

THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN MODERN COMEDY

This essay examines the issues of gender and sexuality and its treatment in Modern Comedy. M.H. Abrams views gender to mean “the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and behavior. He goes on to assert that inasmuch as it is held that, “one’s sex as a man or a woman is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender are largely, if not entirely, social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilization.” The issue of gender and sexuality in modern comedy is one that is certainly going to make our research delve into feminist criticism as the basic critical theory for our thesis as our definition above has shown. We shall base our discussion on William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Our choice the of plays of Shakespeare is informed by the ground that Shakespeare, more than any other dramatist, has a wide representation of characters of both genders. We shall consider the stated works of Shakespeare against the backdrop of the dynamics of gender and sexuality.

It does appear that when we talk of gender we are concerned primarily with the female question as it is only possible to have bearded men who see themselves as feminist and never the other way round. This is because, as Abrams has noted above, society is held up by a superstructure of patriarchal bias. Therefore the arm that wields the hammer cannot (or at least can rarely) be scorched by it. In this essay we shall preoccupy ourselves with the representation of gender in modern comedy, especially the female gender in juxtaposition with the male.

One striking characteristic of the 20th century was the women's movement, which brought women to the forefront in a variety of societal arenas. As women won the right to vote,

achieved reproductive freedom through birth control and legalized abortion, and gained access to education and employment, Western culture was forced to examine its long held views about women and the roles they play in society.

The study of gender and gender roles dominated much of the scholarship in sociology, anthropology, and psychology during the last half of the 20th century. The terms *gender* and *sex* are often used interchangeably, but these terms define different concepts and are not interchangeable. The following definitions are used throughout this study. The term *sex* refers to the biological, hormonal, and chromosomal differences that determine if a person is male female (Lindsey, 1997). By definition, *gender* refers to “meanings that societies and individuals ascribe to male and female categories,” (Eagly, 1987, p. 4) and the term *gender roles* defines prescribed behaviors that are deemed appropriate for women and men (Lipman-Blumer, 1984).

Gender roles, differing from sex roles which are physiological differences based on sexual genitalia, are social constructs, and they “contain self-concepts, psychological traits, ... [and] family, occupational, and political roles assigned dichotomously to members of each sex” (p. 2).

As the study of gender roles became formalized, six predominant schools of thought emerged in an effort to explain why women and men occupy differing roles within a given culture. These theories—biological, structural-functional, social learning, cognitive development, gender schema, and symbolic interaction—are based on different outlooks on human development and cultural practices. Biological theory suggests that the differences in male and female roles result from the biological differences inherent in both sexes (Christen, 1995; Dobson, 1995; Maccoby, 1966). The structural-functional theory proposes that in order for society to maintain itself, each sex must have roles and jobs that will perpetuate society and keep it functioning in an efficient manner (Eagly, 1987; Parsons, 1960; Parsons & Bales, 1955).

Both cognitive development theory (Baldwin, 1971; Kohlberg, 1966) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1971, 1977; Mischel, 1966) explain that gender roles are learned by children in stages and are predicated on rewards for correct gender behavior; however, the theories differ in their interpretations of rewards and learning. Gender schema theory, a combination of the stage and the socialization theories, suggests that humans develop

schemas for learning about gender and gender roles (Bem, 1988). Symbolic interaction theory posits that gender is strictly a social construction, and based on society's definition of masculine and feminine, distinct gender roles are passed on and reinforced by different mechanisms within society (Blumer, 1969; Lipman- Blumer, 1984; Mead, 1964).

Especially important to this study was the symbolic interaction theory of gender roles.

Symbolic interaction attributes gender role development to the process of socialization which is “the lifelong process through which individuals learn their culture, develop their potential, and become functioning members of society” (Lindsey, 1997, p. 53). Symbolic interaction suggests that social roles are learned over time and are subject to constant reinforcement (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1964). Additionally, symbolic interaction theory holds that a person's understanding of his or her role is subject to change. If plays are considered social models, then how female and male characters are presented suggests how society at large views the roles of women and men.

Furthermore, the presentation of gender in plays can serve to reinforce or to call for a change in accepted gender behavior for women and men.

WORLD-VIEWS

If plays provided the source material and symbolic interaction theory provided the sociological framework for this study, then the world-views of Modernism and Postmodernism provided this study with a unifying lens through which to examine the position of women and men in culture.

Modernism, as a cultural and literary movement, began to develop as early as the late 1880s but traditionally runs from 1900 to approximately 1950, with the first 25 years of the century characterized as the height of the period (Brockett, 1971; Cantor, 1988; Singal, 1987).

As the Industrial Revolution shifted the economic focus from rural to urban life, and as inventions changed lifestyles, the past, most notably seen in the Victorian culture, seemed outdated. Modernists viewed the world as an isolating place yet a place full of mystery that beckoned an exploration of its very essence. Described as ardent individualists, Modernists reveled in their personal accomplishments. As a natural outlet of their creativity, artistic achievement became important; however, art and the artist became elitist in nature. Art,

regardless of the genre, became fragmented in presentation, while the artist adopted an isolationist persona. Literary works of all modes advanced non-linear plots and new themes such as the effects of technology on humanity or the struggles of individuals with the industrialized world. As the 20th century progressed and society became more dependent upon technology as a way of life, changes in artistic expression and philosophic views called Modernism into question.

Since the late 1950s, changes, reflected in new literary and artistic pieces and in philosophical ideas are often referred to as the "Contemporary" period, but for this study these changes were referred to as the period of Postmodernism (Chabot, 1988; Goodman, 1993; King, 1991; Laqueur, 1996; Linn, 1996). Postmodernists began to break away from the purely scientific explanation of things, and they searched for non-scientific validation and answers. They eschewed the notion that Truths could be found in nature or in the Self. They celebrated diversity and embraced the notion of the Other, meaning those who were different either because of race, gender, or socioeconomic level. Avoiding the "high" art that was a hallmark of Modernism, Postmodernists found inspiration in popular culture. As language became an obsession of this period, Postmodern literary theorists turned to a detailed linguistic analysis that would help them to understand segments of society. Because of their anti-elitist stance, they often primarily focused on the reader and not the author or the text. Especially relevant to this study was the increase in status for women that occurred during the periods defined as Modern and Postmodern. Not only did women gain an elevated status, but also the concepts of gender and gender roles and the systematic study of each started and continued during these periods. During the Modern period women rose to political and social prominence. In the early 1900s, the women's movement was organized around the question of suffrage. After years of work, the 19th Amendment to the United States' Constitution was ratified in 1920 giving women the right to vote. Although Modernists advocated feminism and female writers gained prominence, Dekovan (1999) noted that despite the powerful presence of women writers in the founding of modernism and throughout its history, and despite the near-obsessive preoccupation with femininity in all modernist writing, the reactive misogyny so apparent in much male-authored Modernism continues in many quarters to produce a sense of Modernism as a masculine movement. (p. 126) With the Postmodern interest in the Other and in giving

voice to the silent, literary women broke ground during the later half of the 20th century. As female authors and feminist criticism surfaced as subjects in college classrooms beginning in the 1960s, women also made inroads into theatre. Although women had always been characters in plays, women's voices as serious playwrights were silent, and it was not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that this began to change (Case, 1988). By the 1960s, the status of female playwrights was increasing, and after the rise of the second wave of feminism, a more "energized and forceful refocused attention on women's sociopolitical status, reopened artistic avenues for women and redefined both the nature and artistic expression of women's experiences" (Kachur, 1991, p. 16; see also Case, 1988). The general movement by women in the theatre gained academic significance by the 1970s when anthologies of female playwrights emerged (King, 1991; see also Case, 1988).

GENDER ROLE THEORY

The study of gender roles and how men and women learn different roles has been the subject of many debates over the past several decades. According to Musse (1971),

It is a banal truth that an individual's sex role is the most salient of his many social roles. No other social role directs more of his overt behavior, emotional reactions, cognitive functions, covert attitudes and general psychological and social adjustments.... Nor is the ascription of any role more fundamental for the maintenance and continuity of society. Activities, tasks, characteristics and attitudes are assigned differently to men and women in all cultures. (p. 707)

Because gender is such a defining characteristic for culture, researchers have varying views about the fundamental factors of how humans come to understand gender and the development of gender roles. In truth, in the areas of gender and gender role research nowhere has "so much been written, with so little agreement" (Fagot, 1995, p. 2). Researchers suggest six different theories about how gender roles are developed and why these roles exist. The six theories are biological, structural-functional, social learning, cognitive development, gender schema, and symbolic interaction.

BIOLOGICAL THEORY

Biological theory suggests that the differences in male and female roles result from the biological differences inherent in both sexes. Significant areas of research traditionally center on chromosomes, brain structure, or hormones. For example, Maccoby (1966) examined verbal, numerical, spatial, creative, and analytical abilities and concluded that the different female and male hormones and genetic structure contributed to females being geared to success in verbal tasks while males excelled in numeric, spatial, and analytical tasks. In creative tasks, if the problem required logical solutions boys excelled, but if the problem required that a new solution be developed, girls excelled. Christen (1995) focused on the differences in brain size and structure between women and men. Because of the difference in brain size, women were better at verbal projects, and males were better suited for mathematical and spatial projects. Two predominant conclusions came from the biological theories. First, men, because of their larger physical structure, greater strength, and aggressive behavior, are the protecting and providing entity for the family. Second, women, because of their reproductive capabilities and traditionally passive behavior, are more commonly associated with nurturing and domestic care.

In support of these conclusions, Dobson (1995) cited several research studies that supported the view that women were biologically different and that these differences were innate and "resistant to change through the influences of culture" (p. 33).

One major criticism of the biological view of gender is that because of physical differences, female and male actions and functions are unchangeable and that society has no bearing on the roles that women and men play (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Consequently, biological theories created rigid gender dichotomies that govern male and female behavior. As Chodorow (1978) pointed out, the biological point of view assumed that women had "a natural mothering instinct, or maternal instinct, and that therefore it is 'natural' that they mother, or even that they therefore *ought* to mother" (p. 22). As further evidence of the strict gender portrayals, children who did not conform to their respective roles were considered "abnormal, or even psychologically unhealthy" by doctors or clinical psychologists (Singleton, 1987, p. 4).

Although criticized, biological research has opened avenues for discussions and further research projects. As summarized by Wood (1999; see also Kessler & McKenna, 1978), the value of the biological theories was the "identification of ways in which our choices are influenced by innate and relatively stable factors. Yet biological theories tell us only about physiological and genetic qualities of men and women *in general*" (p. 42).

STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL THEORY

The structural-functional theory is based on the notion that a given society must find a way to perpetuate itself to ensure survival. This view suggests that how women and men come to understand their place in society is not biologically determined but is determined by what the culture needs. Central to this theory is the notion of the "organization." As defined by Parsons

(1960), the central purpose of an organization was the "attainment of a specific goal," and this goal was achieved by the division of labor in a group that allowed the group to produce something that would be used by another group (p. 17). As individuals found themselves in certain groups, the individuals collectively shared a common experience (Eagly, 1987). The division of labor, placing males in the breadwinner capacity and females in the domestic capacity, existed within society to help children prepare for their futures as functioning adults within their group. Gender and gender roles created a stable society because each person comes to understand how his or her position is linked to a larger group (Lindsey, 1997; see also Eagly, 1988). The belief and value system of the culture exerted pressure on an individual to maintain her or his given roles. Parsons and Bales (1955) refined the structural-functional theory with their work on the socialization of the nuclear family. Their work rested on the observation that people no longer lived in large, communal tribes but instead lived as nuclear families in independent dwellings.

Therefore, families became "a more specialized agency than before" (p. 9). As a result of this new position, the roles of the woman and the man in the family gave the family stability and a medium in which to socialize a child into the ways of the world. Thus, Parsons and Bales concluded that

It seems quite safe in general to say that the adult feminine role has not ceased to be anchored primarily in the internal affairs of the family, as wife, mother, and manager of the

household, while the role of the adult male is predominantly anchored in the occupational world, in his job and through it by his status-giving and income-earning functions for the family. (p. 14-15)

With these established roles in place, the family became a structured unit with its primary function resting on socializing a child to the "pattern of values" so that the child will be able to carry on society's structure (p. 15).

Parsons and Bales (1955) suggested that the socialization of a child came in stages, and that the parents were the primary agents of socialization. For effective socialization, the role of the father for the sons and the mother for the daughters was the proper role for emulation. In order to emphasize the different gender roles, they categorized men as being "instrumental superior" and women as "expressive superior." "Instrumental" meant that a man had an external concentration that was focused on seeing the family in relation to his objectives of earning an income and providing status in the world (p. 47). In contrast to this, "expressive" meant that a woman had an internal focus that centered on maintaining the relationships between family members (p. 47).

Structural-functionalism, as a theory for explaining society and gender, has its theoretical limitations. One basic criticism of the theory was that structural-functionalism presented an oversimplified view of society (Eagly, 1997). In addition to its simplicity, the structuralfunctional view of gender was conservative and did not take into account variety within society.

As noted by Lindsey (1997), households with single parents "are immensely adaptable and exhibit a diversity of patterns and circumstances" that were not taken into account by the theory

(p. 6). Finally, the structural-functional perspective has been used as a "justification for the persistence of male dominance and overall gender stratification" (p. 6) as well as a support for the "white, middle-class family ethic" (p. 6). Thus, this theory did not consider the rapidly changing dynamics of the contemporary family nor did the theory consider race, political power, and socioeconomic differences as relevant factors (Millett, 1969; see also Lindsey, 1997).

Millett concluded that structural-functionalism operates in an "endless present" with a "nostalgic flavor" as a prescriptive methodology for dictating "cultural policy" (p. 221 & p. 222).

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Social learning theory explains gender and how gender roles are formed by using a developmental process orientation. Much like behaviorism, central to social learning theory is the notion of gaining rewards for exhibiting the correct gender role behavior, and the major emphasis is on the "agents of reinforcement" (Howard & Hollander, 1997, p. 45; see also Gewirtz, 1971; Hargreaves, 1987; Musse, 1971). Social learning theory, although it recognizes the importance of socialization in defining gender roles, posits that gender identity is set in childhood.

Mischel (1966) defined the process for how a child developed an understanding of gender role behavior. First a child learned to "discriminate" between the differences in male and female behavior. From there, the child "generalized" this behavior from specific experiences to new situations, and this finally led to "performing" sex-typed behavior (p. 57). Observation of appropriate behavior and gaining positive rewards for imitating such behavior explained how children's concepts of gender became entrenched. For example, Mischel noted that "Dependent behaviors are less rewarded for males, and physically aggressive behaviors are less rewarded for females" (p. 75). As a child observed dependent behavior in the mother and aggressive behavior in the father, she or he began to associate these two behavior traits with other females and males.

In a child's activities, positive rewards were attributed to emulating the behavior of males if the child was a boy and the behavior of females if the child was a girl.

Bandura (1971, 1977; see also Bussey & Bandura, 1999) was another proponent of the social learning theory. He suggested that both identification and modeling were two key methods that a child would use to begin forming an understanding of gender behavior. The identification process for a child began right from birth with items such as pink or blue blankets to identify the child as female or male. Identification then continued with the parent's choice of clothing, hairstyles, toys, games, playmates, and finally through "nonpermissive parental reactions to deviant sex-role behavior" (p. 215). Modeling, or the

copying of behaviors seen by parents, other adults, peers, or images from television and film, also contributed to a child's understanding of gender related behavior, but the extent of how modeling affected a child or who a child chose to imitate was hard to discover. Bandura, however, noted that for a child the "observation of rewarding or punishing consequences to a model can substantially affect the extent to which observers willingly engage in identificatory behavior" (p. 237).

Social learning theory was criticized for the passive role given to children in the process of socialization and for the failure to consider variety in children's cognitive abilities (Bascow, 1992; Lindsey, 1997). Under social learning theory, children took no part in their socialization; they merely reacted to rewards that guided them to their sense of identity. Likewise, a child's mental ability and values from ethnic differences were not taken into account.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT THEORY

The cognitive development theory, like social learning theory, focuses on the development of a child in stages. Cognitive development theory is patterned after the work of Jean Piaget (1952, 1954) who focused on intellectual and social learning stages in children. Following the general stages of learning—contiguity, generalization, reinforcement, and repetition—cognitive development theory assumed that a child constructs a "cognitive representation of the distal environment" (Baldwin, 1971, p. 328; see also Musse, 1971). Lawrence Kohlberg (1966) advanced the cognitive development perspective. He proposed that neither biology nor culture influenced a child's understanding of gender, but a child's "cognitive organization of social roles" explained the existence of gender role differences (p. 82). A child's gender identity, or the categorization of boy or girl, was the first basic building block; from there, the child began to comprehend what being a boy or girl meant with regard to his or her activities. Kohlberg developed the following pattern for how gender roles were learned: "I am a boy, therefore I want to do boy things, therefore, the opportunity to do boy things is rewarding" (p. 89). Cognitive development theory suggested that gender identity is stable, is set by the age of six, and does not change like other concepts such as age or social class (Kessler & McKenna, 1978; see also Kohlberg, 1966).

Both social learning theory and cognitive development, although they seem to describe the same process, have distinct differences. One major difference was that social learning theory focused on "sex-typing behaviors and the process of sex-role acquisition" and cognitive development theory focused on "the development of a stable gender identity" (Constantinople, 1979, p. 124). Another major difference between the theories was that instead of seeing reinforcement as the guiding principle as in social learning theory, cognitive development theory suggests that "imitation and reinforcement of sex-typed behavior is actually guided by some form of internalized sex-typed identity" (Hargreaves, 1987, p. 33). Using this premise, social learning theory explained gender differences developing as a result of identification with the father while cognitive development theory regarded identification with the father as the cause of gender differences.

One criticism of cognitive development theory, as well as social learning theory, was the total dependence on only male research subjects when the theories were developed. For example, Kohlberg only used boys in his research activities, and he assumed that the same pattern of development worked for girls. Social learning theory also placed great emphasis on the father figure as the "most powerful provider of rewards and punishments"; therefore, gender role development was again explored from the male perspective (Hargreaves, 1987, p. 31; see also Bascow, 1992; Katz, 1979). Again, it was assumed that girls would follow the same pattern with mothers; however, "empirical studies of imitation and identification have shown that the question of symmetry of the process of sex-typing between boys and girls is by no means straightforward" (p. 31; see also Gilligan, 1982).

GENDER SCHEMA THEORY

Unlike the other theories of gender that focus on the content of gender differences, gender schema theory focuses on the process of how an individual comes to understand gender differences (Bem, 1988; Hargreaves, 1987). In other words, the division between male and female is the important issue, not what makes up male and female. Gender schema theory is based on the premise that humans develop cognitive schemas, which are organizing systems that store information about particular objects or concepts. As defined by Howard and Hollander

(1997):

Schemas are abstract. They serve as theories, as preconceptions that drive cognitive processes. The construction of social schemas is precisely what allows us to think as cognitive misers. Through schemas, people simplify reality, interpreting specific instances in light of a general category. Schemas are vital for processing information. Schemas influence what information we attend to and what information we do not "see" in social situations. (p.

71)

According to schema theory, the ability to create schemas helped people to process information and make judgements. Judgements were likely to confirm existing schemas thereby people perpetuated "both...individual and societal expectations about others" (p. 72). Because schemas organized a vast amount of information, they are "resilient and highly resistant to change" (p. 72)

Schema theory was appropriate for explaining gender role development because people live in a sex-typed world (Fagot, 1995). In learning gender roles, gender schema theory suggested that first a child learns the culture's definition of male and female (Bem, 1988). Once gender definitions became a schema, "The child also learns to invoke this heterogeneous network of sex related associations in order to evaluate and assimilate new information. The child, in short, learns to encode and organize information in terms of an evolving gender schema" (p.

130). This encoding process was then transferred to the self. A child, to see if her or his behavior matches the established schema, used the gender schema as a lens: if the behavior does not match, then the child modifies the behavior to adhere to the cultural definition.

As a model for understanding gender, gender schema theory is also not immune to criticism. The theory was criticized for ignoring situational variables and for reducing all situations into a gender schematic processing point of view (Bascow, 1992). Critics also suggested that more empirical research was needed to fully understand gender schema theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Lindsey, 1997). Proving that schemas exist has been the subject of debate, and only additional research could help to clarify how schemas are developed and if changes in established schemas are possible.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION THEORY

Symbolic interaction presents a different way of looking at individuals and individual learning than any of the other theories discussed here. Unlike biological, functional, developmental, or schema theories that characterize the person as a passive agent in learning and socialization, symbolic interaction characterizes the person as engaged in the process of learning and responsible for internalizing the messages of socialization. Additionally, symbolic interaction "acknowledged and explored various levels of experience neglected by other sociological traditions" (Gould & Kern-Daniels, 1977, p. 184). In short, symbolic interaction examines how "people attach symbolic meanings to objects, behaviors, and other people and develop and transmit these meanings through interaction" (Howard & Hollander, 1997, p. 2).

The basis of symbolic interaction theory comes from the work of George Herbert Mead (1964). Mead was concerned with the idea of the self and how that self was created. He theorized that the self resulted from the interaction of the individual with the group to which the individual belonged. Interaction existed in two forms, non-symbolic interaction and symbolic interaction. Non-symbolic interaction, such as running from danger, was a reflex action or an action taken without premeditation. Symbolic interaction involved interpretation and thinking about the action. Language and communication were essential to symbolic interaction and to the forming of the self because the individual could "talk to himself in terms of the community to which he belongs and lay upon himself the responsibility that belongs to his community" (p. 33).

Additionally, language helped the individual to internalize social habits, and these social habits or customs created a "universal discourse" among all the participants in the group (p. 38). The universal discourse created a common language between the participants. For example, a handshake was a universal discourse in that it is commonly understood as a form of social greeting. Mead concluded that "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth but arises in the process of social experience and activity" (p. 199).

Howard and Hollander (1997) also noted the importance of the self to symbolic interaction. Like Mead, they acknowledged that the self was a "social construct" (p. 107). They contended that the self was not singular in nature, but made up of multiple identities.

Constructing the identities required that the individual interact with others. The basic mode of interaction became language, which they acknowledged as another form of social construction.

Building on the work of Mead, Blumer (1969) further refined and developed the process of how symbolic interaction theory worked in the confines of a society. Blumer suggested three premises for symbolic interactionism. First, "Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them" (p. 2). Second, "The meanings of such things are derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's followers" (p. 2).

Third, "These meanings are handled in and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters" (p. 2). These three premises summarized the notion that symbolic interaction looked at the development of meanings as a process directly involving the individual. Blumer, who labels the individual as an actor, theorized that the process for developing meaning first began with "self-communication" when the actor defined the meaning for things. As a result of this self-communication, interpretation followed:

The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his actions. Accordingly, interpretation should not be regarded as a mere automatic application of established meanings but as a formative process in which meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action. It is necessary to see that meanings play their part in action through a process of self-interaction. (p. 5)

Because individuals lived in groups, Blumer went on to suggest that how the group reacted to the actions of an individual was important to a individual member's development of meanings and subsequent future actions. People took into account their words, objectives, and self-images in order to structure the self; therefore, it was "the social process in group life that creates and upholds the rules, not the rules that create and uphold the group life" (p. 19).

Objects, according to Blumer (1969) were "anything that can be indicated, anything that is pointed to or referred to," and objects were physical objects, social objects like a teacher or friend, or abstract like philosophies or ideas (p. 10). The meaning of an object for a person,

regardless of the type of object, was derived from interactions with others and how the others defined that object. Central to this position was the notion that objects were social creations with no fixed status or definition; therefore, object definitions could be “created, affirmed, transformed, or cast aside” (p. 12).

Gender, then, became an object that was given meaning by the group, and this meaning was affirmed for the individual by interaction with the group. Because social definitions for objects could be changed, gender and gender roles were subject to affirmation or change.

As noted in Chapter 1, symbolic interaction provided the theoretical model for this investigation of gender. Biological theories do not consider culture a relevant factor in determining gender identities and gender role activities; therefore, studying a cultural medium such as theatre would not prove useful under this theory. Although the structural-functional, social learning, cognitive development, and gender schema theories do acknowledge the importance of culture in their respective processes, the theories do not see gender roles as changeable, so looking for changes would not theoretically fit. Additionally, the passive nature assigned to the participants in the theories would be incompatible with this study. Symbolic interaction, while suggesting that gender roles are subject to change, also suggests that participants play an active and vital part in the creation of identity.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

As mentioned in the introduction, this first chapter focuses on the different difficult situations the female protagonists of Shakespeare’s comedies are trapped in at the beginning of the respective plays. In this section of our study we shall concern ourselves with the Elizabethan idea of arranged marriages as a basis for the treatment of female subjugation in the era. It is not surprising that an Early Modern playwright incorporated the topic of arranged marriages in his plays as they were the norm in Elizabethan society because the majority of Shakespeare’s contemporaries believed that love may occur in marriage but generally it was considered foolish to marry for love. As a consequence, the several father/child relationships in Shakespeare’s comedies, like for example the

relationships between Baptista and Bianca, Baptista and Katherine or between Vincentio and Lucentio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, emphasise the fact that parents were concerned about finding suitable matches for their children. Furthermore, the recurrence of this subject in Shakespeare's comedies illustrates that the playwright had the intention to point out the broader social impact marriage had on the respective families. In Elizabethan times marriage did not only concern the bride and groom but it also largely affected their parents and occasionally even further relatives. One may wonder why parents felt so concerned about their offspring's marriages and Ralph A. Houlbrooke offers a fitting explanation:

The writers of domestic counsel assumed that conscientious parents would take the initiative in choosing partners because they knew better than their children what was good for them.

Daniel Rogers (1642) criticised those who were content to leave the choice to their children: parents 'should not only harken to, but runne and ride to seeke out good matches for their children, if any occasion be offered. . .'. All in all, the previous quotation casts a rather positive light on the business of arranging marriages as apparently parents were worried about their children and wanted them to get married to the best possible partners.

However, another reason why families decided to arrange marriages for their children was that a future union also had a great financial impact on both families. Getting married was synonymous with being financially on the safe side as 'a marriage contract included provision both for the bride's dowry and for a jointure, or settlement, in cash and property by the husband's family that guaranteed her welfare should her husband die first.'⁴⁵ Evidently marriage was an important business for the involved families as the groom's family received the bride's dowry and as they also set up a contract for the bride's financial

welfare if she ever became a widow. Lawrence Stone in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* also comments on the advantages of arranged marriages for Early

Modern families:

Among the landed classes in pre-Reformation England, nuptiality – the proportion of surviving children who married – was determined by family strategy. The three objectives of family planning were the continuity of the male line, the preservation intact of the inherited property, and the acquisition through marriage of further property or useful political alliances.

In this context it becomes obvious why the majority of Elizabethan people considered it foolish to marry for love. A child's marriage could have such important financial and political advantages for the parents that the latter preferred choosing the suitable partners for their offspring.

So far it has been established that arranging marriages could be a rewarding business for parents of daughters and sons alike. However, it is commonly assumed that young women were more often the victims of their parents' wedding negotiations. Lisa Jardine states that 'publicly the absolute rights of parents over their daughters was a commonplace.'⁴⁷ She continues by pointing out that there are numerous social documents dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, which prove how powerless Elizabethan girls used to be in their marriage arrangements: one of the Earl of Surrey's sisters was reduced to petitioning Henry VIII when her husband persisted in treating her lands as if they were his own, whilst neglecting her for her wet-nurse; dowager widows were remarried in games of pure power-politics; wives were set aside in favour of more advantageous ones. Consequently, women were turned into mere objects that could easily be exchanged in this business of arranging marriages. Just like any purchasable item, different women were regarded as possessing different 'values':

Any marriageable well-born woman possessed a number of attributes which gave her a 'value': her dowry prospects, her title, her looks, her ability to produce heirs. As the sixteenth century wore on, these attributes, and the parental bargainings that went on concerning suitable matches, came to be seen increasingly as worryingly akin to cash transactions. In Italian discussions of the high cash-value of dowries, the question is earnestly raised as to whether parents are in fact marketing their daughters' virginity to the highest bidder by providing a cash equivalent for the desired match.

Marriageable women were definitely oppressed by their parents as they were literally turned into exchangeable and purchasable objects and so they had absolutely no power to take their own decisions concerning their private lives. Nevertheless, women always tried to escape this restriction and Lawrence Stone provides an example which illustrates what happened to a girl who tried to oppose herself against her family's choice of husband:

In the mid-fifteenth century, Elizabeth, daughter of Agnes Paston, obstinately insisted on choosing her own husband. To bring her to heel, her mother put her in virtual solitary confinement, forbidden to speak either to visitors or to male servants. In addition, 'she hath since Easter the most part been beaten once in the week or twice, and sometimes twice on a day, and her head broken in two or three places'. Being aware of the fact that daughters who opposed their parents' wishes were treated in such a harsh way, it is not surprising that most daughters were ready to accept their parents' choices. Due to this lack of resistance or rebellion, the arranging of marriages gradually became a tradition:

In the sixteenth century, violence was less necessary since the duty of filial obedience had been more successfully internalized. On the rare occasions when children threatened to marry to suit themselves, parents were quick to emphasize the traditional need to consider the interests of the lineage and the obligation to obey one's parents.

Arranging marriages had not only turned into a tradition in the Early Modern period but the Church also advised children to follow their parents' advice 'unless their counsel was contrary to their duty to God'.⁵² As the Elizabethan society was a rather religious society, there are numerous examples of obeying daughters who readily accepted partners introduced to them by their parents. Houlbrooke describes such an example in his book *The English Family 1450-1700*:

In 1665, for instance, after Lord Sandwich had agreed upon the marriage of his daughter Jemimah to Sir George Carteret's eldest son, Samuel Pepys was entrusted with the delicate task of giving the shy and callow Carteret a crash course in the arts of courtship. After the young couple's third encounter, Pepys asked Jemimah how she liked young Carteret. Bashfully 'she answered that she could readily obey what her father and mother had done', which, as Pepys commented, was all she could say or he expect.

The example of Jemimah indicates that young women definitely had no choice of their own as far as their future husbands were concerned. The previous example also proves that the majority of marriageable girls obviously did not even think of rejecting their parents' choice but instead they thought it useless to even try to break free from their powerless situation. This, however, was not always the case as the following example of another marriageable Elizabethan girl illustrates: [...] Mary Boyle, courted by the son of Lord Claneboye in about 1639, showed more spirit than Jemimah Montagu. 'My father and his had, some years before, concluded a match between us, if we liked when we saw one another, and that I was of years of consent; and now he being returned out of France, was by his father's command to come to my father's. . . .' Her father permitted the young man to court her, with a command to Mary to receive him as one designed to be her husband. But this particular project fell through, even though her father pressed her to it, because of

Mary's 'extraordinary' aversion to her intended mate. Apparently it was also possible for girls living in the 16th and 17th centuries to successfully break free from their powerless situation as an exchangeable item of the marriage business. However, one has to remember that Mary Boyle was an 'extraordinary' case as it is emphasised by Houlbrooke and so the majority of marriageable women in the Early Modern period still had no say in the arranging of their own marriages.

Having discussed the business of arranging marriages in Elizabethan society in general leads to the question of how Shakespeare dealt with this problematic in his comedies. In order to answer this question the following part of this section concentrates on how *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* deal with the topic of marriage arrangements.

As briefly mentioned previously *The Taming of the Shrew* mainly focuses on the economic aspects of marriage and above all it illustrates how economic considerations have an effect on who eventually marries who. In other terms, this comedy rather analyses the romantic relationships from a social perspective instead of the real passions of love. Another interesting aspect explored by this play refers to the effects a courtship has on the lovers as well as on the people surrounding them, like for instance the lovers' parents but also their friends and servants. As a matter of fact, whereas the husband and wife are only represented conducting the marriage relationship after the actual wedding, the courtship relationship as well as the arranging of the marriage take place between the bride's father and the groom. This aspect becomes especially evident in the conversation between Baptista and Petruccio in II.1:

PETRUCCIO What dowry shall I have with her to wife?

BAPTISTA After my death the one half of my lands,
And in possession twenty thousand crowns.

PETRUCCIO And for that dowry I'll assure her of
Her widowhood, be it that she survive me,

In all my lands and leases whatsoever.⁵⁵ (II.1 l.120-125)

This extract proves that women had no right to contribute to the arranging of their marriages as Kate is not even present in this crucial scene. Instead her father and her suitor take important decisions about her future without her and they discuss her as if she was a purchasable good. One also realises that arranging a marriage in Elizabethan times can be compared to a transaction involving the transfer of money. Petruccio is obviously only interested in his financial gain and that is why he asks Baptista for his wife's dowry as it will eventually become his possession. However, the financial aspect is apparently also important to Baptista as Petruccio immediately assures him that his daughter will inherit his possessions and thus she will be financially safe if she ever becomes a widow. As it was common for Early Modern women to be excluded from marriage arrangements, one may wonder how they felt about these negotiations concerning their future. Shakespeare depicted Kate's reaction to this marriage arrangement after the conversation between Petruccio and Baptista:

KATHERINE: Call you me a daughter? Now I promise you

You have showed a tender fatherly regard,

To wish me wed to one half-lunatic,

A madcap ruffian and a swearing Jack,

That thinks with oaths to face the matter out. (II.1 l.280-284)

These lines represent a rather unexpected and strong reaction for an Elizabethan woman. Although women were taught to be virtuous and not to contradict their fathers, Kate actually tries to rebel against her father by blaming him for marrying her off to a complete madman who seems irresponsible, worthless and who thinks that he will always get his way by swearing. Her rebellious character even leads her to openly express her disapproval of this marriage to her future husband by replying to Petruccio, after he explained to her that their wedding day will be the following Sunday, 'I'll see thee hanged on Sunday first.' (II.1 l.295)

Although Shakespeare depicted Kate as a very strong-willed woman, who at first sight has nothing in common with the typical well-behaved and well-educated Elizabethan woman, we must not forget that Kate already has had a reputation as an untameable shrew since the beginning of the play:

GREMIO: I say a devil. Think'st thou, Hortensio, though her father be very rich, any man is so very a fool to be married to hell? (I.1 l.122-124)

Although it is interesting to see that a woman with a personality like Kate's had the courage to rebel against her father and her suitor by using harsh words, one cannot simply draw the conclusion that every Elizabethan woman possessed such a strong will and thus tried to confront her male counterparts with her opinion. As a matter of fact, by introducing Kate's sister Bianca, Shakespeare also describes a character who is the opposite of the shrew. Bianca's situation at the beginning of the play can be considered to be at least as difficult as Kate's situation because their father has taken a decision concerning her future husband, too:

BAPTISTA: [...] 'and he of both

**That can assure my daughter greatest dower
Shall have my Bianca's love. (II.1 l.338-340)**

Baptista also intends to arrange Bianca's future marriage and he is only willing to accept the man who offers the biggest amount of money for her. In this context the reader gets the impression that Baptista also treats his second daughter like a purchasable item with no will of its own. As it has been established by now, this situation was definitely not easy for the young woman in question but it was not surprising either as it was the norm for Early modern fathers to arrange their daughters' marriages. Bianca's situation, however, has become even more desperate as her father has taken an additional decision which has an impact on both his daughters' future lives:

BAPTISTA For how I firmly am resolved you know:

That is, not to bestow my youngest daughter

Before I have a husband for the elder. (I.1 l.49-52)

In other words, the obeying daughter is not allowed to get married until her shrewish sister has found a husband. At this point of the play it seems rather impossible that Bianca will ever get married because so far her sister has only been described as absolutely undesirable. How then does Bianca, who has always been Baptista's favourite daughter, react to this rather unexpected and harsh decision? At the very beginning of the second act Bianca's attitude towards this seemingly hopeless situation is depicted:

BIANCA Good sister, wrong me not, nor wrong yourself

To make a bondmaid and a slave of me.

That I disdain, but for these other goods,

Unbind my hands, I'll pull them off myself,

**Yea, all my raiment to my petticoat,
Or what you will command me will I do,
So well I know my duty to my elders. (II.1 l.1-7)**

These lines reflect Bianca's obeying character as she remembers how she is expected to behave towards the older members of her family. By pointing out that she will do anything her sister commands her to do, Bianca has obviously accepted her inferior position in her family. This fact leads to the conclusion that she will also respect her father's decision concerning her marriage. Unlike her sister, she will not contradict her father or try to rebel against him. Thus, Shakespeare represents Bianca as the ideal obeying Elizabethan woman, who is ready to accept difficult situations and who, by no means, tries to break free from this difficult position because this would result in going against her father's decisions.

The main female character of *The Merchant of Venice* is an orphan and so one could assume that she is free to make her own decisions as she can no longer be oppressed by her father. However, one soon realises that the consequences of patriarchy even oppressed unmarried women who had lost their fathers. As a matter of fact, Portia's father still has authority over her even after his death because he announced in his will that his daughter could not choose her own husband:

**PORTIA: O me,
the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would
nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living
daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. (I.2 l.21-26)**

In these lines Portia indicates that she is still obedient to her father although this implicates that she does not have any control over her own life even after her father's death as it was

his final wish that every suitor has to choose the correct casket among three in order to be allowed to marry his daughter. As a consequence, at the beginning of the play the reader does not believe that Portia, who expresses her helplessness in the previous lines, has got any potential for initiative. Her behaviour is rather typical of a frustrated prisoner chained down by her father's wishes expressed in his will.

However, Dymphna Callaghan in her book entitled *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* quotes Lucking who offers an explanation why Portia's father included this unusual casket game in his will:

What is at stake here is not Portia's happiness alone – [...] – but the future welfare of Belmont itself. For the man who marries Portia will also become master of her realm, and the late Lord of Belmont has therefore contrived the casket test as a procedure for selecting his own successor. The apparently arbitrarily and tyrannical decree [of the test of the caskets], so different from the ostensibly rational and liberal statutes of Venice, in fact reveals itself to be a manifestation not only of parental solicitude, but also of a deeply responsible concern to ensure that political power will remain at the service of what is truly significant in life.

(Lucking 1989: 359)⁵⁷

In fact, Portia's father did not only include the casket test in his will to oppress his daughter but he also thought of his property Belmont believing that this casket test was the only way to find a suitable successor who was skilled enough to govern his lands. Nevertheless, this initiative also reflects a father's lack of trust in his daughter as he did not seem to believe that Portia would be able to make a sensible decision concerning her future husband on her own. Thus, this will allows Portia's father to oppress his daughter in order

to save his property whereas it also expresses his doubts about his daughter's sensibility. A possible explanation for the father's decision to set up this will is that in Elizabethan society women were considered irrational human beings who were not able to take reasonable decisions on their own as they could easily be misguided by their feelings. At first, Portia also seems to correspond to this traditional view of the typical woman because she definitely suffers from the fact that her father still controls her and forces her to follow his commands even after his death. However, in the course of the play the reader gradually realises that [A]lthough her father did not trust her to choose a husband for herself – this is a patriarchal society – yet, as her shrewd comments on her suitors reveal, few women ever had a keener insight into men's characters than she. Nevertheless, she does not really rebel against her father's will, and when she learns it has driven away six unwelcome suitors, she is amazed and delighted at the old man's foresight. Her filial piety meant more to the Elizabethans than to us – in their view, a patriarchal society was “natural” – but her quick feelings, her sense of responsibility, her wit and keen perception of the ridiculous belong to every age and make her one of the most magnetic heroines.⁵⁸

This extract from Myrick's introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* indicates that although Portia seems to be oppressed by her father, she nevertheless has more freedom than other women. She has the opportunity to look for some characteristics in her suitors that allow her to get a better picture of her future husband, a privilege other Elizabethan women did not have. One example of Portia's description of one of her suitors reflects that she was able to get a good first impression of her respective wooers:

PORTIA: God made him, and therefore let him pass for a man. In truth, I know it is a sin to be a mocker, but

he – why, he hath a horse better than the Neapolitan's,
a better bad habit of frowning than the Count Palatine.

He is every man in no man. If a throstle sing, he falls
Straight a-cap'ring. He will fence with his own shadow.

If I should marry him, I should marry twenty husbands.

If he would despise me, I would forgive him, for if he
love me to madness, I shall never requite him. (I.3 l.54-62)

Portia's words emphasise her ability to evaluate her suitors' characters as well as the fact that she is not blinded by their appearance. In this context one realises that her father's fear of her inability to make a wise decision concerning her husband and his successor was unfounded.

Furthermore, the scenes describing her encounters with the suitors illustrate that although Portia seems to be in a helpless situation, she is not willing to let fate decide the outcome of the casket test. Indeed, she is powerful enough to manipulate her suitors so that they eventually choose the wrong casket:

PORTIA: Therefore, for fear of the worst, I pray thee set a
deep glass of Rhenish wine on the contrary casket; for
if the devil be within and that temptation without, I
know he will choose it. I will do anything, Nerissa, ere
I will be married to a sponge. (I.2 l.86-90)

Although Portia, who at first sight seems to be a powerless girl caught in a helpless situation, is in fact rather powerful and manages to mislead the suitors into choosing the

wrong casket, a ruse which consequently prevents her from getting married to a man she does not like.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Jessica's social background is a source of numerous conflicts. At first sight, she has to reconcile her Jewish background with Lorenzo's Christianity. The only solution to this problem is Jessica's marriage to Lorenzo and her resulting conversion to Christianity:

JESSICA: If thou keep promise I shall end this strife,
Become a Christian and thy loving wife.⁶¹ (II.3 l.20-21)

Being aware of the fact, however, that Shylock, Jessica's father, a stubborn Jew who is proud of his religion, would never allow his daughter to get married to a Christian and above all not to change her religion, one might wonder how Jessica could possibly solve this problem. In this context one should also point out that Jessica suffers from her father's dominance and strong personality. She actually suffers to such a degree that she feels ashamed of being Shylock's daughter and she even describes her house as hell (II.3 l.2). As a consequence, it is doubtful whether Jessica's love for Lorenzo is really genuine. Does she not rather use him as a means to escape from her father and to deeply hurt Shylock at the same time? These doubts are encouraged by Lorenzo's words in the following extract:

LORENZO: She hath directed
How I shall take her from her father's house,
What gold and jewels she is furnished with,
What page's suit she hath in readiness. (II.6 l.29-32)

In the previous lines Lorenzo describes the precautions that his beloved has taken so that they can elope. Jessica has obviously planned her elopement in a reasonable way as she

even decided which jewellery she would take along. One could assume that Jessica longs to get away from her oppressive father and that explains why she has meticulously planned her escape. As a consequence, her plan to run away does not seem to be based on real love for Lorenzo and it would not be surprising if Jessica just used Lorenzo as a means to escape the hopeless situation she is confronted with in her father's house. Furthermore, her willingness to convert to Christianity must not necessarily be due to her love for her future husband, but given the fact that Christians had a better reputation than Jews, giving up her religion in order to become a Christian would consequently improve her position in society. However, in II,6 Jessica apparently also expresses genuine feelings for her future husband:

JESSICA: Lorenzo, certain, and my love indeed,

For who love I so much? And now who knows

But you, Lorenzo, whether I am yours?

LORENZO: Heaven and thy thoughts are witness that thou art.

JESSICA: Here, catch this casket. It is worth the pains.

I am glad 'tis night, you do not look on me,

For I am much, ashamed of my exchange;

But love is blind, and lovers cannot see

The pretty follies that themselves commit;

For if they could, Cupid himself would blush

To see me thus transformed to a boy. (II.6 l.29-39)

The previous lines, which are spoken at the moment when Jessica and Lorenzo are about to elope, depict Jessica as a young girl who feels ashamed to show herself in a page's clothes to

her future husband. In this context one realises that Jessica must have some feelings for Lorenzo for otherwise she would not experience this shame when she is facing a man while wearing a man's disguise herself. Jessica's love for Lorenzo indeed offers her a means to escape her oppressive father and to start a new life in freedom. Consequently, Jessica manages to break free from the helpless situation she had to deal with at home. However, the question still arises if running away with a man will eventually provide her with real freedom, especially as the play was written for a patriarchal society in which women depended on men and seldom experienced total freedom.

CONCLUSION

The theme of gender and sexuality is an "inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries." Critics have presented varied opinions. Whereas some believe in the divine right of masculinity, others believe in the universal principle of equality. From Moliere to Soyinka there lies a deep gulf of opinions as regards gender. They have undoubtedly been reasonable improvements in favour of the women. This improvement has been championed by the female writers and a few male writers who do feel that women have been unfairly treated. From Portia's submissive "O me,/ the word 'choose'! I may neither choose who I would/ nor refuse who I dislike; so is the will of a living/ daughter curbed by the will of a dead father" in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, society has grown to Sikira's affirmative "men and women are created equal" in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. Women have become increasingly aware and consequently society is increasingly tilting towards a gender balance. This awareness has resulted in literatures that represent women not as "that other" but as a part- an equal part- of the collective humanity. What we have attempted so far is to establish the thesis that there is indeed a question vis a vis gender and

sexuality in modern comedy, and attempt to provide answers to the seemingly varied answers that have been offered.