

NAME - IBEM DEBORAH P.

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**DEPARTMENT - ENGLISH AND LITERARY
STUDIES**

**THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND
SEXUALITY IN COMIC WORKS.**

In addressing the issue of gender and sexuality one must understand that both of these concepts are delicate and equally intricate. The issues of gender and sexuality are most times is always weaved around the feminine gender, but both actually affect the male and female, they complement each other. A close analysis of various works of literature will identify several obligations, expectations or rights conferred upon characters either by themselves or by society, just for the fact that they are either male or female. This paper concentrates on comic works, we will be examining with close reference Moliere's *Tartuffe* and Ben Jonson's *Volpone*.

As was traditional in the seventeenth century setting of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, in which the French

aristocracy was in power, the society was a patriarchal one (ie. a society run by males rather than females). As such, Orgon is clearly the head of the household although the rest of the family has much better sense than he with the exception of his mother, Madame Pernelle, who considers Tartuffe "a fine man." Of course, in his drama, Moliere parodies the blind faith of religious believers as well as the religious hypocrisy of Church leaders. In addition, he satirizes the arrogance of patriarchs who feel superior to others in their family simply because of their position and or sex. For, Orgon refuses to listen to either Dorine, who feels that Tartuffe "usurp[s] the master's place," or his own wife, Elmire. Furthermore, he completely dominates his children, ordering Damis out of the house because he has dared to malign Tartuffe by reporting the religious man's attempts to seduce his stepmother.

Orgon's daughter Mariane is completely dominated by her father, also. In Act 2, Scene 1, for instance, she comes to Orgon in response to his demand to see her,

MARIANE I'm deeply grateful, Father, for your love.

ORGON That's well said, Daughter; and you can repay me it in all things, you'll cheerfully obey me.

MARIANE To please you, Sir, is what delights me best.

ORGON Good, good! Now,
what d'you think of Tartuffe, our guest?....In being his wife, if that should be my choice.

MARIANE You can't mean, father...

ORGON Yes, Tartuffe shall be

Allied by marriage to this family,
And he's to be your husband, is that clear?

It's a father privilege...

This announcement is so emotionally devastating to Mariane, who loves Valere whom her father has previously approved as her fiance, that she contemplates suicide as the only alternative to a miserable fate.

Elmire, too, is subservient to Orgon. For instance, when Tartuffe proposes his sexual advances, Elmire politely tells him that she will not report Tartuffe's inappropriate conduct to her husband in an attempt to bargain with him in return for her silence. She requests of him

ELMIRE To advocate as forcefully as you can

The marriage of Valere and Mariane,

Renouncing all desire to dispossess

Another of his rightful happiness,....

In his male arrogance, Tartuffe refuses Elmire's request. So, she devises a trap in order to expose

the religious hypocrite for the philanderer that he is. Convincing her husband to hear for himself since he believes that she is "impudent," Elmire has Orgon hide himself under the table in the room where Tartuffe again makes his lascivious advances. It is not until she is nearly assaulted that Orgon emerges from underneath the table, and Elmire sarcastically asks, "What, coming out so soon? How premature!" Thus, it is only because his pride is insulted by Tartuffe's advances to his wife, that Orgon takes offense against the impostor.

These instances portray the men in this play as arrogant, ignorant and authoritative. They only do what they deem best because as the men they feel superior to the women. The women on the other hand are subject to the men's will. Instead of revolting against Orgon's daughter, Mariane would rather commit suicide, and his wife was simply smart enough to reveal the deceptive nature of Tartuffe without defying her husband. The only person who was able to stand up to Tartuffe and defy Orgon was his son, Damis whom Orgon dismissed from the house for accusing Tartuffe of making sexual advances towards his stepmother. Damis was able to publicly accuse Tartuffe because he was a male too, he didn't feel the need to be intimidated by his father.

In Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, Celia represents the epitome of femininity in Renaissance literature. She is beautiful, subservient, 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. Because masculinity and femininity can not exist without each other, both men and women must be voluntarily or forcibly complicit to function within this binary. 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.

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). For a while, it seems that Volpone will get

away with this rape attempt, as several men during the play conspire 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 play's other men, rather than the attempted rape. It's difficult to discern Jonson's ultimate statement (if any exists) about sexual oppression. However, it could be argued that, while he shows sexual oppression and violence to be reprehensible, Jonson believes that the oppression of women is less important than the moral lesson about excessive desire and greed. 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 able to wander Venice on her own, and she is seen without her husband just as often as with him (contrast this with Celia, who is prevented from even leaving her home). Lady Would-Be is also much more talkative than Celia, though the play doesn't exactly suggest that this is a good thing. When Lady Would-Be

visits 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. Much of this scene, we can note, is taken from an ancient Greek book called "On Talkative Women," suggesting that Jonson might have believed that there was some truth to the stereotype that women talk excessively (more generously, one could argue that Jonson is merely engaging with the literary tradition of depicting women in this way). 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 allusions 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.

Summarily, one can be of the opinion the the issue of gender and sexuality presented in various

literary particularly comic works are influenced either by the era or age in which the work is set or the cultural norms of the characters. The delegation of certain duties and fates to characters simply based on their gender is not majorly a biological thine, because if it was it would be general.