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ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES

Presentation of gender and sexuality in any two comic works.

As Susan Brownmiller said in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, She writes: “As man conquers the world, so too he conquers the female.” This saying applies to the texts *Volpone* and *The Mandragola*. In the texts each woman’s life, and its set course, is controlled by feelings of weakness, fear and intimidation that stem from being seen, not as a woman, but as an object to be possessed by men. For Celia and Lucrezia, it is the result of sexual objectification that terrorizes and objectifies them. The objectification of these two women as a result of their gender and how the men take advantage of their weakness is what this article examines.

Celia and Lucrezia suffer the bulk of the objectification in *Volpone and The mandragola*. In the texts each woman is like a prize to be conquered and won. These women are continually left waiting to find out what their fate will be because they have no meaningful say in the matter. Their options are only to submit or resist, never to instigate. For these women, a division was formed between personal and public life. This division served to relegate women to the personal, private realm, closing them off from the public sphere and greatly limiting their possibilities outside of the home.

Jonson’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). In Ben

Jonson's *Volpone*, Celia represents the epitome of femininity in Renaissance literature. She is beautiful, submissive, quiet and helpless to resist her husband's control over her every movement. Although it is disturbing that her gender renders her a victim to male characters such as Corvino and Volpone, who treat her as though she is a possession to be won. By examining female sexuality and morality in not only the characterization of Celia but also that of Lady Would-Be Politic, Jonson reveals how women are caught in a double-bind within the patriarchal structure of Renaissance England; they must either conform to their feminine roles or risk being alienated from their communities. Though Celia is virtuous, she is kept under Corvino's extremely careful and cruel control—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 for Italian men to be jealous and controlling of 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.

In the rape scene, we see the virtuous character of Celia crying out to God to be saved and she begs Volpone to leave her” Do me the grace to let me scape: - if not, Be bountiful and kill me”. But, unlike the morality play, it is not God who saves Celia but rather luck that has

Bonario in a position to rescue her. But, even in the speech of Bonario when he interrupts Volpone Jonson is satirizing as well as moralizing: Forbear, foul ravisher! libidinous swine! Free the forced lady, or thou diest, impostor.

Like Celia, Lucrezia has no say in the matter and in order to achieve success Callimaco only has to convince Lucrezia's husband, Messer Nicia, that the plan he has put forth is a good one. Once in Lucrezia's bedroom, Callimaco is able to force himself upon her. Sex is something that men do to women; men take the initiative, make things happen, and control the Event. This case is no exception and only after he has had his way with her body, does Callimaco take a chance and tell her the truth about himself. Through the ages, imperial conquest, deeds of valor and expressions of love have gone hand in hand with violence against women in both thought and in deed. Despite the fact that this is the first time that Callimaco and Lucrezia have actually spoken, he claims to be madly in love with her and unable to live without her caresses that he has only just had, or better put, that he has only just taken. Lucrezia's only desire, the reader is told, is to live an honest life in the grace of God.<sup>27</sup> In the words of Callimaco, Lucrezia is "honestissima et al tutto aliena dale cose d'amore. Were it not for all of the pressure from outside forces, Lucrezia would never have *sinned*.<sup>29</sup> At this point in the story all of the forces are working against her. In order to do what she thinks is right, Lucrezia would have to go against the wishes of her husband, her mother, her doctor and her priest. If she continues with the plan they have laid out for her, she will be forced to make a cuckold of her husband. . She is changed from a chaste wife to a whore by the influence of her husband. Lucrezia has nothing to do with the success or failure of Callimaco's plan.

The women are treated as mere objects of desire and a common housewives thus Corvino exercises his authority over her. He berates Celia for tossing her handkerchief to Scotto

Mantua. He feels he has been made a fool of in public and accuses his wife of harboring a desire to be unfaithful to him and of making excuses in order to meet with her paramours. She begs him not to be jealous and protests that she never makes such excuses, that she hardly even leaves the house, even to go to Church—but this is not enough for Corvino. From now on, he says, she will never be allowed out of the house, never allowed to go within two or three feet of a window, and forced to do everything backward—dress backward, talk backward, walk backward. If she fails to obey, he threatens that he will dissect her in public as an example of a woman without virtue.

When Lucrezia refuses to yield to Collimanco's desires her husband insults her. It took a lot of persuasion from her mother and her husband before she could succumb to their pleas. Lucrezia is the object that Callimaco must have and will stop at nothing to possess. Lucrezia's life is ruled by those around her and it is not until she allows herself to be possessed by Callimaco that her situation begins to improve. In exchange, however, Lucrezia gives up her humanity. Her status is reduced to that of a thing, a mere sexual instrument.<sup>51</sup> Callimaco, who always has a kind word when it comes to Lucrezia, is obviously not interested in her because of her high moral character. He seems best able to express his true feelings when speaking with the devious Ligurio, a man who will do anything to improve his own situation. When talking to Ligurio, Callimaco offers no praise of Lucrezia instead only his need to possess her. His love is an expression of the lover's physical needs and his selfishness is made clear throughout the play.

In Volpone, Volpone's desire for Celia is instinctual, not refined or rational, and we are now merely seeing the lustful, hedonist side of Volpone that was only hinted at in previous passages. For the language in which Volpone describes his love for Celia is grotesque; it is the language of sickness, not love. He feels a fever, a "flame", trapped inside his body. "My liver melts," he exclaims, and Mosca describes his situation as a "torment." That the "sick" Volpone

now suffers from a lovesickness is another example of situational irony, and, through this irony, Jonson demonstrates that Volpone's light-hearted, lustful ways are not as innocent as they may appear, since they can easily develop into an unhealthy, and *unnatural*, sexual obsession (remember from Act I that the grotesque can serve as an indication of something unnatural, hidden underneath the surface of a character or situation).

Corvino ends his first diatribe with a threat of murder, indicating that sex and violence are thus firmly linked in his psyche. Like Volpone, Celia's body causes a sickness in him, except that his sickness is characterized by violence and rage whereas Volpone's is characterized by physical agony. Corvino's grotesque sexual obsession is firmly linked to his sense of property, for he considers Celia to be his property. When he says, "I will make thee an anatomy, / Dissect thee mine own self and read a lecture / Upon thee to the city and in public," the vocabulary of science—"anatomy," "science," and "lecture"—serves to convey the grotesque image; this language strongly associated with the rising bourgeois merchant class of Jonson's day. And when he threatens to kill her entire family as retribution for her supposed infidelity, he uses the language of law: those murders would be "the subject of my justice." Corvino's rage is that of a merchant who feels that he is being ripped off, whose property has been stolen and who wants the thief put to death. To put it in psychological terms, it is that of a *sociopath* who feels his power threatened; Corvino lashes out in a sadistic and brutal manner in order to maintain control.

When Lucrezia cannot become pregnant, she alone must shoulder the blame. Her husband, Messer Nicia, tries everything possible to cure his wife of her supposed infertility and yet he will not

consider the possibility that he could be the cause of the couple's pregnancy problem. She is seen as a lesser woman because she cannot provide her husband with an heir. Even though Lucrezia's problems stem from her husband's sterility, she is to blame for the failure of conception.

To lose Celia to a lover would send Corvino into a murderous rage, and he condemns her for her perceived infidelity using moral concepts such as "justice"; but to use her in order to gain [Volpone's](#) fortune is "nothing." The justice of the situation is determined, it seems, by whether or not Corvino makes a profit, not on any moral issue, and the virtue of his wife for a vast amount of fortune is a more than equitable trade. Thus Celia laments that she's being betrayed by her own husband as she says "I am a creature, hither ill betray'd, By one whose shame I would forget it were". Her husband ill treatment of her is very degrading because she is "nothing".

In conclusion, both women suffer the injustice mete out against them as they are being treated as mere object of men's desires and seen as inferior beings and can be exploited sexually at will as a result of their gender. The patriarchal system in which they find themselves is pitiable. In this essay, I have fully presented the idea of gender and sexuality in two texts namely: *Volpone* and *The misanthrope*.

#### References

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

<http://www.litcharts.com/lit/volpone/themes/gender-roles-and-women>