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The Presentation of Gender and Sexuality in any Comic Work

Sexuality and Gender has always played a role in literature and art and is a common theme in The Country Wife by William Hogarth, and Volpone by Ben Jonson. All of which are examples of artistic expressions from the 18th century. Its absence in certain literature periods signifies audience on the point of writers who sought to avert controversy and social censure, while its presence in other literary periods has served both to establish social norms, in some cases, and to challenge them, in others. Yet some writers and artists in the eighteenth century have explored sexuality openly without seeming to take a definitive stance about the morality of certain sexual behaviors, including extramarital sex and prostitution. Rather, the approach taken by these writers suggest it is important in literature in such thought-provoking-non-polemical manner that the reader would be compelled to consider the role that sexuality played in his or her own. Such is the case in “The Country Wife” by William Hogarth and Volpone. The creators developed complex female characters whose behaviors constituted a threat to established social norms. Nevertheless, the authors appear to remain neutral with respect to their own personal values given that they skillfully elicit the readers’ interest, empathy, and even identification with these female characters.

“The Country Wife” addresses themes of sexuality in the eighteenth century. He treats his subject and his characters with such comic skill that the reader is more likely to laugh than to finger-way, even though their lack of respect for mental relationships might, under other circumstances, be completely appalling. Horner is the most insightful of all the “wit” in the play, often drawing out and commenting

on moral failings of others. In order to gain sexual access to “respectable” women, spreads the rumor that venereal disease has rendered him impotent. Even though in announcing to the world that he is an impotent eunuch, Horner essentially emasculates himself and removes almost everything that makes him male, he is actually the most intelligent character in this play, who became of sexual desire. Cockold announces the news of his impotency in order to be having affairs with the ladies of upper class.

“The Country Wife” presumes the certainty of infidelity among smart women, or women of “wit”. Indeed, the paranoid Cockold, Mr. Pinchwife, even marries a country wife because he believes her ignorance disinclines her from staying. Pinchwife asserts that “good” wives and private soldiers should be ignorant...”What wit in a wife is good for, but to make a man a Cockold?”. Pinchwife parallels the noun modifier “good” with its structural corollary “private” thereby evoking the standard to which society holds female sexual agency. If a wife is “good” in the same way that a soldier is...”owned by an individual...” Then feminine value is measured by the exclusivity of a woman’s sexual utility to a man, in this case Pinchwife.

Furthermore, he asserts that “ignorance” is the key to preserving her utility and that the “Cuckolding” of a man proceeds directly from “wit” itself. In this exchange the same value of exclusive sexual utility is preserved. If she is ignorant, she brings value to her husband through fidelity but if she has wit, she devalues her husband by making him a Cuckold, or Philandering. The either/or flow of intelligence to sexual agency in country functions a textual binary that contrasts ignorance and fidelity with wit and infidelity. Although the jealous husband certainly has suspicions, it appears this binary pervades the gallant’s perspective as well. Mr. Horner, the scheming libertine of the text, actually prefers wit in his women, “... I think wit is more necessary than beauty, and I think no young woman ugly that has it, and no handsome woman agreeable without it”.

In the value exchange of a woman’s sexual utility, she brings value to Mr. Horner, the would-be lover, by her sexual exclusivity to him (if only for a time), independent of moral “goodness”. Women in the text are only “as good as” the sexual usefulness they provide to the men in equation, and whether husbands or lovers, the men in COUNTRY seem to presuppose the manifestation of female

(gender) along the ignorance/infidelity, and wit, infidelity binary. Contrarily, while the male characters of the text affirm the intelligence, the actions of the female characters reveal a more subjective sexuality. Rather than dependent upon the sheer fact of her cleverness or naivety, the causes for each woman's action are varied, robust and often complex.

Mr. Margery Pinchwife, for example, repeatedly demonstrates her ignorance. In fact, her affair with Mr. Horner is ultimately facilitated by Lucy's wit, not her own. Here, the ignorant women are unfaithful, while the cunning Lucy is never characterized sexual terms at all. Her only desire is to join her mistress Alithea with Mr. Harcourt, and much like her clever servant, Lucy. Alithea shrewdly detects Mr. Harcourt's masked insult toward her fiancé, Mr Sparkish. However, Alithea's intelligence does not sentence her to Mr. Harcourt's chamber; rather, she remains to her fiancée, thought the play. Finally, Lady Fidget, Mrs. Dainty Fidget, and Mrs. Squeamish, maintain a calculated, intellectually-rigorous façade of propriety to mask their ulterior extramarital motives. Yet, during their masquerade at Mr. Horner's home, they complain that most refined and shrewd women, such as they are have much trouble bedding a lover, as men prefer more "common women". Despite their willingness and wit, these three women find it difficult to cuckold their husband.

In Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, Celia represents the epitome of feminist. She is beautiful, submissive, quite and helpless to resist her husband's control over every movement. Although it is disturbing that her "gender" renders her victim to male characters such as Corvino and Volpone, who treat her as though she is a possession to be won. Celia provokes what can be termed as "grotesque" reactions from both Volpone and Corvino, and we can compare and contrasts these reactions better understand each character. Volpone used religions, imagery in the description of gold, but now he has found a new "better angel" in Celia. And the "gold, plate, and jewels". Which Volpone addressed in tones of worship at the beginning of the play, he gives to Mosca so that he can use them to woo Celia; the all-important gold has been subordinated to her conquest. He expresses his love for her as grotesque. It is a 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".

Corvino also has a pathological, grotesque response to Celia's body. Corvino's description of the handkerchief-tossing incident is rife with intense, sensual imagery suggesting that Corvino may be in the grip of some sort of sexual psychosis, he feverishly describes "itching ears", "noted lechers" before her verbally imagines Celia and Scoto Mantua engaged in the act of intercourse. By contrast with Corvino, Volpone's earlier outburst seems tame. Corvino ends his first diatribe with a threat of murder, indicating that sex and violence are this firmly linked to his psyche. Corvino's grotesque sexual obsession is firmly linked to his sense of prosperity, for he considers Celia to be his property. But more than that, it also shows the fundamental hypocrisy of those values, through irony. When Mosca tests which impulse is stronger in Corvino, his sexual jealousy or his desire for material possession he quickly discovers that it is the latter. To lose Celia to a lover would send Corvino into a murderous rage and he condemns her for her infidelity, using moral concepts such as "justice" but to use her in order to gain Volpone's fortune is "nothing" Corvino's reversal is an example of situational irony, which reveals Corvino's talk of justice to be hypocritical, a means of exercising power over people, like Celia, who care about such things.

Finally, Sexuality and Gender has always played a role in literature and art. Its presence in literary works is serving both to establish social norms, in some cases, a challenge to other writers of literature. For its important in literature is not just about the non-polemical manner that a reader will be compelled to but to consider the role that Sexuality can play or has played in his or her own life.