

## **The presentation of gender and sexuality in 2 modern comic works**

Gender is the relationship between men and women, both perceptual and material. Gender is not determined biologically as a result of sexual characteristics of either relationship or men, but is constructed socially. Gender issues focus on women and on the relationship between men and women, their roles, access to and control over resources, division of labour, interests and needs.

Sexuality includes our gender identity (the core sense that we are female or male) gender role (the idea of how we should behave because we are a female or male) and it also includes our sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual)

Gender in importance of *Being Earnest* is a play about two young men in Victorian England who lead double lives and are eventually caught in their lies because of their love. The play is a satire of Victorian morals and involves of the characters around the growing relationship of Jack and Gwendolen and Algernon and Cecily Oscar Wilde has reversed the roles of gender in this play, the females are those who take the lead and are seen as the most dominant characters throughout- a bizarre layout in a time period where men were seen as the head of the family and the most assertive figure. Lady Bracknell is the most domineering character throughout the play, and this is a result of the eloquent and rather unnatural language she uses. She takes on the role of her husband in Act 1 when Jack asks for Gwendolen's hand in marriage "I feel obliged to tell you that you are not down on my list of eligible young men" this was often the father's role. Lord Bracknell is blatantly absent from the play, he is referred to as a sick man, almost an invalid, and plays in fact the role of the mother. There has to be said that a lot of Victorian women had psychosomatic disease like Lord Bracknell who has little

appetite and frustrated by their assigned roles as daughters, wives and mothers. As for lady Bracknell she has the power of decision, money and power of language.

However, having stated that women do not enjoy the position that they deserve in society does not mean that Oscar Wilde finds women superior to men and that society would benefit from their presence in the public. Sphere in the play, Algernon and Jack are idle and lazy, but morally the women are not better than them, they are idle, liars, cheat and are interested in money. Lady Bracknell is indeed an assertive woman, but a terrifying “Gorgon” (Jack’s expression). Actually, the play portrays real anxiety about gender because raises a difficult question about the meaning of masculinity and femininity, always in an ironical and derisive tone. For instance, when lady Bracknell interviews Jack she is glad to hear that Jack smokes because “a man should always have an occupation of some kind” (p.52). It is a reveal of stereotypes about women’s activities. Upper-class women were idle but sometimes did some volunteer work or some crafts work at home. It was assumed that they had “an occupation of some kind” Gwendolen says in Act II that “the home seems to be the proper sphere for the man”, which might have sounded funny and abused to a Victorian audience, although less so to a modern one. Therefore, if it is ridiculous to state that for men, why shouldn’t it be equally ridiculous to state that for women? Gwendolen then continues, “And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painful effeminate” (35). This seems to clear indication of role reversal in the plot, where Gwendolen, a woman, clearly states that men becomes effeminate when they abandon their “domestic duties” which are usually seen as a woman’s sphere. Lady Bracknell values society and its values, saying, “Never speak disrespectfully of society, “but she goes against these values by playing the role of her husband in her daughter’s life.

Jack and Algernon also take on more female roles in this story, although they are always commenting on their own masculinity and being praised for it by others. The play opens with the two of them sitting and waiting for the women (Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen) to show up. And it is not that they waiting to chat, Jack is waiting for Gwendolen to propose to her, instead of actively seeking her out, he takes a more passive role and water he even asks her if he can propose to her (II). Algernon passively allows Cecily to dictate their love for each other. It seems that throughout the play all the main characters assume roles of the opposite gender, especially as far as activity and passivity go, and thus create a critique of the societal standards for each gender. In the case of sexuality, Oscar Wilde focused mainly on the dual-identity that existed in Victorian society, but also when it came to sexual identity, and suppressing true sexual identity to conform to Victorian societal standards. Jack creates an alter ego named Ernest to keep his honourable image intact in Victorian society, when in fact creating Ernest is not at all an honourable act. Algernon who is a character that, seems to represent Wilde, himself is a reflection of Wilde's thought on the suppression of sexual identity, where he creates an alter ego named Bunbury in order to act indulgences outside his normal life which is an allusion to the way Wilde has separate his private public self, and hide his true sexual identity). The Importance of Being Earnest, Wilde makes two distinct connections: that aristocratic society had fixed views and roles for both men and women when came to jobs and social interaction, and that sexual identity and desires were to be suppressed because their effects on society did not fit Victorian standards.

One way of working at sexual identity in the play is through the different signifiers that form Jack's persona. At the beginning of the play the character of John Worthing is divided: there is Jack and there is his imaginary brother

Earnest, both in the same person. Jack and Algernon's sexual identities is that even if they have taken part in what is nowadays regarded as the most stereotypical of male homosexual acts, and sexual, from that does not automatically follow that they are homosexuals. Lord Illingworth's constant flirting with women; even kissing one and having produced a son certify him as heterosexual. Cecily and Gwendolen, also exhibit some tendencies towards same sex passion, their interest is perhaps best shown in their diaries.

Gender in *Volpone*: Most of the play's characters are men who operate in the traditional sphere of commerce. Men are wholly responsible for finance and are 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 comedic English relationship. The Italian marriage is between Celia and Corvino. 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 ideal of a woman, she is silent, chaste and obedient. 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 17th century women were considered to be trustworthy and inferior creatures. 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 also much more talkative than Celia. Lady would-Be, However also breaks the mold of a renaissance woman in that she appears to be educated, certainly much more so than Celia. Her long-winded speeches are so filled with literary references and an allusion 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, though sometimes affirms stereotypes too. At the very least, Volpone complicates the role of women in society by showing that women like men can be well read, virtuous, well educated, and well spoken. 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. In that of sexuality Volpone used religious imagery in the description of gold, but now he has found a new better angel in Celia. And the "gold Jewel which Volpone addressed in tones of worship at the beginning of the play, Volpone gives to Mosca so that he can use them to woo Celia. The all-important gold has been subordinated to her conquest. His desire for her 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. The language in which Volpone describes his love Celia is grotesque; it is the language of sickness, not love. He feels a fever, a "flame" trapped inside his body. 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 develop into an

unhealthy and unnatural, sexual obsession (remember from Act 1 that the grotesque can serve as an indication of something unnatural, hidden underneath the surface of a character or situation). 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 maybe in the grip of some sort of sexual psychosis; he feverishly describes “the fricace” (a type of massage), before he verbally imagines Celia and Scoto Mantua in the act of intercourse.