

Presentation of Gender and Sexuality In “Volpone and Mandragola”

Gender and sexuality is one of the predominant issues of concern in modern comic works. However, gender can be defined as culturally and socially constructed difference between men and women that varies from place to place and time to time. It can be seen as the relations between men and women, both perceptual and material, gender is not determined biologically as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men, but is constructed socially. It is a central organising principle of societies, and often governs the process of production and reproduction, consumption and distribution.

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.

Generally speaking, human sexuality is how people experience and express themselves as sexual beings. Sexuality is the recognition of or emphasis upon sexual matters. It is how we feel emotionally and romantically towards members of a sex in other words, it is our sexual orientation.

In *Volpone* by Ben Jonson, most of the play's characters are men who operate in the traditionally male sphere of commerce. At the time in which the play is set men were responsible for finance and they were expected to have power over women in relationships, roles that most of the male characters in the play firmly occupy. However, the play compares male authority love, sex and courtship to the social expectations of women.

The marriage is between Celia and Corvino, she is kept under Corvino's extremely careful and cruel control. He 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, and he is jealous of her. 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 argues 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 wouldn't win, no matter how virtuous they are. Women were considered to be untrustworthy and inferior creatures.

Through proper examination of Corvino and Volpone, it is portrayed that both characters try to exhibit male authority over Celia through sexuality (Corvino attempts to lure her to Volpone who in turn attempts to rape her). For a while it seems that Volpone will get away with this rape attempt, as several men during the play conspires to say that Celia is lying about her accusation. At the end of the play, Volpone is punished but it seems that the primary reason for his punishment is his continuous deception of the plays other men, rather than the attempted rape. The crime Volpone seems most guilty of in the play is excessive greed for money at the expense of Voltore, Corbaccio and Corvino.

Lady would be the second woman in the play is the opposite of Celia. The play contrasts her marriage to sir politic would be a perfect example of marriage between Corvino and Celia. Lady would-be is more independent than Celia, which reinforce the stereotype that married English women were given more freedom than married Italian women. Lady would-be was able to wander Vernice on her own, and she is seen without her husband just as often as with him (contrast this with Celia who is prevented from leaving her home. Lady would-be was also much more talkative than Celia. When lady would-be visited Volpone, he jokes in asides that she is so long winded that he's

being tortured by her “flood of words” and that, though he’s only pretending to be sick, she’s actually making him ill by talking ceaselessly. Lady would-be, however also breaks the mood of a renaissance woman in that she appears to be educated, certainly much more than Celia. Her long-winded speeches are so filled with literary references and allusions that Peregrine is shocked when she yells at him.

The difference 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 assumption about women, though it sometimes affirms stereotypes too.

In *Mandragola* by Niccolo Machiavelli, Messer Nicias’s wife Lucrezia’s only desire, is to live an honest life in the grace of God. In the words of Callimaco, Lucrezia is not for all of the pressure from outside forces, Lucrezia would never have sinned. 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. Yet as authority figures emanate an aura of rightness and their actions cannot easily be challenged, what else can Lucrezia be but wrong if she resists the will of those around her? As socialization teaches that men know best, Lucrezia eventually gives in. The only reason, however, that the opportunity arose for her to go against what she believed to be right was because of her unparalleled beauty. Although Lucrezia is the central figure of *Mandragola*, she has the fewest lines of any character in the play. In fact, Lucrezia has so little to do with the action that most of what the reader learns about her comes not from first-hand information but from what the other characters say about her.

In literature, as it pertains to life, division of gender roles as a defining factor in the construction of social norms and acceptable behaviour existed long before the renaissance and is still prevalent today. These socially created expectations serve to determine, and in many cases limit, masculine and feminine behaviour. The socialization of gender roles begins at birth; male and female infants receive different treatment, immediately setting them on entirely different life paths. Once these social arrangements have been established, those who have become accustomed to the greater privileges and power, in this case men consider it to be both natural and imperative to defend the status quo. The group that benefits most from this arrangement comes to believe that it truly deserve the dominant position and as a result, guards it vigorously.

What separates the men from the women in *Mandragola* is the feeling of vulnerability with which the women are repeatedly left. From a young age, learning dependence and helplessness, rather than self-assurance and self-reliance, becomes one of the primary tasks of female socialization. Males instead, learn early in life to view aggression as a resource that can move them toward targeted goals in the public arena. They are conventionally trained to use competition and aggression as a means to accomplish their goals. Whether it is through scheming or pure violence, the male’s end goal is to claim the object of his desire. The idea that society has determined that aggressiveness is a natural, and therefore acceptable, masculine role has permeated false notions of masculinity. It is instilled in young boys from the moment they realize that being a male comes with certain innate privileges including the right to buy a woman’s body. When young men learn that females may be bought for a price, and that acts of sex command set prices, then how should they not also conclude that that which may be bought may also be taken without the civility of a monetary exchange?” It is through the experience of sexuality that women learn about gender, female subordination and male power.

Historically, women have been able to increase their bargaining power with men by refusing to give in to a man's sexual desires. By holding out on sexual favours, women could influence the men that courted them. As female beauty and implied sexuality are associated with male success, a beautiful and sexy woman is seen as an enviable prize for a successful male. This idea has led to what Catherine Hakim refers to as 'erotic capital'. Hakim defines erotic capital as the valuation of "a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts." As great beauty is considered to be in short supply, it is universally valorised and desired resulting in women typically possessing more erotic capital than men. This advantage in erotic capital potentially gives women an advantage in negotiations with men. For Lucrezia, it is instead the opposite. Their power comes from giving in to a man's sexual advances. Once Lucrezia becomes the woman possessed, she ceases to be the woman desired.

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. 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.

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 problems. In certain cultures, a woman's erotic capital is closely tied to her fertility. For Lucrezia, her problems come from her inability to become pregnant. 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. By taking Callimaco as a permanent lover, Lucrezia is able to resolve the legal problem of an heir and secure her own future. In accepting Callimaco, Lucrezia establishes the ground rules and tells him: Lucrezia submits to the heroic rapist in order to improve her situation. Were something to happen to Messer Nicia, Callimaco, who readily accepts Lucrezia's proposal, would be right there to take his place. Lucrezia gains some power over Callimaco by exploiting her own weakness. Females learn the subtle lesson of controlling powerful men through demonstrated helplessness but this "learned helplessness" also serves to entrap women. Callimaco has taken title to Lucrezia's body, a great sexual convenience as well as a testament to his intellectual stature, and in return he has to assume the burden of protecting her from potential harm. This is what Callimaco promises Lucrezia. He has gained access to her body and in return she is given the protection and security that her situation previously lacked. After being under the control of others, Lucrezia finally has a chance to gain some control over her own situation and it is an opportunity that she will not let slip away. She expresses her new-found boldness by tricking her husband into giving Callimaco a key to their house. After Messer Nicia introduces Callimaco to Lucrezia, she guides the conversation to the end that she has planned.

Lucrezia was objectified and vilified for not immediately giving in to men's desires. Callimaco represent the only choice that this woman has to gain some control of her own situation and to live out her life in peace and security.

As Brown Miller, aptly states: “Female fear of an open season of rape, and not a natural inclination toward monogamy, motherhood or love, was probably the single causative factor in the original subjugation of woman by man, the most important key to her historic dependence, her domestication by protective mating.” To say that Lucrezia made her choice for any other reason than safety and security would be to deny the existence of the heroic rapist and the perpetual state of fear that he creates.

In conclusion Ben Johnson and Niccolo Machiavelli in “Volpone and Mandragola” respectively, presents women as the weaker sex and sex objects for men’s sexual satisfaction while men are projected as powerful and in full control of the women.