

**UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA  
FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
DEPARTMENT OF ART EDUCATION  
(EDUCATION/ENGLISH)**

**TOPIC**

**PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY TWO  
MODERN COMIC WORK**

**AN ASSIGNMENT  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT FOR THE  
REQUIREMENT OF THE COURSE: ELS 240  
(MODERN COMEDY)**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Gender is the social identities, expectations and privileges different cultures construct for members of the different biological sexes. Gender expectations, which vary greatly between cultures, establish the boundaries of acceptable individual social behavior such as dress, marriage, property rights, household duties and “sexuality” one’s self-expression as a sexual being. Unlike biological sex, cultures may accept or assign many more than two genders. Women in some Albanian communities, who take on a male identity in order to follow traditionally male household roles, are an example of a third gender. Let’s look at the definition of gender and sexuality.

## **DEFINITION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

Gender is the range of characteristics between masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex (i.e. the state of being male, female or an intersex variation which may complicate sex assignment), sex-based social structures (including gender roles and other social roles), or gender identity.

Sexuality describes the whole way a person goes about expressing himself or herself as a sexual being. It describes how important sexual expression is in a person’s life, how one chooses to express that sexuality, and any preference one

may have towards the type of sexual partner they choose. The way we choose to behave sexually is as individual and complicated as the ways we choose to dress or earn a living categories or lends itself to simple labeling, but rather is a rich and complex area of human experience.

### **Presentation of gender and sexuality using Ben John Benson's Valpone and George Bernard Shaw Pygmalion**

Most of the play's characters are men who operate in the traditionally male sphere of commerce. At the time in which the play is set, men were wholly responsible for finance and they were expected to have power over women in relationships, roles that most of the male characters in the play firmly occupy. However, the play also compares male authority, love, sex, and courtship to the social expectations of women by exploring two examples of marriages, one an extreme depiction of an Italian marriage and the other a comedit English relationship.

The Italian marriage is between Celia and Corvino. Through Celia is virtuous, she is kept under Corvino keeps her indoors almost at all times, and he forbids her, at one point, from even venturing too close to a window. Corvino's rule over Celia is extreme, but it was stereotypical their wives. Likewise, Celia represents the stereotypical Renaissance ideal of a woman; she is silent, chaste, and

obedient. This is shown to work to both her advantage and disadvantage. Her sterling reputation initially gives her credibility in court, but her testimony is quickly undermined since, as a woman, she was considered to be an unreliable witness (even to a crime of which she was a victim). The power of Celia's reputation cannot stand up to the stereotype that women are too hysterical and emotional to be trustworthy and rational, even though the men who argue against her are known to be deceitful. The cruelty of the impossible position in which Celia finds herself in court illustrates that seventeenth century women couldn't win – no matter how virtuous, women were considered to be untrustworthy and inferior creatures.

Johnson's position on gender roles can be clarified, to an extent, through an examination of Corvino and Volpone, who both try to exhibit male authority over Celia through sexuality (Corvino attempts to whore her to Volpone, who in turn attempts to rape her). For a while, it seems that Volpone will get away with this rape attempt, as several men during the play conspire to say that Celia is lying about her accusation. At the end of the play, Volpone is punished, but it seems that the primary reason for his punishment is his continuous deception of the play's other men, rather, than the attempted rape. It's difficult to discern Johnson's ultimate statement (if any exists) about sexual oppression. However, it could be argued that, while he shows sexual oppression and violence to be reprehensible,

Johnson believes that the oppression of women is less important than the moral lesson about excessive desire and greed. Lust and rape are bad, in other words but only because they are a form of avariciousness. The crime Volpone seems most guilty of in the play is excessive greed for money at the expense of Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino.

Lady Would-Be, the second woman in the play, is the opposite of Celia. The play contrasts her marriage to Sir politic would-Be – a quintessentially English marriage – with the Italian marriage between Corvino and Celia. Lady Would-Be is more independent than Celia, which reinforces the stereotype that married English women were given more freedom than married Italian women. Lady would-Be is able to wander Venice on her own and she is seen without her husband just as often as with him (contrast this with Celia, who is prevented from even leaving her home). Lady would-Be is also much more talkative than Celia, though the play doesn't exactly suggest that this is a good thing. When lady would-Be visits Volpone, she jokes in asides that she is so long-winded that he's being tortured by her "flood of words", and that, though he's only pretending to be sick, she's actually making him ill by talking ceaselessly. Much of this scene, we can note, is taken from an ancient Greek book called "on Talkative Women", suggesting that Johnson might have believed that there was some truth to the stereotype that women talk excessively (more generously, one could argue that

Johnson is merely engaging with the literary tradition of depicting women in this way). Lady would-Be, however, also breaks the mold of a renaissance women in that she appears to be educated, certainly much more so than Celia. Her long-winded speeches are so filled with literary references and allusions that peregrine is shocked when she yells at him.

The differences between lady would-Be and Celia illustrate different societal roles for women in Italy and England which suggests that gender roles are culturally contingent, rather than biologically determined. In this way, the play challenges stereotypical gender roles and assumptions about women, through it sometimes affirms stereotypes, too. At the very least, Volpone complicates the role of women in society by showing the women – like men – can be well read, virtuous, well educated, and well spoken.

In “Pygmalion”, although British society is supposed to break down along class line, Shaw makes a point of highlighting gender and sexuality in the play. Although Mrs. Higgins initially is horrified by the idea that her son might bring a flower-girl into her home, she quickly grows sympathetic to Liza. As a woman, she is the first to express a concern for what will be done with the girl after the experiment. The idea that her training makes her highly unmarriageable by anyone anywhere on the social scale. When Liza runs away from Wimpole St, she instinctively knows that Mrs. Higgins will take good care of her. Higgins’s mother

sides with Liza before even her son, not revealing that Liza is in the house while Higgins is dialing the police.

In contrast, relations between people of opposite genders are generally portrayed by Shaw as antagonistic. Higgins and his mother have a troubled relationship, as do the professor and Mrs. Pearce. Freddy and Liza get along better perhaps only due to his more passive, feminine demeanor.

## **CONCLUSION**

Gender and sexuality has played a prominent role in comedy plays, as this is seen in *Volpone* and *Pygmalion*.