogy written by Meg Cabot, explore homosexual romances, which implies that chick lit is pushing societal constraints toward total sexual freedom.

3.3 Opposition to Chick Lit

Chick lit, although very popular and commercially successful, is not without its critics. In *This is Chick-Lit*, Lauren Baratz-Logsted writes, "I cannot remember a single instance of a genre being as widely reviled, while at the same time being as wildly popular, as chick-lit" (Baratz-Logsted 2). The scorn towards chick lit may be partly due to people not knowing exactly what the genre is about. Yardley writes,

When I tell people outside of the writing community that I write Chick Lit, they usually wear a polite, humoring smile. Those that are avid readers usually give me a patronizing smirk—oh, you write those books. The thing is, if I asked any one of them to define Chick Lit, they would not have a clear answer. They'd probably say, "Those are those dating books, right? The ones with the bright pink covers?" Or they would shrug and say that, although they don't know how to define it, they know it when they see it. Like art. Or, you know pornography. (Yardley 4)

The haziness of chick lit's definition rests in the comparative dearth of academic study conducted on the genre. In truth, much of the academic community is somewhat disparaging toward chick lit and does not view it as worthy of serious academic examination. Rather, it is frequently looked upon as "trivial fiction" (Ferriss & Young 2). Stephanie Davis-Kahl writes that

Academia's reception of chick lit as a legitimate area of study has been lukewarm, at least in the area of research and scholarship. Reasons behind the reluctance to study the genre could include a distaste for the term itself; a belief in the conventional wisdom that all chick lit is about stiletto heels, pink drinks, and men; or an assumption that very popular, highly marketed and lucrative literature must be too "low culture" to warrant scholarly consideration. A search for "chick lit" in the MLA International Bibliography database yields less than a dozen results from peer-reviewed journals. (19)

Today, the MLA International Bibliography database yields only forty results. While this is an increase from Davis-Kahl's chick lit search in 2008, the number of search results are still quite minimal.

Some proponents of chick lit, such as Farr, assert that the commercial success of chick lit has contributed to its frequent rebuff among much of the academic community. Sometimes, a genre's financial profitability can reduce its value as art or serious literature. Farr asserts that when products (including chick lit) are

. . . successfully marketed to their predominantly feminine readers, when they "amuse and engross" us successfully, their aesthetic value generally drops.

Serious literature is, again, written by those "most inclined to view themselves as artists," who, inevitably (and prescriptively), find "their audiences limited." To take [chick lit] seriously, by implication, is to make one's critical project as trivial or frivolous. (208-209)

Thus, part of the opposition to chick lit can be surmised as academic snobbery— the academy may consider studying literature that is not considered "art" and that embraces pop culture as lowering its standards and thus not worthy of time within the scholarly world. Chick lit's commercial success has other connotations as well. To be commercially successful can be taken as the genre aligning itself with capitalism—a system that is frequently associated with consumerism and commodification. Consumerism and commodification can be interpreted as promoting corruption and inequality—entities that academia and second-wave feminists often look down upon and even fight against. Thus, chick lit may be viewed as endorsing and encouraging such undesirables, because the genre is associated with capitalism. Farr writes that

. . . critics find in this complicity with consumerism an undermining of the genre, a reason not to take it seriously. . . consumerism reinforces sexism, and the take-home message of [chick lit] novels, the critics conclude, is to buy things to fix yourself; if you are lucky, you will be rewarded with romance. (204)

Much of chick lit, such as the *Confessions of a Shopaholic* series, does indeed have characters partaking in the capitalist system, particularly with regard to shopping and enjoying fashion. Laurie Narancho asserts that chick lit's "fixation with clothes permeates the genre in content and form" and causes the genre to seem shallow (35). Farr also cites consumerism and money as issues of contention among feminists and chick lit, and she asserts that money and consumerism are among the reasons why chick lit is frequently viewed as superficial and trivial. She writes,

In the current cultural construction of this feminine genre, sex and money dominate. As a result, the genre is perceived, predictably, as shallow. . . . the nexus of its fictional fantasies is found not in characters, relationships, or events, which are all perceived as much more true to life, but in setting—the high-powered, urban world of advertising, finance, or publishing, a dream world where spending offers community, therapy, reward, and wish fulfillment. (204).

The assumption that consuming goods and services in a capitalist system is synonymous with shallowness may be in error. Or, chick lit may simply attempt to overlook such shallowness in favor of a more empowering interpretation of consumerism (particularly fashion) and capitalism as ways in which a woman can exhibit and affirm her identity. Fashion has traditionally been a way to assert one's identity. Specifically, fashion and adornment have been ways for females to assert their individualities throughout history.

Additionally, with regard to shopping, women control the money by making decisions concerning what to buy and not buy. As sovereignty over money has been historically associated with men, women being in control of money can be interpreted as women being in control of a historically masculine power. Shopping and fashion should then perhaps not be looked upon with uniform, academic disdain. Rather, they can be viewed as outlets in which women can make choices, assert their authority and autonomy, and be creative. Surely, such independence from the male world, and subversion of its authority (by controlling where money goes), are feminist and should be celebrated rather than treated as trivial or shallow.

Yet, much of the fervent opposition toward chick lit is launched by feminists and women. Davis-Kahl explains this antagonism:

A troubling observation is how much of negativity towards chick lit comes from other women writers, and this begs the question why. One explanation may be that chick lit is seen as a betrayal of feminism and its call for equality, e.g. if women are writing unashamedly about clothes, shopping, drinking to excess, and sex, then how far have we truly come? Another explanation is the confusing message sent by some chick lit about the joys of being single and a feminist vs. finding a man. . . . Lastly, the sometimes intense focus on appearance, accessories, and the body in chick lit is a source of discomfort for some. (19)

Chick lit's engagement with "clothes, shopping, drinking to excess, and sex" does not necessarily indicate a backwards step in feminism or rejection of that ideology. Rather, it can be viewed as a step forward with regard to female freedom. By discussing such matters, authors of chick lit are actually pushing societal boundaries by showing that not

only men can partake in drinking and sex, not only men have sexual desires, not only men can participate in various vices, not only men can be self-reliant, not only men can take care of their own well-beings, not only men can chase their aspirations, not only men can achieve their dreams. Chick lit thereby aids women in releasing the pressures to be paragons of virtue and take on identities that may be inconsistent with the desires of many women. Indeed, as Mazza says, chick lit allows women to be "just human," rather than "superhuman" ("What" 9). Additionally, as previously discussed, women seen shopping and enjoying fashion are not necessarily indicative of shallowness or anything for which women should be ashamed. Likewise, looking for a man, being a feminist, and enjoying the single life are not necessarily singularly exclusive. A woman can enjoy being single but still relish in viewing her choices of men. Additionally, a woman can be a feminist while desiring companionship and love from a man. Having a romantic ideal of love and of a man is not axiomatically "masochistic" (Ferriss & Young 36). If a woman desires idealized love (whether that be the stereotypical prince on a white horse, a partner in crime, simply a best friend, etc.), then she could believe that she deserves the ideal and will not, or prefers not to, settle for anything less. This choice suggests that there is an element of self-esteem. Thus, rather than being masochistic, the woman may value herself to the point that anything less than an ideal (even one that is unattainable) is unworthy of her. For instance, in the chick lit *Queen of Babble* trilogy, Lizzie Nichols breaks up with her boyfriend, Luke, because she states that she deserves "forever" and will not settle for anything less (Cabot 267). This action demonstrates that Lizzie believes that she is worthy (an indicator of self-esteem) of her ideal (forever love).

Critics point out, perhaps rightfully so, that chick lit lacks in ethnic, age, geographic (meaning chick lit originating in locations other than Great Britain and the United States), and socioeconomic diversity. Admittedly, chick lit does traditionally focus on the experiences of white, middle-class, young females. Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai state that

Chick-lit novels tell clever, fast-paced stories about young, predominantly white women's messy journeys of personal and professional growth—heroines gain self-knowledge and self-acceptance, and are thus empowered to take control of their intimate relationships and professional lives. (2)

While it is true that the majority of chick lit stories contains young, white protagonists, chick lit includes many subgenres that cater to ethnic and age diversity. Some of these subgenres include "chica lit" (focusing on Hispanic women), "sistah lit" (spotlighting African-American women), "mommy lit" (centering on pregnancy and child-rearing), and "hen lit" (focusing on women typically in their forties and older). However, this project primarily concentrates on the mainstream chick lit protagonist: a Caucasian, childless, young (in her twenties), female protagonist.

Another criticism of chick lit is that the genre allegedly encourages women to stay in the private sphere (family, home, domestic activities) instead of venturing into the public and masculine sphere of the workplace. Critics, such as Kerstin Fest, assert that chick lit portrays women who try to break out of the private sphere as rejecting their femininities and not being respectable and good. Fest claims that chick lit texts, such as *The Devil Wears Prada: A Novel*, are exemplary of women having to choose between the

private sphere (which supposedly encourages feminine virtues) and the public sphere (which often spawns evil tendencies in characters). She writes,

. . . chick lit very often tells the story of young, unmarried, and childless women in the workplace. While this aspect is largely of no concern in current discussions, it poses a problem in chick lit. The process of a young woman finding her feet in a professional environment is not portrayed in terms of the *bildungsroman*. The woman is not entering a stage of maturity by becoming a working member of society, but finds herself at a contested site on which she has to defend her femininity. The public sphere based on capitalism and rivalry seems at odds with feminine virtues such as empathy, tenderness, and sensitivity.

It is this aspect in which chick lit shows most continuity with nineteenth-century literary accounts of working women. . . . the young women have to decide between "true" femininity and professional success. (Fest 60)

Fest is incorrect in stating that chick lit novels do not portray their protagonists as "entering a stage of maturity by becoming a working member of society." Oftentimes, such as with Lizzie Nichols in the *Queen of Babble* series, the heroine's career helps her to grow and become self-reliant. For example, Lizzie's career as a wedding gown designer and restorer aids her in embracing who she is, accepting what her desires are, and developing complete self-reliance. Certainly, these actions are signs of maturity. Additionally, Fest is erroneous in claiming that the public sphere is necessarily "at odds with feminine virtues such as empathy, tenderness, and sensitivity." The way that Lizzie obtains her first famous client is by being kind to her and empathizing with the client's situation of having to please her future mother-in-law. Lastly, Lizzie's career, in and of

itself, meshes femininity (wedding dresses) and professional success (Lizzie builds an exceptional business reputation and makes a good profit).

Fest also affirms that ". . . contemporary chick lit novels draw the conclusion that somehow women do not quite belong in the public sphere. Clearly presented as 'good' that is kind, emphatic, and non-ambitious women, the heroines of chick lit still put the private before the public" (61). Admittedly, there is sometimes a conflict between a character's private life and her career. This conflict, however, should not necessarily be taken as chick lit discouraging women from entering the public sphere. Rather, it can be considered as a realistic portrayal of the obstacles women face when pursuing careers. Many women choose to participate in both the private sphere by having families, and in the public sphere by pursuing careers; and balancing the two spheres may be a constant struggle. Chick lit portrays this balancing act in which women work to maintain the balance between private and public spheres. For example, Lizzie Nichols balances her wedding dress business (public sphere) with her love life (private sphere). Thus, chick lit is a realistic depiction of women in the workforce. The genre does not necessarily romanticize these struggles and, like Fest claims, often shows the demands that women must face when they enter the workforce, such as holding on to their femininities (i.e., feeling confident in wearing "girly" clothes or accessories, participating in the private sphere, and having pride in being a woman) while still being competitive in the marketplace. These struggles and demands are ones that women often face. Many women must find ways in which to compete in the labor force, while wearing "girly" clothes and accessories, and still maintain connections to their families and friends.

Indeed, a realistic depiction of women's lives is one of the goals of chick lit and should not be looked upon with derision.

In sum, chick lit currently enjoys enormous commercial success despite academia's frequent rebuff of the genre. While chick lit's urtext is often cited as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the genre actually has deep historical roots in the romance novel and in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Today, modern chick lit attempts to give a realistic portrayal of women's lives, particularly with regard to how women are enjoying the freedoms gained by the feminist movement, and how women try to balance both the private and public spheres in their lives. Admittedly, chick lit frequently lacks socioeconomic, geographic, ethnic, and age diversity. However, the genre is branching out via subgenres such as chica lit and hen lit. Even though romantic entanglements are frequently somewhat idealized, they often seem realistic and do not always have happy endings. The fallibilities (often humorous) of chick lit's protagonists increase the realism of the genre and aid in making the protagonists relatable to audiences.

Now that the chick lit genre has been defined and discussed, the influences of third-wave feminism upon chick lit can be made apparent. While scholarly studies on chick lit typically utilize *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Sex and the City*, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, or *The Devil Wears Prada: A Novel* as example texts, this thesis will use Meg Cabot's *Queen of Babble* trilogy. By using a chick lit text that has yet to be subjected to significant academic scrutiny, this project extends awareness of the genre's many texts and provide new insights into third-wave feminist ideology, chick lit, and third wave's influence on chick lit.

4. Third-Wave Feminist Influences in Chick Lit's *Queen of Babble* Trilogy

This thesis argues that modern chick lit texts are influenced by third-wave feminism as evidenced by chick lit embracing girl power, traditional femininity, and individuality. Using Meg Cabot's modern chick lit *Queen of Babble* trilogy (*Queen of Babble*, *Queen of Babble in the Big City*, and *Queen of Babble Gets Hitched*), this thesis demonstrates that third-wave feminism makes its influences apparent in Lizzie Nichols's actions, words, thoughts, and friends. It is first appropriate to summarize the *Queen of Babble* series in order to provide background information for this thesis's analysis of said trilogy.

Lizzie Nichols, a girl in her early twenties, graduates from the University of Michigan with a degree in fashion design. In *Queen of Babble*, she leaves her hometown of Ann Arbor in order to visit her boyfriend, Andrew Marshall, in London. Once she arrives, she discovers that Andrew is not the man she dreamed about. Lizzie leaves him in order to join her childhood friend, Shari Dennis, and Shari's boyfriend, Charles "Chaz" Pendergast. Both Shari and Chaz are in France working at a castle (Mirac) that Chaz's friend owns. On the train ride to Mirac, Lizzie finds comfort in a stranger named Luke. It turns out that Luke is Chaz's friend and Luke's family owns Mirac. Lizzie and Luke eventually fall in love with one another and become a couple.

In *Queen of Babble in the Big City*, Lizzie moves to New York City with Shari, Chaz, and Luke in hopes of obtaining a job in the fashion world and eventually owning her own bridal gown refurbishment shop. Lizzie and Luke cohabitate in his mother's posh apartment, but when Luke is unwilling to make a long-term commitment (i.e., propose marriage to Lizzie), Lizzie breaks up with him and moves into an apartment of

her own. Lizzie's love life, however, is not the only issue of focus. She finally finds employment at a boutique that specializes in refurbishing and restoring bridal gowns. However, she must prove her talents to the owners. At the end of the novel, Lizzie demands a full time position at the bridal boutique (which she does get), kisses Chaz (whom Shari left for a woman), and Luke proposes marriage to Lizzie.

The last novel of the trilogy, *Queen of Babble Gets Hitched*, finds a newly engaged (to Luke) Lizzie who continually fights her feelings of love for Chaz. While dealing with conflicting feelings over Chaz and Luke, Lizzie also runs the bridal boutique by herself due to her boss having had a heart attack. In the end, Lizzie ends her relationship with Luke for good, takes ownership of the bridal boutique, and agrees to marry Chaz.

Now that background information on the trilogy is known, the novels' third-wave feminist influences (as shown via girl power, traditional femininity, and individuality) can be made apparent and analyzed.

4.1 Girl Power

Both third-wave feminism and girl power aid women in fighting what third-wave feminist Wolf calls "victim feminism," in which women are "beleaguered, fragile, intuitive angels" and seek "power through an identity of powerlessness" (136). Put in another manner, both third-wave feminism and girl power urge women to be confident in their own individualities and discover their own strengths and powers. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* website, girl power is the "power exercised by girls; *spec.* a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism." Thus, girl power refers to a woman being able to make her own

choices voluntarily and freely. She asserts her personality as well her wishes and desires, rather than submitting to some force outside of herself, whether that be a type of feminism, domination attempted by males, or person/character. She can take care of herself and exhibits self-reliance.

As with third-wave feminism, the *Queen of Babble* series endorses the woman's freedom of choice (one aspect of girl power), particularly with regard to significant others. Women are encouraged to choose their significant others (whether male or female), instead of vice versa. After Lizzie breaks up with Andrew, she is forlorn and doubtful of ever finding true love. However, her grandmother asserts that Lizzie's choosiness with regard to a man is good. Cabot's lively prose illustrates:

"I'm never going to get a boyfriend! A real one, I mean, who loves me for me, and not my savings account."

"Bullshit," Grandma says.

Startled, I say, "W-what?"

"You're going to get a boyfriend," Grandma says. "Only unlike your sisters, you're choosy. You're not going to marry the first asshole who comes along who tells you he likes you, then knocks you up." (Cabot *Queen of Babble* 98)

By comparing Lizzie's apparently good choice of being "choosy" to the decisions of her sisters (who both got married because they were pregnant), Grandma elevates Lizzie and supports her decision not to "settle." Grandma's saying, "the first asshole who comes along who tells you he likes you" implies that she is pleased that Lizzie has enough pride in herself to walk away from a man. Grandma also condones Lizzie's refusal to be

manipulated by men. Some men (particularly "assholes") may try to manipulate women into coming under male control, and those men may not even work hard to do so, as indicated by Grandma's use of "likes" instead of "loves." Additionally, Grandma's words, "the first asshole who comes along who tells you he likes you, then knocks you up," suggest that she champions Lizzie's decision to have power over her love life instead of allowing the man to take control. By getting a woman pregnant, the man, arguably, aids in taking away a woman's freedom and putting more responsibilities on the woman. If she chooses to have the child, then she is making a commitment to give birth to the baby and most likely to raise the child—neither of which is easy. If the woman chooses to not have the child, then she may be faced with a degree of societal ridicule and emotional, and especially physical, trauma. Either way, the woman's self-determination is reduced. Yet, Lizzie refuses to fall into this trap. She, instead of the male (Andrew), does the rejecting; she chooses the man—she does not let the man choose and control her.

Women's freedom of choice with regard to significant others is not confined exclusively to heterosexuality. Third-wave feminists Labaton and Martin write that the third wave addresses "our . . .sexualities," which includes not just heterosexuality and homosexuality, but everything in between as well (xxiv). The character of Shari in the *Queen of Babble* series addresses bisexuality, a sexual orientation which is neither wholly homosexual nor completely heterosexual. After being with Chaz for two years, she leaves him for her female boss, Pat. Shari explains that her sexuality is not exclusive to either gender. She tells Lizzie, "I like *some* girls. Just like I like *some* guys.' Her smile faded, and she added seriously, 'It's about the person's soul, Lizzie, not the parts they have on the outside. You know that'" (Cabot, *Queen of Babble in 194*). By not putting

limitations on her sexuality, Shari embodies the third-wave notion of pushing societal boundaries to include more identities. Third-wave feminist Rowe-Finkbeiner writes that the third wave aims to create "spaces for women to be seen as individuals rather than solely as members of their sex, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientations" (88). Thus, Shari can be viewed as creating a "space" for women to be considered as individuals rather than as functions of their sexualities. Throughout the novels, Shari's personality, for the most part, remains the same—she is still Chaz's confidant, Lizzie's best friend, and the voice of reason when Lizzie needs her.

Lizzie continues to demonstrate her girl power by refusing to submit to others. For instance, she refuses to submit to male sexual advances. She tells Luke the following concerning her ex-boyfriend, Andrew: ". . . I mean, he e-mailed me a picture of his naked butt. What would make a guy think a girl would WANT to see a picture of his naked butt? I mean, seriously? Why would he think that was an okay thing to do?" (Cabot, *Queen of Babble* 116). Lizzie talks in a derogatory tone towards Andrew as indicated by her saying, "What would make a guy think a girl would WANT to see a picture of his naked butt?" The capitalization of "want" suggests that she is incredulous that Andrew would think that his action would be acceptable and welcomed by any female. Thus, Lizzie rebuffs the imposition of Andrew's sexuality upon her, thereby rejecting him—submission is summarily dismissed.

Lizzie also simultaneously thwarts Andrew's attempt at control and asserts her identity when she declares that she is "Lizzie," not "Liz." Lizzie and Andrew have the following conversation:

"Listen, tell that wanker, when he gets in here, that you were wrong about my having a job. That you misunderstood. All right? Can you do that for me, Liz?"

"Lizzie," I say in a sort of daze.

He looks at me blankly. "What?"

"Lizzie. Not Liz. You always call me Liz. No one calls me that. My name's Lizzie." (*Queen of Babble* 89)

At a glance, insisting upon Andrew calling her "Lizzie" instead of "Liz" appears trivial. However, third-wave feminism maintains that "the everyday is . . . the site of feminist activism" and transmits political messages (Reger xx). By telling Andrew what to call her, Lizzie is asserting her authority—her girl power. A name is a large part of one's identity. Therefore, Andrew calling Lizzie something other than what she views to be her name can be interpreted as him trying to control and/or change who Lizzie is. She will not, however, bend to Andrew's will; she stays true to her identity and obliges that her desire to be called "Lizzie" be recognized and heeded.

Another instance of Lizzie asserting herself occurs when she is fighting for her job at the bridal shop. Lizzie says to both of her bosses as they try to interrupt her,

Not a word. You're going to listen to me. First off, I want thirty thousand a year *plus* commissions. I want two weeks' paid vacation, full medical *and* dental. I want at least one sick day per month plus two personal days per year. And I want the upstairs apartment, rent free, all utilities paid for by the shop. (Cabot, *Queen of Babble in* 287).

This passage demonstrates that Lizzie asserts herself in the public sphere. She does not even negotiate with her bosses; instead, she tells them exactly what they are going to do. Lizzie places herself in the dominant position and essentially commands (as indicated by "Not a word" and "You're going to listen to me") her bosses to provide the salary, benefits package, and apartment. She takes control of her position in the workplace.

Lizzie also asserts herself with regard to her desires and her value as a person. She says the following when she and Luke are fighting and before she has moved out of his apartment:

You've never seen me angry before? You're right. That's because I've been trying to be on my best behavior with you, Luke. Because I've been trying to prove to you that I'm worthy of you. Worthy of being with a guy as great as you. It's like . . . it's like this apartment. This beautiful apartment. I've been trying to act like the kind of person who would live in a place like this . . . a place with a little Renoir girl on the wall. But you know what I figured out? I don't *want* to be the kind of person who would live in a place like this. Because I don't *like* the kind of people who live in places like this—people who cheat on their husbands and lead girls to believe they've got a future together when they don't because they're not interested in marriage, only in having fun. Because I think I'm worth more than that Because I can't do for now. I need forever. I *deserve* forever.

(*Queen of Babble* in 267)

By telling Luke that he is correct in that he has never seen her angry before, Lizzie admits that she hid her true self from Luke. Instead of showing her feelings, she bottles them up in order to fit some sort of ideal that would be "worthy" of Luke. She denigrates herself

in order to take on an identity that Luke desires as shown by her constantly "trying to act like the kind of person" who would live in Luke's apartment and would be loved by him. However, in the passage, Lizzie affirms that she is valuable simply by being herself and that she has nothing to "prove." She does not want to be "the kind of person" that Luke wants. Moreover, she insists that her desires matter—she yearns for a relationship that has a "future," and she realizes that she is worth obtaining her desires and not settling for anything less—she deserves "forever."

Throughout the *Queen of Babble* series, Lizzie, despite her insecurities, often demonstrates the self-determination that third-wave feminism encourages. For instance, she is driven to succeed in New York City, saying, "I am *not* going back home with my tail between my legs. I am going to make it in New York City if it kills me" (*Queen of Babble in 39*). By writing that she will not go back home with her "tail between" her "legs," Lizzie implies that she refuses to be defeated. She will not allow the city to determine her fate; rather, she will continue to work hard to achieve her dreams, and the only way that she will allow the city to control her destiny is if the city "kills" her. This strong will and determination partly stem from Lizzie's ambition. She knows what she wants (to work in the fashion world refurbishing, restoring, and designing wedding gowns), and even when obstacles are thrown her way, she finds some method of circumventing the impediments. For example, when her bosses decide to sell the bridal shop, thereby endangering Lizzie's job and her residence, Lizzie ascertains how to pay her bosses the money to buy the bridal shop's building—she goes to one of her clients and gets the client to invest in a line of bridal gowns designed by Lizzie. Even others around Lizzie recognize her drive and ambition. Chaz tells Lizzie,

You've known what you've wanted to do since the day I met you. You've also known it was going to be hard, and that it would take a lot of sacrifice, and that you probably wouldn't make a lot of money at it right away. But that never stopped you. You never gave up on your dream when the going got tough.

(Queen of Babble in 77)

Oftentimes, Lizzie must be self-reliant (an aspect of girl power) in order to achieve her dreams. When her job and home are in jeopardy, Lizzie even says, "No! I can't let that happen! I have to solve this myself . . ." *(Queen of Babble Gets 252)*.

Lizzie depends upon herself in order to remedy her problems. Also, throughout her life, she consistently earns her own money instead of depending upon others for her income.

She states,

I'm the one who's been working in retail—and before that, babysitting every Friday and Saturday night throughout my teens, thus denying me anything resembling a proper social life—for the past seven years, scraping by on minimum wage, and denying myself life's more expensive pleasures (movies, eating out, shampoo other than Suave, a car, et cetera) in order to save enough to one day escape to New York and pursue my dream. (Queen of Babble in 25).

Thus, Lizzie not only makes the often self-sacrificing choices that allow her to chase her aspirations, but she also obtains the resources on her own. She is not handed anything; instead, she takes care of her own well-being and works for the means to achieve her dreams.

Both the third wave and girl power aid women in taking control over their lives and being empowered. Girl power and third-wave feminism encourage women to

eschew the victim status and not allow others to dictate who they can and cannot be. This freedom of self-determination extends to women choosing what they do and do not incorporate into their identities. For instance, one aspect of identity that is welcomed in both third-wave feminism and the *Queen of Babble* trilogy is traditional femininity.

4.2 Traditional Femininity

Traditional femininity refers to activities and practices that are typically associated with women and are sometimes labeled "girly." Some examples include having children, getting married, wearing makeup, being drawn to fashion, shopping, etc. There are other less concrete, yet stereotypical, aspects to traditional femininity as well such as softness, delicacy, an adeptness for nurturing, being in touch with and expressing one's emotions, warmth, etc. (Please note that this author makes no value judgments regarding the aforementioned aspects of traditional femininity; they are mentioned simply in order to define the concept of traditional femininity as it is referred to in this thesis.)

Third-wave feminist, Walker, asserts that engaging in traditional femininity, which is often in contradiction with second-wave feminist thought, is acceptable and even encouraged (if that is what the woman desires to do) in third-wave feminism. She writes, "For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories" ("Being" xxxiii). In contrast, third-wave feminism aims to encourage women to embrace all aspects of their lives, rather than to be confined by the boundaries that a feminist ideal may generate (such as rejecting traditional femininity). Rowe-Finkbeiner writes that

. . . to position the third wave in a feminist historical context, an oversimplified timeline might say that the first wave won the right to vote; the second wave won the right to enter the professional workforce; and the third wave combines previous efforts, modified by a woman's right to choose what works best for her—either "traditional" female roles, "nontraditional" roles, or a combination of the two. (88-89)

Thus, third wave actually encourages, rather than disparages, conventional femininity. Certainly, chick lit's protagonists frequently engage in traditional femininity, and such is often integral to who they are as characters.

One way in which traditional femininity reveals itself in the *Queen of Babble* series is through the emphasis on fashion. Ferriss and Young write, "Fashion has been dismissed by feminists as frivolous, as inculcating women with a debilitating femininity and making them the unwitting dupes of capitalism" (10). Indeed, fashion is oftentimes looked upon as shallow and a tool of control used by consumerism and the capitalist system. However, in the *Queen of Babble* series, fashion is portrayed as meaningful, presented as of academic and historical importance, and as a way of expressing one's unique personality. Fashion is also used as a method of partaking in "girlie feminism," which is an aspect of third-wave feminism in which "activists seek to reclaim the femininity and joy they perceive as missing in second-wave feminism" (Reger xxi). For example, Lizzie takes pride in her "girly" appearance. She states, "Superpleased with my scheme, I put on my makeup, and am just applying an extra layer of topcoat to my pedicure—since I'll be traipsing around the city in open-toed shoes, and I want to protect my French tips" (Cabot, *Queen of Babble* 80). By wanting to protect her "French

tips," Lizzie implies that she values this aspect of her appearance and receives joy in achieving her own, self-determined, standards of beauty. She is proud of her French tips and desires to show them off in "open-toed shoes." French tips and open-toed shoes are often associated with femininity because they are aspects of beauty enhancement, and such is embraced by third-wave feminism because it is a part of accepting, and even celebrating, girlie feminism.

Indeed, fashion is not portrayed as shallow in the *Queen of Babble* series. Rather, the tone towards fashion is often serious, and fashion is shown as being valuable.

Throughout the first novel (*Queen of Babble*) Lizzie writes her thesis (a project that she must complete in order to officially graduate from college) on the history of fashion and intersperses it throughout the text. She writes, "The first woven material was made of vegetable fibers such as bark, cotton, and hemp. Animal fibers were not employed until the Neolithic period, by cultures that—unlike their nomadic ancestors—were able to establish stable communities near which sheep could graze, and in which looms could be constructed" (*Queen of Babble* 11). The word choice is academic, as demonstrated by "employed," "Neolithic," and "nomadic," and adds a scholarly and serious tone to the passage. This historical and scholarly presentation presents fashion as meaningful and rooted in human culture—not shallow and as a mere product of capitalism and greed.

Moreover, fashion is portrayed as representative of creativity and passion. For instance, Lizzie finds a Hubert de Givenchy evening gown in the attic at the Mirac castle. She says to Luke, "This is a Hubert de Givenchy evening gown. A priceless, one-of-a-kind couture evening gown from one of the most innovative and classic fashion designers in the world. . . ." (*Queen of Babble* 188). By being in awe of the gown and its creator,

Lizzie shows an appreciation for the art that is fashion. Furthermore, she shows her passion for such—fashion is part of who she is as a character; her zeal exemplifies girlie feminism as she takes great joy in the iconic femininity of the evening gown.

Fashion is used as a vehicle by which familial histories can be preserved and cherished. After Lizzie restores the Givenchy evening gown that is over forty years old, many women ask for her services. One unnamed woman says,

Well—I really am sorry to interrupt—but my daughter would like to wear my grandmother's wedding dress for her wedding next June, but we just haven't been able to find anyone willing to, um, rehab it. Everyone we've seen about it says the fabric is too old and fragile, and they don't want to risk ruining it. (*Queen of Babble* 293)

To the unnamed woman, the dress is not just a piece of fabric. Rather, it is a part of her familial history that she wishes to pass on to her daughter. Her daughter also wants to wear the dress; therefore, she desires to partake in her family's past and keep her grandmother's memory alive—such actions are not shallow. Thus, for them, the wedding dress (symbolic of fashion) is meaningful and representative of family tradition.

Another manner in which traditional femininity is celebrated in the *Queen of Babble* series is the approval of modesty. As third-wave feminism embraces a woman's right to choose how to live her life, the ideology does not reject a woman if she chooses modest actions, such as abstaining from lewd language. For instance, Lizzie gives the following speech to one of her bridal gown clients, Ava, who continually swears:

. . . And last, while I appreciate that, as feminists, we have every right to embrace whatever kind of language we choose, even words considered by previous

generations to be "unladylike" or "coarse," it really isn't tasteful or imaginative to use vulgarities in everyday conversation. Sure, if you're really upset about something. But the f-word, Ava, when you're speaking about making love? I think you're better than that. In fact, I *know* you are. (*Queen of Babble Gets* 79)

Swearing, and coarse language in general, has traditionally been associated more with males than with females. The fact that Lizzie claims that it is acceptable for a woman to swear when she is "really upset about something" implies that women can do the same things as men if they so desire. However, she denounces meaningless, habitual swearing by telling Ava that she is "better than that." This disparagement of cursing may be taken as implying that women are above such vulgarity—that they are so intelligent and "imaginative" that they do not need vulgar words and that they can come up with better and more meaningful verbal expressions. Traditional femininity excludes swearing, and by rejecting Ava's use of the "f-word," Lizzie embraces this aspect of traditional femininity. She does not let feminism dictate who she is; rather, she chooses her own actions and words. Ultimately, women are free to use language as profane as that of the most crude of men; however, they are also free, and even encouraged, to be above such crassness.

Traditional femininity is also apparent in the *Queen of Babble* trilogy's advocacy of the importance of family, which is often associated with femininity due to the link between women and family (most likely due to females being the sex that gives birth and that is conventionally associated with keeping the nuclear family intact). At the beginning of *Queen of Babble*, Lizzie describes her parents' living room by saying that it,

. . . has changed very little in the four years since I've been living in a dormitory more or less down the street. The pair of armchairs in which my mom and dad read every night—him, spy novels, her romance—are still slipcovered against Molly the sheepdog's fur. Our childhood photos—me looking fatter in each consecutive one, Rose and Sarah slimmer and more glamorous—still line every inch of available wall space. It's homey and threadbare and plain and I wouldn't trade it for any living room in the world. (*Queen of Babble* 28)

The living room is representative of Lizzie's family, and her attention to detail implies that her family is very important to her. She is soothed by her family's constancy as evidenced by her pointing out that the room "has changed very little in the four years since I've been living in a dormitory." Lizzie also takes comfort in her family as a whole, as shown by her saying that she "wouldn't trade it for any living room in the world."

The *Queen of Babble* series continues to emphasize the importance of family by having Luke's lack of desire to meet Lizzie's family be a point of contention between the young couple. Lizzie states, "I'd wanted him to come back to Ann Arbor with me to meet my parents. This didn't seem like an unreasonable expectation to me, either. I'd met his family, after all. It seemed to me that if Luke really wanted to make a long-term thing out of our relationship, he'd want to meet my family" (*Queen of Babble in* 135-136). Lizzie views her family as part of who she is as a person. Thus, when Luke does not wish to see her family, he essentially does not want to see and get to know part of Lizzie's identity. This notion of family being part of a woman's identity is quite feminine, and third-wave feminism states that a woman can be connected to her family and still be a feminist.

One last aspect of traditional femininity that is encouraged by the *Queen of Babble* series is taking pleasure in a man. Walker states, feminism need not "instantaneously [pit] us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad" ("Being" xxxiii). Third-wave feminism aims to release women from constantly fighting someone (including males). Thus, by showing that it is acceptable for a woman to receive enjoyment from a man, the *Queen of Babble* series reinforces the third-wave feminist notion that life does not need to be viewed in terms of polarities—just because a woman is a feminist does not mean that she must celebrate the female body, but not the male body. Lizzie tells her readers the following:

One thing I'll say about Chaz. He may have a master's in philosophy, but he's got the body of a physical trainer.

But Luke—I'm able to note all too clearly when he, too, pulls off his shirt a second later—is an even more spectacular example of athletic masculinity than Chaz. (Cabot, *Queen of Babble* 174)

Taking pleasure in the male form can even be construed as encouraging female sexuality and freedom. Instead of trying to hide how much she enjoys seeing Chaz and Luke shirtless, Lizzie reveals her pleasure and admiration. Thus, perhaps inadvertently, traditional femininity's encouragement of female pleasure from males actually promotes the third-wave feminist notion of sexual freedom and even liberty from societal and patriarchal constraints attempting to suppress female sexuality.

Traditional femininity is not the only dimension of personality and individuality that is accepted in third-wave feminism and the *Queen of Babble* trilogy. In order for

women to continue to push societal boundaries, they are encouraged to have various and multitudinous parts to their individualities. In fact, both the aforementioned series and third-wave ideology advocate that women have many dimensions to themselves, even ones that may seem contradictory.

4.3 Individuality

The *Oxford English Dictionary* website defines individuality as "the aggregate of properties peculiar to an individual; the sum of the attributes which distinguish an object from others of the same kind;" "individual characteristics;" and "individual personality." Thus, individuality refers to the unique composition of an individual, her personality, and her actions; individuality refers to all aspects of a person. In chick lit, a character's individuality is revealed through her actions, dialogue, and inner thoughts. While individuality is, at least in part, shaped by society, education, and experiences, the person herself is ultimately the one who decides the majority of what is incorporated into the person she is and desires to be. In other words, individuality is mostly created according to a person's own volition.

One important aspect of individuality is its multidimensionality. Third-wave feminism welcomes multifaceted individualities; in fact, third-wave voices, such as Walker's, call for feminism to be receptive to, and flexible with, women's diverse desires, personality traits, etc. The *Queen of Babble* trilogy embodies this diversity of individuality, particularly with regard to the protagonist, Lizzie. Indeed, Lizzie's individuality is quite multidimensional. For instance, throughout most the series, Lizzie is a "good girl" and is typically a zero or "one" on the "Bad Girl Scale" (Cabot, *Queen of Babble Gets* 243). Yet, she does partake in the following actions, which might not be

considered wholly virtuous: sexual activity (she has sex with three men [Andrew, Luke, and Chaz] in one year); constantly drinking Diet Coke, which contains "lovely and delicious carbonation, caffeine, and aspartame" and is, overall, not very healthy; lusting after another woman's man (Luke when he was another girl's boyfriend); and cheating on her fiancé (Luke) with Chaz (*Queen of Babble* 61). However, these supposed vices do not denigrate Lizzie. Rather, they aid audiences in connecting with her character.

Lizzie's fallibility hearkens back to the third-wave feminist principle that "less than perfect personal histories" should be welcomed instead of shunned (Walker, "Being" xxxiii). Moreover, perfection is not necessarily diverse or multifaceted. The imperfections essentially add spice to a female protagonist and allow audiences to identify with her, because, like all humans, the character is flawed.

Continuing with the concept of fallibility is Lizzie's insecurity, which is yet another part of her individuality. Like many people, Lizzie demonstrates uncertainty in regard to her abilities. She questions whether or not she can live successfully and autonomously in New York City by admitting, ". . . I can't possibly go job-hunting in New York City without a college degree, and I don't know if I'll be done with my thesis by the time [Shari] and Chaz are ready to leave. Also the whole even-if-I-have-a-degree-I'm-not-so-sure-I-can-make-it-in-the-big-city thing" (*Queen of Babble* 158). Lizzie also shows that her confidence wavers when she is faced with the possibility of Chaz being in love with her. She tells her coworkers (who happen to be part-time models), "So . . . Look. I'm sure men fall head over heels for you two all the time. I mean . . . *look* at you. But in real life—for *real* girls, like me, that is—that just doesn't happen. Men don't go around falling in love with me. And certainly not without encouragement" (*Queen of*

Babble Gets 74). Lizzie's periodic lack of confidence in herself is consistent with the third-wave notion that women are not required to have "perfect personal histories" (Walker, "Being" xxxiii). Additionally, Lizzie's insecurities illustrate that even empowered women are not compelled to be strong all of the time. Indeed, women cannot be constantly confident—no rational and sane human can. By allowing an empowered woman, like Lizzie, to be fallible and sometimes self-doubting, the *Queen of Babble* trilogy follows both the third-wave and chick-lit directive of letting women be "just human" rather than "superhuman" (Mazza & Deshell 9).

Another aspect of Lizzie's multifaceted individuality is her passion for fashion. Not only does she sew and design clothes, but Lizzie also shops for clothes, thereby participating in the capitalist system. She tells readers that she is excited to "Shop! They couldn't possibly have a vintage store [in Sarlat]. But maybe a thrift shop . . . God, could you image the finds just waiting for someone like me? Givenchy, Dior, Chanel . . . who KNOWS?" (Cabot, *Queen of Babble* 144).

An additional feature of Lizzie's individuality is that she is hardworking, driven, and takes pride in her work. Although Lizzie is quite girly (as evidenced by her love of fashion and use of makeup), she is pleased to have her hands calloused by her work. She states, "I've worked my ass off for these calluses. And I'm damned proud of them" (*Queen of Babble Gets* 129). The cursing ("ass" and "damned") and rough hands are not traditionally feminine or girly. However, Lizzie does not try to hide her hands and she is not ashamed of them, which implies a facet of her individuality that is proud of her work and happy to show the ways in which her work is manifested.

Third-wave feminism and chick lit promote each aspect of one's individuality as worthy of being valued as important. This encouragement is seen in the *Queen of Babble* series when Shari (Lizzie's best friend) acts as a messenger for third-wave feminism. She passes on the third wave notion that if an activity or entity is important to and/or empowering for a woman, then that entity is part of a person's individuality and is therefore valuable. Trying to convince Lizzie that she should not hide her individuality from Luke, Shari says the following in an "exasperated" tone:

What I mean is, [Luke] likes documentaries and you like *Project Runway* . . . and yet you guys only ever watch documentaries. Because you're so busy trying to get him to like you, that you just do whatever he wants, instead of telling him what *you* really want to do. Or watch. (*Queen of Babble* in 239)

Oftentimes, documentaries are considered as more important, sophisticated, and meaningful than reality shows like *Project Runway*. However, the tone of this passage is not one of condescension. If anything, Shari expresses frustration, as indicated by the word "exasperated," that Lizzie does not view one of her own desires to be valuable and worthy as those of Luke. Shari emphasizes that because watching *Project Runway* is important to Lizzie and is something that she desires to view, then the show is worthy of being watched. Additionally, the show deals with Lizzie's passion—fashion. Rowe-Finkbeiner writes that third-wave feminism is "about accepting what each woman finds empowering" (91). Thus, this notion of valuing one's desires (which often empowers the person) pushes societal boundaries, because the idea implies that things that are important to women, whether or not society agrees, should be valued—simply because women value them.

In addition to valuing many different aspects of female individuality, third-wave feminism aims to embrace seemingly contradictory traits, actions, and/or ideas in women as well. According to third-wave ideology, without incorporating contradiction into individuality, many identities will be excluded. Excluding contradictions traps women in identities that "dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad" (Walker, "Being" xxxiii). Thus, according to third-wave feminism, without the allowance for contradiction in a woman's individuality, she is denied freedom of choice. Walker writes, "For us the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple personalities: including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving" ("Being" xxxiii). Thus, by allowing, and even embracing, contradiction, third-wave feminism promotes a flexibility of individuality that modern women may need.

The *Queen of Babble* trilogy follows third-wave feminist protocol by allowing Lizzie to possess traits and commit actions that are contradictory. For instance, Lizzie is both ditzy and intelligent. Her sentences sometimes employ juvenile constructions: "I mean, he e-mailed me," and, "I mean, seriously?" (Cabot, *Queen of Babble* 116). However, Lizzie is quite intelligent. She uses sophisticated words (such as "connubial"), and she demonstrates knowledge that implies that she is highly educated, such as when she says to her coworker, Tiffany, "How can you say that? Greece is the cradle of Western civilization, the birthplace of democracy, political science, Western literature and philosophy, the Olympic games—" (*Queen of Babble Gets* 66, 56). Lizzie is both

intelligent and educated, and this combination of ditzy and brainy embodies third-wave feminism's inclusion of contradiction and using contradiction as a source of power.

Mazza warns to be, "Careful, if you think you know us," thereby suggesting that oppositional dichotomies and ironies allow a character/person to maintain a degree of mystery and authority (since no one can truly know all of another person's secrets) (Ferriss & Young 27). Thus, having a person or character (Lizzie) be both intelligent and ditzy dispels stereotypical notions that say a person is either intelligent or obtuse. Instead, a person can be both simultaneously, thereby embodying a contradiction.

Another seeming irony in the *Queen of Babble* series is that Lizzie laments many young people's hunger for money, yet she ends up running her own business that turns quite a profit. Lizzie tells Luke,

Well, haven't you noticed that people our age . . . all they seem to think about is making money? Okay, not everyone. But a lot of them. No one wants to be a teacher anymore, or even a doctor . . . not with HMOs and all of that. There's not enough money in it. Everyone wants to be an investment banker, or a corporate headhunter, or a lawyer . . . because that's where the money is. They don't care if they're doing anything good for mankind. (Cabot, *Queen of Babble* 114)

The tone of the passage is condescending due to Lizzie's use of hyperbole as indicated by words such as "all," "no one," "everyone," and "anything." According to Lizzie, greed and hunger for money pervade most young people's career decisions to the point at which they stop caring about their fellow humans. However, Lizzie partakes in the consumerism of the capitalist system. Her boss says, "Thanks to Lizzie, business is up almost a thousand percent since this time last year" (*Queen of Babble Gets* 91). Thus,

like she has portrayed many young people, Lizzie also aims to make a profit off of others. She is doing so by following her passion (making and restoring wedding dresses), but she still promotes consumerism (by providing goods and services for profit) and derives benefits from the capitalist system. Her quest for profits may not be as greedy as that of some others because such is not all she seems "to think about," but her pursuit of profits is present because she is not able to keep her New York apartment or her bridal gown business without sufficient financial funds.

Perhaps the most glaring contradiction in the *Queen of Babble* series is that Lizzie designs and restores bridal gowns, and yet she is quite empowered. Bridal gowns are symbols of marriage—traditionally, a binding contract between a man and woman. When a woman is married, some of her freedom could be circumscribed, because she is often obliged to have sexual relations with only one man (thus she has less sexual freedom), she may be compelled to take her husband's desires into account when making her decisions, she may take his surname (thereby relinquishing part of her identity in exchange for an element of her husband's), and she may surrender some autonomy in order to promote a successful marital relationship. Thus, marriage can be seen as an extension of patriarchy and male control over women. However, Lizzie does not seem to view wedding dresses as symbols of patriarchy and male control. Rather, she views them as outlets for her passion and talents—as vehicles for expressing her creativity and individuality. She also considers wedding dresses as ways to earn money, since she makes restoring and designing the dresses her means of obtaining money, thereby retaining autonomy in her life (i.e., she does not have to depend upon her family, Luke, or Chaz for her income). Lastly, she sees the wedding dress as a means of celebrating a

woman and allowing that woman to live out her fantasies. For example, she writes of one of her clients who is trying on the gown that Lizzie designed for her, "The hem is the perfect length—just sweeping the floor. She looks like a princess. No, like a fairy princess" (*Queen of Babble in* 147). Thus, via a wedding dress, Lizzie helps a client feel special and as if the world revolves around her, at least for her wedding day.

By taking a symbol (the wedding dress) of patriarchy and male control, and then making that symbol represent a female focus, women's desires, and a method by which Lizzie can maintain her autonomy, Cabot pushes against male control. Like third-wave feminism, Cabot allows Lizzie to take the wedding dress (and the dress's positive connotations) and incorporate the symbol into her individuality without necessarily promoting patriarchy. Instead, via wedding dresses, Cabot encourages openness toward female individuality. Walker writes that feminism "must continue to be responsive to new situations, needs, and especially desires, ever expanding to incorporate and entertain all those who wrestle with and swear by [feminism], including those who may not explicitly call its name" ("Being" xxxv-xxxvi) Cabot accomplishes this flexibility toward female individuality that Walker outlines by taking something patriarchal (the wedding dress), changing its imagery to benefit women, and then demonstrating that embracing that symbol is acceptable.

Continuing with the notion of embracing one's individuality, an interesting aspect of the *Queen of Babble* trilogy is that Lizzie is not able to obtain true love until she finds a man who embraces and supports all of her chosen roles and her personality—her individuality. In fact, the main point of contention between Lizzie and her significant others is often the man's lack of respect for her quirks, personality traits, dreams,

passions, etc. For example, one reason why Lizzie moves toward loving Chaz instead of Luke is because she cannot be herself and show her individuality to Luke. Lizzie's best friend, Shari, articulates the need for Lizzie to relish in her individuality instead of hiding it in order to truly be loved:

I mean, Lizzie . . . you like to watch *The Real World* marathons in bed with a pint of Coffee Heath Bar Crunch and the latest issue of *Sewing Today*. You like to listen to Aerosmith at full volume while you hem fifties cocktail dresses on your Singer 5050. Can you imagine ever doing either of those things in front of Luke? I mean, do you really act like yourself around him? Or do you act like the kind of girl you think a guy like Luck would want? (Cabot, *Queen of Babble in 28*)

Shari's tone is not demeaning, and she does not denigrate the activities that Lizzie likes to partake in such as watching *The Real World*, eating ice cream, reading *Sewing Today*, and listening to Aerosmith while she sews. Rather, she equates the aforementioned activities to being part of who Lizzie is by asking if Lizzie could ever "really act like yourself around" Luke. Not partaking in behaviors that Lizzie receives enjoyment from implies that Lizzie cannot truly be who she is around Luke. Instead, she must attempt to fit some sort of stereotype that will please Luke—an action that Shari bemoans. Hiding her individuality and attempting to be someone who she is not does not "allow for individuality" or "complexity," something which third-wave feminism also laments and fights against, and such concealment reduces Lizzie's happiness (Walker, "Being" xxxiii). By Shari attempting to convince Lizzie to embrace rather than conceal her identity, Shari acts as a messenger for third-wave feminism's encouragement of individuality and complexity. She not only enlightens Lizzie, but also validates Lizzie's unique personality

and interests. Lizzie is the sum of her parts, and happiness necessarily requires acceptance of the whole person.

Shari also tells Lizzie, ". . . And don't be afraid to be yourself in front of him. Because if he doesn't love the real you, he's not Prince Charming after all" (*Queen of Babble in 29*). This is an interesting rhetorical move, because it references the traditional fairy tale of Prince Charming galloping on a white horse to save the fair maiden in conjunction with the implication that the story is not about Prince Charming acting as a savior. Rather, the story is about the maiden embracing and asserting her individuality. Then, only when the woman finds a man who loves and accepts her individuality ("the real" her), will she find true love. This conditional situation suggests that the woman, as opposed to the man, is in control of her love life. Only she can make her "happily ever after" happen. As third-wave feminism maintains, a woman's choice to embrace all aspects of her individuality will yield rewards that are of true value to her.

In contrast to being with Luke, Lizzie can show her true self to Chaz, and Chaz encourages her to rid herself of any constraints on her individuality. He tells Lizzie, "I just want to let you know that when I look into my future, I see *nothing* but you. . . . *And you're not even wearing Spanx*" (Cabot, *Queen of Babble in 302*). Spanx is shapewear that is made of nylon and elastic and constricts the female body in order to smooth out any bulges and make the body seem thinner. Spanx is, arguably, the modern-day corset. Chaz telling Lizzie that she is "not even wearing Spanx" when he sees her in his future could certainly be taken as sexual flirtation. However, his comment could also be interpreted as Chaz seeing Lizzie as boundary-free in his future. Spanx constricts a female's body, hides aspects of her, is uncomfortable, and molds a woman into the thin

and firm shape that much of society has deemed desirable in women. Therefore, when Chaz states that Lizzie is not wearing Spanx, he implies that he sees her as who she truly is, free of society's impositions and free of constraints. He desires all of Lizzie in her natural glory, and he wants her to be comfortable. He does not want her to hide any part of herself (including her individuality). Chaz embraces all of Lizzie; thus, when Lizzie and Chaz finally become a couple, Lizzie states, "Something is happening to me. I've even stopped wearing Spanx. I just don't care if my bulges show" (*Queen of Babble Gets* 238). Lizzie's acceptance of herself stems not exclusively from Chaz, but also from Lizzie realizing that she should accept all of herself—bumps, lumps, and all.

While the *Queen of Babble* series is exemplary of third-wave feminist influence through Cabot's apparent embracement of girl power, traditional femininity, and individuality, the protagonist of the series (Lizzie Nichols) is by no means perfect. However, her fallibility, humor, and personality help to portray a character who is entertaining, sympathetic, and realistic. Most females can probably see at least an aspect of themselves in Lizzie and in the chick lit genre as a whole.

5. Conclusion

Naomi Wolf, Rebecca Walker, and Barabara Findlen are the foundational voices for third-wave feminism. Through their books and anthologies, they have laid groundwork for the new generations' feminism. Third-wave ideology aims for freedom with regard to individuality and identity; rather than being forced into either/or choices, women are able to incorporate all identities that they desire, even ones that are contradictory. In fact, third-wave feminism maintains that contradiction allows women to push societal and patriarchal boundaries by allowing females to enter into identities

that might have been previously denied to them. This freedom of choice and identity is accomplished not necessarily through political activism that seeks to change political structures, but through everyday activities such as appearance, pop culture, art, recreation, fashion, and even blatant consumerism. While the third wave seeks to give women the flexibility and freedom that are needed in today's world, the ideology does not necessarily reject other feminist ideologies, such as those of second-wave feminism. Rather, third-wave voices, such as that of Walker, pay homage to the second wave and maintain that third-wave feminism would not be possible without second-wave feminism's contributions.

As with third-wave feminism, chick lit also encourages women to embrace multiple and diverse identities. However, this third-wave influence may be ignored (or overlooked), and the chick lit genre, unfortunately, is sometimes denigrated and labeled as "fluff" and not worthy of scholarly and academic study. Inspection of chick lit reveals that the genre is not mere modern entertainment. Instead, chick lit has literary roots reaching back to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Additionally, the literature addresses serious political, economic, and social topics such as class, culture, consumerism, commercialism, patriarchy, and femininity. Chick lit serves as a safe haven from patriarchy and societal constraints thrust upon women. Here, women can explore who they are, what they desire, and how they can live their lives. Even though the genre is somewhat lacking in ethnic, geographic, age, and socioeconomic diversity, many women still relate to chick lit, particularly because of chick lit's humorous, fallible, and sympathetic female protagonists.

What little academic study that has been done concerning chick lit often focuses on the foundational chick lit texts: *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Sex and the City*, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, and *The Devil Wears Prada: A Novel*. There are many more chick lit works, however, that are deserving of scholarly analysis—such as Meg Cabot's *Queen of Babble* trilogy (*Queen of Babble*, *Queen of Babble in the Big City*, and *Queen of Babble Gets Hitched*).

As demonstrated by this thesis, Meg Cabot's modern chick lit trilogy, *Queen of Babble*, is influenced by third-wave feminist ideology. The girl power in the *Queen of Babble* series correlates with third wave's emphasis on female empowerment via female self-reliance, freedom of choice, and assertiveness with regard to a woman's personality and desires. Throughout the series, Lizzie Nichols demonstrates all of the aforementioned aspects of girl power—she chooses her man instead of vice versa; she refuses to submit to the will of others; she relies on herself in order to make her dreams become reality; and she becomes assertive concerning her needs, desires, and value as a person. The *Queen of Babble* books also demonstrate third-wave feminism's influence through the novels' encouragement of women not to be afraid to embrace traditional femininity. As with third-wave ideology, the *Queen of Babble* series suggests that it is acceptable for a woman to act girly (such as having a passion for the world of fashion), partake in traditionally modest practices (such as not using lewd language), view her family as important, and take pleasure in men. Lastly, third wave's influence is apparent in the trilogy's encouragement of individual women embracing a multiplicity of diverse identities within their own individualities. Lizzie embodies this kind of multidimensional persona by exhibiting behaviors that are not always completely virtuous, having

imperfections (various insecurities), working hard and being determined to follow her passions and achieve her goals, and being both contradictory (both intelligent and ditzy) and ironic (making the typically patriarchal symbol of the wedding dress morph into a symbol of female empowerment). Moreover, as with third-wave feminism, Lizzie embraces all aspects of her individuality and asserts that each part is worthy of being valued as important. Thus, in light of all of the aforementioned influences, the chick lit *Queen of Babble* trilogy exemplifies many of the philosophical, sociological, and economic principles of third-wave feminism. Hopefully, this thesis, at least in part, establishes that chick lit (including texts such as the *Queen of Babble* trilogy) is a worthwhile literature genre and worthy of serious scholarly examination.

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