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# The Source and Structure of *Girl World*: Tina Fey's *Mean Girls* and Rosalind Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabes*

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*For My Daughter Diana*

**T**HE STORY OF THE LOSS and regaining of identity” may not be “the framework of *all* literature,” as Northrop Frye asserts in *The Educated Imagination* (21), but it is undeniably the frame within which Tina Fey weaves the fabric of *Mean Girls*. At the heart of the autobiographical tale that Cady Heron (Lindsay Lohan) tells in the movie’s retrospective voice-overs lies a comedic narrative of *Bildung* in which Cady loses her identity and moral compass and eventually regains them at a mature level of consciousness of the sort that scholars of William Blake usefully call “higher innocence.” From the outset, she is positioned as an innocent in the alien and hostile environment of North Shore High—Blake’s realm of “experience”—and by the end she is the wise overseer of a peaceable kingdom that she has been partly responsible for bringing into being. Most prominent of the various threads that Fey weaves into the intervening world of experience, “*Girl World*,” that Cady enters at North Shore is the book from which that phrase is taken and upon which *Mean Girls* is based: *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, a lively and commonsensical guide to “Helping Your Daughter Survive the Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of

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Adolescence” by Rosalind Wiseman that became popular enough after its publication in 2002 to be reprinted several times and, in 2010, reissued in an updated and revised form that takes into account such things as Facebook, Twitter, and, nominally, Fey’s movie.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between *Mean Girls* and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* is a close and complex one that, when examined with an eye on the 2004 screenplay<sup>2</sup> from which the movie emerged, promises to shed light not only the ways in which the movie draws upon and differs from its sources but also on its substance, its structure, and its ideology—indeed, on how *Mean Girls* means and what social and cultural work it performs.

## I

*Because girls’ social hierarchies are complicated and overwhelming, I’m going to take you through a general breakdown of the different positions in ... [a] clique. Queen Bees and Wannabes*

The closeness and complexity of the relationship between *Mean Girls* and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* becomes immediately and strikingly apparent when Wiseman’s vignettes of “The Queen Bee and Her Court” in her opening chapter on “Cliques and Popularity” are compared with Fey’s characterization of Regina George (Rachel McAdams), Karen Smith (Amanda Seyfried), and Gretchen Wieners (Lacey Chabert), the three “Plastics” whose impact on the principal character, Cady Heron, drives the narrative of her steadily deteriorating values and their eventual reconstitution. All three are largely based on types identified and delineated by Wiseman, as are Regina’s mother (Amy Poehler) and Cady herself as she becomes a Plastic and, in due course, the clique’s Queen Bee. Other characters such as Janis (Lizzy Caplan) and Damian (Daniel Franzese), the “Arts Freaks,” who initially “mentor” Cady (*S* 10) and then hatch a plot to dethrone

1 Although Wiseman begins her introduction to the 2009 edition (which by 2014 had been reprinted three times) by rejoicing in the fact that “awareness of Queen Bees and Mean Girls is now commonplace” (2), her book makes no mention of Fey and contains only one oblique bibliographical reference to *Mean Girls*: “*Mean Girls* (Special Feature with Rosalind Wiseman. ‘The Politics of Girl World’). Mark Walters (Director), 2004. Paramount Pictures” (420).

2 The screenplay is dated March 2003, and the movie was shot in Toronto in the summer of the same year. In the following pages, the screenplay is cited as *S*. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from *Queen Bees and Wannabes* are from the first edition.

Regina by depriving her of her senior boyfriend, her “‘Hot’ Body, and her ‘Army of Skanks,’” spring less obviously from the pages of *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, but they nevertheless reflect aspects of Wiseman’s book, which also provided the basis or the inspiration for several scenes and parts of scenes in the movie.

The “fabulous but ... evil” Regina (Damian’s description) is of course (and as her name declares)<sup>3</sup> the Queen Bee who, in Wiseman’s terms, personifies a “mean” and “evil popularity” “based on fear and control”—a popularity that she uses to dominate the other Plastics and, because they are the “dominant, or alpha, clique” at North Shore, the school as a whole, including the teachers and the African-American principal, Mr Duvall (Tim Meadows) (24, 25, 81). “[T]hink of a combination of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* and Barbie,” writes Wiseman in a reference to the infamous Matel doll that inspired the term Plastics: “Through a combination of charisma, force, money, looks, will, and manipulation, this girl reigns supreme over the other girls ... [S]he appears omnipotent” (25). Most of these very qualities are given to Regina in the series of comments by various girls that immediately follow her introduction: she is “flawless,” she owns “two Fendi purses,” she was once told by John Stamos that she is “pretty,” and to be “punched ... in the face by her” is “awesome.” Among the qualities that Wiseman attributes to the Queen Bee are three others that are also given to Regina: “She can make another girl feel ‘anointed’ by declaring her a special friend” (as Regina does with Cady on their first meeting); “If she thinks she has been wronged she feels she has the right to seek revenge” (as Regina does when she discovers that she has been tricked by Janis, Damian, and Cady); and “She’ll make stuff up about people and everyone will believe her (as Regina does by spreading the rumor that Janis is a lesbian) (26). This last attribute is especially pertinent to *Mean Girls* because it lies behind the Plastics’ *Burn Book*, the compendium of mean statements about other girls that Regina keeps in her bedroom and later uses as ammunition for her revenge.

When Regina is first introduced, she is being carried on the shoulders of several boys, a translation into filmic language of Wiseman’s statement that every school has its “Miss America,” the “golden girl who bears aloft the grail of beauty” as defined by Avon, Victoria’s Secret, and other institutions (79). Wiseman’s statement that the “golden girl” is “all that ... [girls] talk about when she leaves” (79–80) has a similar equivalent not only in the ensuing series of comments by various girls but also in several later

<sup>3</sup> Regina (Latin: queen) is obvious and George probably points to George III rather than George Washington.

sequences in which students and teachers speak admiringly about Regina and then Cady, who in the process of transforming herself into a candidate for Queen Beeship talks obsessively about her model. With regard to the personal appearance of the “golden girl”—“the look” that other girls “envy” and emulate (or rebel against)—Wiseman maintains that it is not “necessarily create[d]” by the Queenbee, but she is “its ultimate arbiter and enforcer” (81). This is certainly the case when Regina wears the T-shirt in which Janis has cut two suggestively circular—not to say, areolan—holes and other girls immediately follow suit. Later, when Cady has usurped Regina’s throne, the series of comments on her by various students that is structurally parallel to the series focused on Regina includes a clip in which one girl says, “I saw Cady Heron wearing army pants and flip-flops so I bought army pants and flip-flops.”

Despite or perhaps because she is, in Janis’s words, “one of the dumbest girls you’ll ever meet,”<sup>4</sup> Karen is the personification of Wiseman’s “Sidekick,” the “lieutenant or second in command [of the Plastics], the girl who’s closest to the Queenbee and will back her no matter what because her power depends on the confidence she gets from the Queen Bee” (27–28). (The military metaphor here is consistent with Wiseman’s perception of a clique as a “platoon” [19], which is carried forward in the movie in Janis’s description of Regina’s followers as an “Army of Skanks” and Cady’s purchase of “army pants”). “All the girls in a clique tend to dress similarly,” observes Wiseman, “but the Sidekick wears the most identical clothes and shares the mannerisms and overall style closest to the Queen Bee” (20)—a statement echoed in *Mean Girls* in the scene in the Old Orchard Mall, where Regina and Karen are wearing garments in the same shade of pink, but Gretchen’s blouse is much darker. That together the Queen Bee and her Sidekick “appear to other girls an impenetrable force” (28) makes all the more significant the moment toward the end of the movie when Karen feigns sickness to avoid going out with Regina, occasioning the latter’s famous “Boo, you whore.”

Among the other clique types identified and delineated by Wiseman, the one that Gretchen personifies is “The Pleaser/Wannabe/Messenger,”<sup>5</sup>

4 Karen’s lack of intelligence is a striking instance of the individualization of Wiseman’s types in *Mean Girls*, and, of course, a key element in the process of transforming the book into a drama with a specific setting, a compelling plot, and engaging and sympathetic characters. In short, Fey gives Wiseman’s types a “local habitation and a name.”

5 A very similar type is the Banker (so called because she “banks information about girls”); indeed, Wiseman concedes “it’s easy to mistake her for the Messenger” (29). Moreover, in the second edition of the book she splits the Messenger and

who “will do anything to be in the good graces of the Queen Bee and the Sidekick”:

She’ll mimic their clothes, style, and anything else she thinks will increase her position in the group ... But she can easily be dropped and ridiculed if she’s seen as trying too hard to fit in. (One of the worst accusations that you can make of a teen is say she’s trying too hard ... ) The Queen Bee and the Sidekick enjoy the convenience of making her their servant, but they love talking behind her back. (33)

“Stop ... using ‘fetch.’ It will never catch on,” Regina snaps at Gretchen after her third attempt to introduce the English slang word into the vocabulary of the Plastics, who do indeed “talk ... behind her back” in one of their conference calls (of which more later). But the most significant characteristic of The Pleaser/Wannabe/Messenger for the movie is that “She loves to gossip” and to “spread gossip” (34, 38). “[S]he knows everything about everybody,” says Damian of Gretchen when she is introduced; “that’s why her hair is so big. It’s full of secrets.” “She’s the keeper of all secrets,” says Janis in the screenplay (46). A key element in the plot by Janis, Damian, and Cady to dethrone Regina is to “crack Gretchen” and gain access to her “secrets,” which in the course of the movie include the fact that Regina’s mother has had a “boob job” and that Regina herself has had a “nose job.” The evidence that the plot to crack Gretchen is working accumulates slowly, but, when she finally cracks, she does so with a bang rather than a whimper. The explosion occurs after the Plastics’ annual performance (appropriately in plastic Santa costumes) of “Jingle Bell Rock” at the school’s Winter Talent Show proves to be a disaster for Gretchen— she accidentally kicks over their boom box—and a triumph for Cady—she averts total disaster by singing a cappella. Feeling herself increasingly shunned by Regina and taking a cue from her English teacher’s comment that Cassius’s description of Caesar to Brutus in *Julius Caesar* (1.2.135–36)—“he doth bestride the narrow world / Like a colossus”—could be translated into contemporary parlance as “Why is he so huge and obnoxious?” Gretchen delivers herself of an impassioned diatribe implying that Regina is a dictator, asserting

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the Pleaser/Wannabee into separate types (see 93–96). It would appear that these secondary types are unstable. As is the case with Regina and Karen, Fey again individualizes Wiseman’s type, making Gretchen Jewish and the scion of a family made wealthy by the invention of “Toaster Strudel.” In the screenplay, she is “not ‘hot’ but has expensive clothes” and “a sniveling whiny face” and is dismissed by Damian as “a little Gucci Hootchie” (11).

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that Brutus is just as “cute,” “intelligent,” and widely liked, and concluding that “we should totally just stab Caesar.” Here as in the screenplay Fey affirms the connection between *Mean Girls* and Shakespeare’s play that is very obliquely implied near the beginning when Mr Duvall, on mispronouncing Cady’s name as he introduces her to the students in her homeroom, mentions that he has a nephew named Anfernee who resents being called Antony. Nor does the connection reside merely in the deposition of a tyrannical dictator: Caesar is murdered in the middle of the play and Gretchen delivers her speech in the middle of the school year, and thereafter both the play and the movie become a bitter contest between one character whose fortunes decline (Brutus, Regina) and one whose fortunes rise (Antony, Cady). It was a stroke of genius on Fey’s part to see in Wiseman’s gossip girl the basis for a pivotal figure both in the plot against Regina and in the symmetrical and chiasmic structure of the movie.

Before the success of the plot to depose Regina allows Cady to assume the position of Queen Bee of the Plastics, she personifies the “Floater” in Wiseman’s typology: “she is beautiful, nice, not terribly sophisticated, and avoids conflict” (30). All these qualities are self-evident in Fey’s characterization of Cady in the opening scenes of the movie: she is pretty (and immediately recognized as such by Janis, Damian, and Regina); she is “nice” (in the sense of good and averse to “conflict,” which is why she accepts Regina’s invitation to sit at the Plastics’ table in the cafeteria); and she is certainly “not terribly sophisticated.” Indeed, she is an innocent from abroad in the Court of Queen Regina. As a consequence of being homeschooled in Africa, she knows nothing about Girl World and has little knowledge of fashion or glamour: in the screenplay, “She is naturally pretty,” “Her hair has never been dyed,” “Her eyebrows have never been plucked,” and her “hair [is] in a French-braid” (1). Moreover, she has only experienced one brief crush, on a young African boy toward whom she shows a combination of aggression and affection (in a flashback she embraces him and tells him that she loves him).<sup>6</sup> After being dropped at North Shore by her parents, she is nearly hit (and metaphorically *is* hit) by a school bus before making her way toward the school building and along

<sup>6</sup> His response to her declaration (“Mimi na penda wewe”) is a curt “taroka” (“get away”). The comfortable coexistence of humans and animals both in Africa and in Cady’s new home in Evanston are belaboured in the screenplay and revised in the movie to include a racial element in the form of the African boy and a photograph of an African in traditional dress. On a personal note, part of my interest in *Mean Girls* stems from my own experience growing up on a farm in Kenya with Kiswahili as my second language and moving to Canada (and to a boys’ school rife with bullying) at the age of fourteen.

the corridor to her homeroom across a liminal zone that visually enacts Wiseman's observation that the "first day at ... middle school or junior high ... [is] difficult and frightening for girls" as they "navigat[e] through th[e] noisy throng ... caring what each person thinks of them" (37–38): students are making out, boys are setting fire to paper bags, she is jostled and given angry and contemptuous looks. Fey also gives Cady two further characteristics that are typical of the Floater: "she doesn't associate with any one group" (hence the term Floater), and "When backed into a corner, ... [she] is one of the few girls who will actually stand up to the Queen Bee" (30). Both of these characteristics are crucial to the plot, as is one of Cady's qualities that does not come from Wiseman: she loves mathematics. In addition to being a jab at the stereotype that girls are not mathematically and scientifically inclined, Cady's talent in math reflects a recurring emphasis in the screenplay and movie on the importance of intelligence. It also places her in the senior math class, where she has an instantaneous and vomitorial crush<sup>7</sup> on Regina's "adorable" (*S* 12) ex-boyfriend Aaron Samuels (Jonathan Bennett) and is encouraged by the female teacher Sharon Norbury (Tina Fey) to join the school Mathletes, a decision that she avoids until the climax of the movie when she has regained the identity and integrity with which she began her journey through *Girl World*.<sup>8</sup>

While the naïvité of Cady's professorial parents sets them apart from all but the ubiquitous "Worried Parent" ("that's every parent" [53]) in the typology of "parenting styles" that Wiseman describes in her chapter "Passport from Planet Parent to *Girl World*," Regina's mother personifies "The Best Friend Parent" and "The Hip Parent," particularly the latter:

This parent will do anything to be liked by the daughter and her friends. This is the parent who buys beer for parties during high school, ... believing that if the kids are going to drink, they might as well do it under their own roof ... I've never seen a child who respects the Hip or Best Friend Parent. Both types are really easily manipulated by their children, especially in front of others. (51)

7 One girl's description of the symptoms of a crush in *Queen Bees and Wannabes*—"I feel like I'm going to throw up. And I'm sure right in front of him"—may lie behind Cady's "word vomit" in Aaron's company and then "real vomit" on him.

8 In the movie, Cady's explanation of her love of math, that "it's the same in every country," wins the admiration of Damian, but in the screenplay her very different explanation in a voice-over has a moral dimension that is implicit throughout the movie and comes to the foreground at its climax: "My favorite subject was always math ... Cause with math you're either right or wrong. There's no in between. Which is comforting when you live in a crazy place" (4).



Even before she appears on screen, Mrs George's permissiveness is evident in the behaviour of Regina's little sister Kylie, who is watching MTV and doing a lap dance for the benefit of a large teddy bear.<sup>9</sup> When Mrs George does appear, she exhibits the same characteristics as Wiseman's Hip Parent and elicits a response from Regina that accords fully with Wiseman's observation that such parents are not respected by their daughters:

MRS GEORGE. Hey, hey, hey. How are my best girl friends?  
Gretchen. Hey, Mrs George, this is Cady.

MRS GEORGE (after greeting and hugging a wincing Cady).  
Just want you know, if you want anything, don't be shy, okay.  
There are no rules in this house. I'm not a regular mom. I'm  
a cool mom. Right Regina?

REGINA (turning to leave the room). Please stop talking.

MRS GEORGE. I'm going to make you girls a hump-day treat.<sup>10</sup>

When she returns, Mrs George is carrying what is described in the screenplay as "a tray of frozen daiquiris. Little umbrellas and all" (27). As Cady suspiciously takes her drink and asks whether there is alcohol in it, Mrs George replies, first coyly, "No, god honey! No! What kind of a mother do you think I am?" and then conspiratorially, "Why? Do you want a little bit? Because if you're gonna drink, I'd rather you do it in the house." With her wince-inducing boob job,<sup>11</sup> her exaggeratedly rolling hips, and her contemptuous and domineering daughter—Regina has even commandeered her parents' enormous bedroom—Mrs George is more than merely a personification of the Hip or Best Friend Parent; she is a vapid, ridiculous, and pathetic caricature of the type and a cringe-worthy example of a less-than-adequate parent.

In explaining how she arrived at the "characteristics and appearance" of the type of girl whom other girls admire, Wiseman relates that she

9 Later she is seen watching *Girls' Beach Party* (a variant of *Girls Gone Wild*) and lifting her top in mimicry of two bikini-clad girls in the movie.

10 "There is nothing more ridiculous to a teen than an adult who tries to be hip by using teen slang," observes Wiseman (61), which is exactly what Mrs George does later when she asks, "What is the 411? ... What's the cool jam?" Ironically, Wiseman herself uses "411" herself when she advises mothers that "Whenever possible" they should get their daughter's "friends' 411" (67).

11 In the screenplay, she has "big grapefruit boobs with very long rock hard nipples" that are devoid of feeling (25, 28).

asked girls to identify attributes that they saw as indicative of “high” and “low” “social status” and then placed the former inside and the latter outside a “box” entitled “Act Like a Woman.”<sup>12</sup> As might be expected, the admired attributes—“Pretty,” “Confident,” “Money,” “Thin,” “Hangs out with the right guys,” and so forth—are possessed in abundance by the Plastics, and those regarded as of “low social status”—“Shy,” “Fat,” “Acne,” “Gay,” and “Too Opinionated and cause-oriented”<sup>13</sup>—are given by Fey to other students in *Mean Girls* and seized upon by the Plastics in the Burn Book, one entry in which reads, “Dawn Schweitzer is a fat Virgin and has a huge ass.” (In the screenplay but not the movie, the Burn Book contains an entry describing “the HEAVY SET ... ‘Emma Lynne Gerber ... [as] the future Mrs Egg McMuffin’ [28].) Other girls are maligned in the Burn Book in accordance with another normative judgment identified by Wiseman: “Sexual promiscuity,” which is “more acceptable (meaning ... [the] girl will not be called a slut) if ... [she] is popular” (39). Thus Regina is able to say of herself, “I was half a virgin<sup>14</sup> when I met him [Aaron]” and Karen and Gretchen both appear to be sexually active, but in the Burn Book the unpopular Bethany Byrd has “an amazing ability to suppress her gag reflex.” In Wiseman’s typology, all the girls in the Burn Book personify the “Target”: the girl who is ridiculed because her “style of dress, behavior, and so on are outside the norms acceptable to the clique.” Other such girls are Amber D’Alessio, who in the screenplay does not just “ma[ke] out with a hot dog,” but rather improbably “masturbates with a frozen [one]” and Janis, whose entry below a picture of herself and Damian on a flier reading “Outside the Box: The Artistic Experience” consists of one word: “Dyke.”

To the extent that Janis, who is described in the screenplay as “a fleshy girl with punk hair and clothes” (6) wears a T-shirt inscribed “RUBBISH,” dresses according to her full figure, and eventually confronts the rumour

12 As Mimosa Nguyen has pointed out to me, this concept derives from the work of Paul Kivel and his associates, who, “developed ... ‘Act Like a Man’ and ‘Act Like a Lady’ boxes ... in workshops ... conducted ... in the early to mid 1980s ... [which was] first published in 1990 as *Teens Need Teens*, and reissued and revised in 1992 as *Helping Teens Stop Violence*.”

13 In the screenplay, Regina pledges that, as Spring Fling Queen, she “will do more that just sell candy and sponsor queer stuff like recycling” (15).

14 The phrase “half a virgin” amusingly reflects the Clintonian question of whether oral sex is actually sex. In her chapter entitled “Pleasing Boys, Pleasing Girls: When Relationships Get More Serious,” Wiseman addresses the terminological issue largely through a commentary by “Anna, 16” in a section entitled “Losing Her Virginity,” which reads in part: “if ... [a girl] were to, say, give her boyfriend—someone she’d been seeing for a week or more—a blow job, it may not be such a big deal. She’s still a virgin” (254).

that she is a lesbian, she has taken ownership of her exclusion from the normative “Act Like a Woman” box. So too has Damian (who is described in the screenplay as “possibly fat and definitely gay” [6]), who flaunts his homosexuality by testing the colour of Cady’s against his complexion and by using the girls’ washroom, behaviours that flaunt his homosexuality and flout heteronormative expectations. Moreover, he shows himself to be completely unabashed when Janis affectionately and memorably introduces him to Cady as “almost too gay to function” and later tells him that he has “out-gayed himself.” As Regina unknowingly eats Swedish nutrition bars in the belief planted by Cady that they are slimming, she increasingly acquires two of the dreaded “low status” attributes: her skin breaks out and she puts on so much weight that she can no longer fit into a dress at the “2, 3, 5” store in the mall. The “golden girl” is rapidly coming to possess the attributes that, in Wiseman’s terms, will get her “cast out” of the “high status” box and out of the “life raft”—the clique—that, for all her seeming invulnerability, she has assembled in order to survive the perilous seas of adolescence (38–39). Regina’s nemesis comes when her bulk forces her to wear sweat pants on a Monday, thus violating the Plastics’ dress code and prompting Karen and Gretchen to expel her from their table: as she leaves, she collides with Emma Gerber, the “future Mrs Egg McMuffin” of the screenplay’s *Burn Book*, whose angry retort, “Watch where you’re going, fat ass,” provokes gales of laughter.

## II

*Where are you going to sit at lunch?*  
Queen Bees and Wannabes

In the opening chapter of *Queen Bees and Wannabes* on “Cliques and Popularity,” Wiseman answers the question “Where does your daughter hang out with her friends?” with the suggestion that, if a mother “want[s] to ... understand what ... [her] daughter’s world looks like,” she should “ask her to draw a map of her school that shows who hangs out where” and provides an example of the responses of “two sixteen-year-old girls” (41–45). Near the beginning of *Mean Girls*, Janis draws just such a map for Cady and proceeds to describe North Shore’s various cliques and their hangouts. As she does so while walking along a school corridor, the focus shifts from the map to the cafeteria and moves from table to table:

Janis (handing the map to Cady). Here, this map is going to be your guide to North Shore. Where you sit in the cafeteria is crucial because you've got everybody there: you've got your Freshmen, ROTC Guys, Preps, J.V. Jocks, Asian Nerds, Cool Asians, Varsity Jocks, Unfriendly Black Hotties, Girls Who Eat Their Feelings, Girls Who Don't Eat Anything, Desperate Wannabes, Burnouts, Sexually Active Band Geeks, the Greatest People You Will Ever Meet [Damian and herself], and the Worst [the Plastics].

A few similar groups—"Jocks," "Group of Junior Girls," and "Asians"—appear in the first of Wiseman's two maps and the others—"Preppies," "ROTC Kids," "Nerdy Freshmen," "Populars," and "Wannabe Populars"—on the second, the largest portion of which is devoted to the "Cafeteria" (42–45). As notable as the similarities between Janis's map and Wiseman's are their differences: Janis's includes few drug-related and special-interest groups such as "Ecstasy & Acid Users," "Hacky-Sack Playing Kids," and "Model United Nations Girls," and its categories sparkle with an audacious verbal wit that, when accompanied by visuals of the various tables in the cafeteria, results in one of the funniest scenes in the opening sequences of the movie. Moreover, Janis's map has a plot-related function that is of course absent from Wiseman's "non-fiction" guide (Fey 14): as *Mean Girls* nears its comic climax, cliques initially constructed, like Wiseman's, in obedience to patterns of inclusion and exclusion are unified in opposition to the meanness personified first by the Plastics and then by Cady. *Mean Girls* is rarely overtly political,<sup>15</sup> but North Shore is nevertheless (and inevitably) a microcosm of the multicultural and racially troubled society of which it is a part and, in its final cohesion, a twenty-first century reflection of the enduring American dream of unity out of diversity.

As an example of how cliques operate, Wiseman includes in her "Cliques and Popularity" chapter a subsection entitled "The Rules of the Clique: A Snapshot" in which "Gabrielle, 15" describes the code of her group:

We have rules about what we wear. You can only wear your hair up (like in a pony tail) once a week. You can't wear a tank top two days in a row. You can only wear jeans on Friday and that's the only time you can wear sneakers. If you break any of

15 It is difficult not to see the vignette near the beginning of the movie of "six inbred looking albino kids" (S 2) expressing creationist, homophobic, and pro-gun views as anything other than a jab at the Christian Right.

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these rules, you can't sit with us at lunch. Monday is the most important day because you want to look your best. Friday is downtime. When we hang out that night, we wear sweats.

If you want to invite someone to lunch [from outside the group], you have to formally invite them and the group has to vote on it. We do this because it's like buying a skirt without your friends telling you whether you look good in it or not. You may like someone, but you could be wrong. If three or more people in the group [of seven] really like her, we offer the girl an extended invitation—for a whole week. (37)

Before Regina invites Cady “to have lunch with ... [the Plastics] every day of the rest of the week,” she consults Karen and Gretchen, and, after Cady has cautiously accepted, Karen famously declares, “On Wednesdays we wear pink.” On Wednesday when Cady is dutifully wearing pink,<sup>16</sup> Gretchen further explains the code of the Plastics:

You can't wear a tank top two days in a row and you can only wear your hair in a pony tail once a week ... Oh, and we only wear jeans and track pants on Friday. And if you break any of these rules, you can't sit with us at lunch ... Oh, we always vote before we ask someone to eat lunch with us, because you have to be considerate of the rest of the group. I mean, you wouldn't buy a skirt without asking your friends first if it looks good on you ... Oh, and it's the same thing with guys. You may think you like someone, but you could be wrong.

Gretchen's comment about “guys” is a plot-driven addition that will lead Cady to disclose her crush on Aaron, but otherwise the rules of the Plastics coincide almost entirely with those of the cliques described by “Gabrielle,” who must have been extremely flattered when she saw *Mean Girls*.

Of course, many scenes and parts of scenes in the movie are less directly related to *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, and many more are mostly or entirely Fey's invention. Sometimes a passage by Wiseman seems to have served merely as a prompt to a scene,<sup>17</sup> a case in point being her

16 Unfortunately, the movie does not follow the screenplay in making the pink T-shirt that Cady borrows from Damian in order to conform a “Celine Dion tour shirt” (19).

17 Not all the scenes in which Fey used Wiseman's book as a prompt found their way from the screenplay into the movie; for example, Wiseman gives an account

comment regarding technology in “A Word to the Wise,” a subsection in “Girl Meets Boy: Crushes, Matchmaking, and the Birth of the Fruit Cup Girl”<sup>18</sup>: “Call waiting and conference call capacity are dangerous weapons in the hands of young adolescent girls ... [I]t’s too tempting for girls to have conference calls where one girl listens to the conversation without knowledge of another” (207). In the first of three split-screen telephone calls among the Plastics in *Mean Girls*, a three-way conference call is used by Regina to trick Cady into agreeing that Gretchen did a “bitchy thing” when she told her that Cady has a crush on Aaron and then into saying that she must have divulged the “secret” because “she likes the attention.” Much later in the movie, Cady turns the tables in a three-way conference call among Regina, Gretchen, and herself in which Regina says that Gretchen is “not pretty enough” to be Spring Fling Queen and that Karen should have been nominated but no one would vote for her because she is “such a slut.” Later still, Cady exploits Karen’s stupidity in a four-way conference call to get her to call Gretchen “so annoying” and then plays on Gretchen’s love of gossip to get her to tell Karen that “Regina says everyone hates you because you’re such a slut.” Yet Wiseman is very much a presence in the content of the last two conference calls. “Ho. Freak. Whatever,” she writes in “The Über-Rep: The Slut,” “There are few other words that carry so much weight, have so much baggage, and control a girl’s behavior and decision-making more [than slut] ... When it comes to the ‘slut’ reputation, girls accuse each other of two things: acting like a slut and being a slut” (129). A further dimension is added to this in *Mean Girls* when Ms Norbury tells the girls: “You all have got to stop calling each other sluts and whores. It just makes it okay for guys to call you sluts and whores.”

Another instance of Fey’s use of a section of *Queen Bees and Wannabes* as a point of departure and another scene in which Wiseman is nevertheless a presence is the party that Cady throws at her house when her parents are away for the night. Such parties and their various components—blaring music, uninvited guests, excessive drinking, destruction of property, sex in bedrooms and bathrooms,<sup>19</sup> and other spirited activi-

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of a girl shopping for shoes with her mother and observes that she has “seen girls in this situation who have thrown ... shoes across the store” (75), which is exactly what Cady does at the end of a shopping expedition with her mother (67).

18 “The Fruit Cup Girl personifies girls’ internal conflict between expressing personal authenticity and codified gendered behavior that gets them attention from boys” (209). Wiseman derived the term from a girl who “pretended that ... [she] couldn’t open ... [her] fruit cup and asked ... [a boy] to open it for ... [her].”

19 In the screenplay, the party episode is much more explicit than in the movie: Cady finds Gretchen “kneeling in front of Jason” in the bathroom (rather than

ties—are a staple of movies about teenagers and college students, but on the evidence of the screenplay especially Fey drew some inspiration and some details for Cady’s party from an “out-of-control party” described by Wiseman in her chapter on “Parties: Sex, Drugs, and Rock ‘n’ Roll.” In both places, “Everclear” (high-proof alcohol) is a punch ingredient, “Jell-O shots” are drunk, a group of boys arrives uninvited, and the host girl interacts with a boy on whom she has a crush (65, 276–77, 285; *S* 76). The narratives of potential seduction in the book and the movie are very different, however, and serve very different purposes. At the party described by Wiseman, a boy persuades a girl to go “upstairs” to a “bedroom” with him, locks the door, “sits on the bed with her,” “grazes her breast” with his “elbow” when he “reaches out to touch her cheek,” and finally “kisses her” (283–85). Whether or not these “sexual overtures” are successful is left uncertain by Wiseman, who uses the story to discuss the feelings and possible responses of a girl in such a predicament. By contrast, at Cady’s party, she finds Aaron innocently looking for her in her bedroom, suggests that they remain there instead of going downstairs, makes him sit beside her on the bed, places her thigh against his,<sup>20</sup> and attempts to kiss him. She fails and, instead, receives a lesson in the folly of “pretend[ing] to be bad at math” to get him to help her and doing so with such success that she is “failing.”<sup>21</sup> Far from finding this “funny” as Cady expects, Aaron response is quite the reverse, and it develops into one of two assaults on the Plastic persona that she has molded by mimicking Regina’s “look,” mannerisms, and language (here, “No. Shut up”):

AARON. Wait. You’re failing on purpose? That’s stupid.

CADY. No, not on purpose. Just, you know, I just wanted a reason to talk to you.

AARON. Why didn’t you just talk to me?

CADY. Because I couldn’t, because of Regina. Because you were her property.

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sitting on the edge of the bath) and discovers Karen and “a huge black guy” called KeShawn in a “closet with their pants off” (77). Nor is the decidedly non-PG-13 material confined to the party episode; to give just two more examples, when Janis is asked early in the movie what her “wig ... [is] made of,” she replies, “Your mom’s chest hair,” but in the screenplay it is “Your mom’s pubic hair” (7), and Jason Mandarino’s offer to assign someone to help Cady “pop her cherry” (14) in the screenplay becomes “butter your muffin” in the movie.

20 In the screenplay, Cady is more aggressive: she “puts her leg on Aaron’s lap” (77).

21 In essence, she has become the Fruit Cup Girl (see note 18).



AARON. Her property?

CADY. No. Shut up. Not her property.

AARON. Don't tell me to shut up.

CADY. I wasn't, but ...

AARON. You know what? You are just like a clone of Regina.

In *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, the bedroom scene at the party is used as a warning to mothers against permitting the conditions that put their daughters in harm's way. In *Mean Girls*, it is a lesson in Cady's moral and sentimental education that is swiftly followed by another. After vomiting on Aaron, she rushes after him into the street, where she is confronted by Damian and a furious Janis, who calls her "A dirty little liar" for deceiving them about the party and rejects all her attempts to explain, yelling, "You're plastic. Cold, hard plastic ... You try to act like you're so innocent" but "You are a mean girl. You're a bitch," an analysis that is as accurate as it is caustic. As Janis and Damian drive away, Janis throws a rolled-up canvas to Cady. It is a painting of the three of them in the early days of their friendship. Cady's eyes fill with tears; the regaining of her lost identity and its reintegration into her behaviour has begun.

### III

*The goal for any girl is to learn how to navigate the ... painful experiences [of adolescence] successfully and to go through a process of self-reflection that leads to wisdom and the development of a personal code of ethics.* Queen Bees and Wannabes

Despite their quite different target audiences, both *Mean Girls* and *Queen Bees and Wannabes* have an educative and ethical purpose that is imbued with overlapping assumptions and principles about what is good and bad, damaging and empowering, for adolescent girls on their journey from childhood to adulthood. Moreover (and despite Aaron's positive function at this point and later in the movie), Wiseman and Fey are fundamentally in agreement that females are better qualified and suited than males to guide girls through the treacherous terrain of Girl World, where, whether they want to be or not, they are "competitor[s]" in a "beauty pageant" and a race "to be attractive to boys" that can lead them, as it leads Cady in her pursuit of Aaron, to use "too much make-up," to wear "too sexy clothes" (S 74), and to "pretend to be not as smart, strong or capable around a



boy ... [they] like" (Wiseman 77, 202). Not surprisingly, then, all the male authority figures in *Mean Girls*—Mr Duvall, Coach Carr, Regina's father, and Cady's father—are more or less incompetent and ineffectual,<sup>22</sup> and the key figure in rescuing Cady from the abyss into which she falls as a result of the success of Janis's and Damian's plot to dethrone Regina is Ms Norbury, Fey's by turns hilarious and serious version of Wiseman.<sup>23</sup>

At the outset, Ms Norbury appears to be no more admirable or less ludicrous than her male colleagues. As she enters the homeroom carrying coffee and a bag of donuts for the class (an early sign of her kindness), Cady bumps into her and spills her coffee. When she tries to remove her stained sweater over her head, her shirt comes with it, allowing Mr Duvall, who has arrived to introduce Cady, to stare at her chest. In the scenes that follow, Ms Norbury makes several attempts to help Cady "navigate" the perilous seas of Girl World, but her role as Cady's redeemer does not become fully apparent until Regina distributes copies of pages of the Burn Book throughout the school and causes utter chaos among the girls. Standing on a raised platform with her arms folded in satisfaction, she once again "bestrides ... [the] world / Like a colossus." During the melee, Ms Norbury discovers to her great dismay that she is described in the Burn Book as a "drug dealer" (the reason being, of course, that she called herself a "pusher" when attempting to persuade Cady to drop her pretense of being bad at math). After Mr Duvall has restored order in the school by setting off the fire extinguishers, he summons the girls to the auditorium for an "attitude makeover," proves himself woefully inadequate to the task, and delegates it to Ms Norbury. The remainder of the scene is the first of several that are punctuated by a series of apologies, failed apologies, and

22 Mr Duvall assumes that Cady is black because she comes from Africa and he is in awe of Regina; Coach Carr is an incompetent health teacher and a sexual predator; Regina's father can only gaze in horror when she dresses like a Playboy bunny for a Halloween party; and Cady's father does not know what "grounded" means. See Wiseman's "Do You Think I'm Sexy? Halloween Immunity" (100–01), for Halloween as an excuse for girls to "dress as sexy as possible with less fear of recrimination" and "to be a 'bad' girl."

23 As already seen, Janis also plays a significant role in Cady's moral life; indeed, early in the movie, she articulated the traditional concept of sins of commission and sins of omission ("There's two kinds of evil people. People who do evil stuff and people who see evil stuff and don't do anything to stop it"), and, when Cady becomes simultaneously obsessed with her own appearance and with Regina, even wearing perfume Regina gives her, Janis accurately assesses the moral level to which she has sunk: "You smell like a baby prostitute." The same point is made visually in the Plastics' second visit to the mall when Cady, extolling the benefits of being one of them in a voice-over, falls head first into a trashcan.

failures to apologize. “Apologies are powerful because they’re a public demonstration of remorse,” writes Wiseman in “The Art of the Apology” in her chapter on “Nasty Girls, Teasing, Gossiping, and Reputations”: they are “an acknowledgment of the consequences of hurtful behavior and an affirmation of the dignity of the person who has been wronged,” but to be effective they must be “Genuinely contrite,” and “without qualification,” “Given with genuine understanding of the crime involved” and “Devoid of any ‘last licks’ in which the speaker buries another insult within the apology” (149).

The first technique that Ms Norbury uses in the auditorium to make the girls aware of the impact of their meanness is based squarely on one described by Wiseman near the beginning of the opening chapter of *Queen Bees and Wannabes*:

[I]magine you’re invisible and walk with me into a classroom where I’m going to discuss cliques and popularity ... I start the class by asking the girls to close their eyes and answer by a show of hands how many of them have had a friend gossip about them, backstab them, or be exclusive. All hands immediately shoot up. I ask the girls to keep their hands up and open their eyes. They laugh. Then I have them close their eyes again and to answer by a show of hands how many of them have gossiped, backstabbed, or been exclusive about a friend. Much more slowly, some bending from the elbow instead of extending their hand, all the hands go up. I tell them to keep their hands up and open their eyes. They laugh again, but nervously. (21)

This is exactly the procedure followed by Ms Norbury, and the reactions of the girls are also exactly the same: in response to the first question, their “hands ... immediately shoot up” and, in response to the second, they raise their arms “more slowly, some bending [them] from the elbow.” The ensuing discussions between and among the girls about the things that are “bothering” them is only broadly derived from such discussions in *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, but Regina’s subsequent response is entirely consistent with what Wiseman says about what always occurs next:

A girl ... will raise her hand defiantly and say, “Ms. Wiseman, the girls in this grade are not exclusive and we don’t have cliques. People hang out with the people they want to. We just all have our own friends.” As she is speaking, there are

many expressions of disbelief and eye-rolling from the other girls. (21)

Regina (raising her hand and standing up). Can I just say that we don't have a clique problem at this school, and some of us shouldn't have to take this workshop because some of us are just victims of this situation.

“Without exception,” comments Wiseman, “this girl ... [will] always be one of the meanest, most exclusive girls in the room.” Of course, the truth of this is already abundantly evident in *Mean Girls*, but it is confirmed when everyone in the auditorium, including the teachers, admits to “being personally victimized by Regina George.”

During an earlier interrogation by Mr Duvall about the authorship of the Burn Book, Cady refused to take responsibility for her part in it, and when confronted by Ms Norbury in the auditorium she does so again, now three times (in allusion, perhaps, to Peter's thrice denial of Christ), but her conscience, like that of Shakespearean villain, is beginning to stir:

MS NORBURY. Cady, do you have anything you want to own up to?

CADY (voice-over). Yes.

CADY. No.

MS NORBURY. You never made up a rumor about anybody?

CADY (voice-over). Just that you sold drugs.

CADY. No.

MS NORBURY. Nothing you want to apologize for?

CADY (voice-over). I couldn't apologize to Ms. Norbury without getting blamed for the whole Burn Book.

CADY. No.

MS NORBURY. I'm really disappointed in you Cady.

The next technique used by Ms Norbury is a trust exercise in which girls read out apologies to people they have hurt and then jump backwards into the crowd. Predictably, Gretchen's lame non-apology—“I'm sorry that people are jealous of me, but I can't help it that I'm popular”—leaves only Karen to catch her and both crash to the floor. Equally predictably, Janis's confession that she masterminded the plot to “mess up Regina's life” and convinced Cady to help receives a joyous response. On witnessing this, Regina storms out of the auditorium with Cady behind her, attempting

to apologize. Turning on her like a cornered animal Regina snarls: “you know what they say about you? They say you are a home-schooled jungle freak who’s a less hot version of me. Yeah. So don’t try to act so innocent. You can take that fake apology and shove it right up your hairy ...” Before she can be anatomically explicit Regina is hit by a school bus and badly injured. A final assault on Cady’s corrupted morality and a further stage in her moral regeneration comes when her mother, responding to her denials of the rumour that she pushed Regina into the path of the school bus and then discovering telltale evidence of her party, says, “I don’t know what to believe anymore” and asks, “Who are you?” She has indeed lost her identity.

Structurally, *Mean Girls* is coming full circle: Regina being hit by a school bus echoes Cady’s near miss near the beginning of the movie, and, at lunch on the day following her mother’s questioning of her identity, the hostility of her fellow students forces Cady to eat in the washroom once again. The regaining of her identity comes after lunch when, in the presence of her class, Ms Norbury, Mr Duvall, and the policemen who have come to investigate the allegations that Ms Norbury is a “drug dealer,” she makes a simple, sincere, and unqualified confession: “I wrote it.” To make amends, she takes flowers to Regina, she refuses to divulge the names of the other authors of the Burn Book because she is “trying the new thing where I don’t talk about people behind their backs,” and, dropping the pretense that she is bad in math, she gets a high mark on an assignment, which earns an approving “Welcome back, nerd” from Aaron. Most importantly, she apologizes to Ms Norbury, who forgives her but with the proviso that she join the Mathletes in representing North Shore at the Illinois State Championship, which takes place on the same night as the Spring Fling, the result being two intertwined and ideologically inflected episodes that complete Cady’s journey from “innocence” through “experience” to “higher innocence.”

Not only does the team against which the North Shore Mathletes compete at the State Championship represent a private school (Marymount Prep), but its members are smirkingly arrogant and less racially diverse. Since *Mean Girls* is a comedy, the outcome of the contest is as much a foregone conclusion as the movie’s desired happy ending: North Shore will defeat privilege and exclusivity as Janis, Damian, and Cady defeated the Plastics. When Cady faces her counterpart on the Merrymount team in the inevitable sudden-death round, her voice-over is replete with the lessons that she has learned in the course of her journey: her opponent is not pretty but “making fun of [her] appearance” “wouldn’t stop her beating me ... Calling somebody else fat, won’t make you any skinnier. Call-

Structurally,  
*Mean Girls*  
is coming full  
circle.

ing someone stupid doesn't make you any smarter. And ruining Regina George's life definitely didn't make me any happier. All you can do in life is try to solve the problem in front of you." In other words, nothing is gained from demeaning and defaming others, and much can be lost, including the knowledge, intelligence, and skills required for problem-solving, whether in life or in a math competition. After her opponent buzzes in with a wrong answer, Cady struggles in a voice-over and flashback to fight through the distraction of Aaron to discern the correct one from a graph that Ms Norbury has drawn on the blackboard, and in the knick of time answers triumphantly "the limit does not exist," which is both mathematically correct and a statement of her recognition of her own limitless potential. "[S]elf-reflection ... [has] led ... to wisdom." With the competition over, Cady prepares to go home and will miss the Spring Fling, but Ms Norbury convinces her otherwise. Cady has regained her lost identity, and it remains for her actions at the Spring Fling to complete her journey towards "higher innocence."

While the Mathletes have been winning the State Championship, the students have been voting for next year's Spring Fling King and Queen. With the crowning of Cady as Spring Fling Queen, comic expectations are again fulfilled and the evidence of her transformation is complete: after apologizing publicly to "all the people whose feelings got hurt by the Burn Book" and proclaiming that "everybody looks like royalty tonight," she turns to two girls who for one reason or another do not fit into the "Act Like a Woman" box and says something complimentary to and about each: to Jessica Lopez, who is in a wheelchair, "that dress is amazing" and to Emma Gerber, the "Future Mrs Egg McMuffin" of the Burn Book in the screenplay, "that hairdo must have taken hours ... you look really pretty." Snapping her appropriately plastic crown into pieces, she distributes three of them to the other candidates—Gretchen, Janis, and Regina—complimenting each, and tosses the remaining pieces to other students, including Damian. By a form of redistributive justice, the disadvantaged are raised up but the privileged are not laid low. That this applies even to Regina reflects that fact that she has been smitten and shows signs of reform:<sup>24</sup> "That's right," Aaron says earlier, "Getting hit by a bus is pretty good punishment." As the scene concludes, Aaron and Cady are dancing and making out, while, in the words of the screenplay, "We see all the different types of people dancing around them. All shapes and sizes, and levels of coolness," including Mr Duvall and Ms Norbury, Regina and the Spring Fling King,

24 The "spinal halo" that Regina wears as a result of her injury gives her an angelic look that suggests that she has come back from the dark side.

and Janis (who now identifies herself as Lebanese) and the captain of the Mathletes (who is south Asian).<sup>25</sup> The marriages, banquets, and dances that so often conclude comedies are figures of social harmony and restored order, but the dance in *Mean Girls* is more than that: it is a microcosm of the American melting pot at work in multicultural America at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The movie does not end there, however. In a voice-over scene filmed for the most part from above—from the perspective, it could be said, of “higher innocence”—Cady describes the later activities of the Plastics: Regina has channeled “all her rage into sports,” Karen has capitalized on her meteorologically sensitive breasts to become a weather announcer, and Gretchen has found “a new clique and a new Queen Bee to serve.” To the end, all three remain sympathetic characters in much the same way that Belinda does in *The Rape of the Lock*: silly, frivolous, errant, and overly dramatic as they are, they are also, in Pope’s phrase “bright nymph[s]” (5: 141) whose foibles, charm, and glamour are consistently and ultimately a source of delight rather than censure. As for Aaron and herself (and here the camera’s perspective comes down to earth), he has gone to Northwestern and she has “gone from homeschooled jungle freak, to shiny Plastic, to most hated girl in the school, to actual human being.” “School used to be like a shark tank,” she adds, “but now I could just float,” that is, return to being the Floater that she was when she arrived at North Shore. In a much-used phrase in *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, her “rite of passage” (30) through *Girl World* has been successfully completed. The setting in which Cady recapitulates her journey is the lawn in front of the school. Once a site of hostility and destructiveness, it is now a place of friendship and harmonious interaction, which is, in essence, a modern equivalent of the town common of early America. Then into the scene stride three younger girls whom Damian immediately identifies as “Junior Plastics.” Eyeing them appraisingly as they appear to be hit by a school bus, Cady speaks the movie’s final words: “If any freshmen tried to disturb th[e] peace ... well, let’s just say we knew how to take care of it.” The movie’s final lesson is clear: cliques will never cease to exist and to appear, and “peace” can only be maintained if right-minded people are prepared to act to protect it.

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25 A conspicuous absence in the movie is a partner for Damian, who simply disappears from the scene; gays and, as far as can be told, lesbians are not among “all [its] different types.”

Rosalind Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabes* provided Tina Fey with a wealth of material—a Girl World imaginary—upon which she drew liberally and sometimes extremely closely for material that she shaped into a moral fable, a coming-of-age narrative, and a sparkingly witty comedy that reflects the realities of contemporary American culture and has roots deep in the American tradition. Morally appealing, culturally resonant, structurally satisfying, and extraordinarily funny, *Mean Girls* is an enduring hit with adolescents of all ages, a group that no one should be ashamed to join if they are invited, which is exactly what the movie did in 2004 and continues to do many years later.

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