

ELS 240: MODERN COMEDY

NWACHUKWU CHRISTINE N.

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THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ANY TWO MODERN COMIC PLAYS

Gender and Sexuality, two prominent themes in Modern Comedy, are popular social terms

which represent part of the human construct.

Gender is the range of characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, these characteristics may include biological sex (i.e. the state of being male, female or an intersex variation which may complicate sex assignment), sex-based social structures (including gender roles and other social roles), or gender identity.

Human sexuality is the quality of being sexual, or the way people experience and express themselves as sexual beings. This involves biological, erotic, physical, emotional, social, or spiritual feelings and behaviors. Because it is a broad term, which has varied over time, it lacks a precise definition. Physical and emotional aspects of sexuality include bonds between individuals that is expressed through profound feelings or physical manifestations of love, trust, and care. Social aspects deal with the effects of human society on one's sexuality, while spirituality concerns an individual's spiritual connection with others. Sexuality also affects and is affected by cultural, political, legal, philosophical, moral, ethical, and religious aspects of life.

Sexuality and gender are prominent themes in Modern Comedy

plays. Depending on the genre of the play, sexuality and gender are used as either a tool of manipulation, a form of propaganda or sometimes both. During the time of Shakespeare, there was a social construct of gender and sexuality norms just as there are today. There was a hierarchy of sexes and each had their own role in society. Men were masculine, they were not ruled by emotion, they were strong and hard working. Women belonged in the home, they were ruled by men and by their emotions and therefore were thought to often make bad decisions. By blurring the lines between sexuality and gender in his plays, authors deconstructs these norms to display their ambiguity. Masculine men can play effeminate women roles (which they did on stage) and effeminate women can play masculine men roles. Moliere's 'Tartuffe' and Wole Soyinka's 'The Lion and the Jewel' as major examples, I will show the different ways sexuality and gender are presented, used to manipulate characters, alter the action of the play and deconstruct the social norm of gender and sexuality and how they vary depending on the genre of the play.

Tartuffe

In Tartuffe, one of his most prominent works, Moliere uses several female characters – Madame Pernelle, Elmire, Mariane, and Dorine. Several of them typify traditional gender stereotypes, though Dorine and Elmire somewhat transcend them. Madame Pernelle reflects the classic elderly woman type, who lambasts perceived immorality in others while stubbornly persisting in her own ignorance. Elmire is mostly presented as an object of desire, but she does show some agency in her machinations against Tartuffe. Further, in her controlled reaction to his lechery, she reveals a maturity and sophisticated understanding of the world. Mariane is absolutely stereotypical, as the obedient and passive daughter whose purpose in the play is mostly functional - her marriage serves as a catalyst for much of the conflict. It is Dorine who pushes most of the boundaries – she is loud, opinionated, and a dynamic player in the action. She is barely discussed as a sexual object, and instead exemplifies rationality

and clear-headedness on the level of Cleante, whom many critics believe speaks for Moliere himself. Overall, Moliere seems steeped in his era's view of women while being willing to consider other perspectives as well.

Throughout the plot, it is apparent that "Tartuffe" also functions as a social commentary on women and the patriarchal hierarchy that deems them necessary for little purpose. This is most apparent on his use of several female characters to critique the social structure that oppose them so unfairly and, through them, demonstrate that females are capable of much more. After all, it is the female characters that utilizes logic and cunning to bring about Tartuffe's unmasking and succeed where the men failed to do so. Hence, it is through the females characters insistency that guides the family through Orgon's foolish decisions and Tartuffe's scheme.

Mariane is portrayed as an obedient and submissive female who refrains from outwardly expressing her opinion. In this respect, Mariane is the most conventional character of her time. She reflects what society finds acceptable in women and displays what function women played within a hierarchical system. This is most apparent within several scenes between her and Orgon. The scene where Mariane expresses her disdain towards her father's plan only to have it utterly dismissed by Orgon shows the dilemma most women at the time faced. Their voices were largely unheard even though it is rational and morally right. Furthermore, Orgon states "to graft Tartuffe into my family. So he must be your husband" portrays women as intermediaries of wealth, power and ownership. Lastly, Mariane further supports the conventional ideal women by her soft spoken nature and her decision to delegate the responsibility of vocalizing her direct disdain towards her father's plan to Dorinne. During the time, it was expected of women to be submissive and obedient. In summation, Mariane portrays the conventional women who is oppressed under a patriarchal system. They were expected to hold blind obedience towards men even though men's decisions can lead to an unfavorable outcome.

Dorine and Elmire are perhaps the stars of "Tartuffe." They are largely outspoken characters that consistently defy conventional standards with tremendous vigor and enthusiasm. Dorine, the maid of the family, outwardly expresses her opinion despite her role as a maid. She openly expresses that Tartuffe is a fraud defiantly towards Orgon with reason and understanding in which Orgon seems to lack. Dorine's absolute disregard for her position combined with her rational ability to see through Tartuffe's scheme communicates Moliere's argument that women should pay no heed to their position within the hierarchy since they are capable of using logical reasoning and making rational decisions, just as much or even more so than men. In addition, Elmire is shown to display a great degree of intelligence through her subversion of authority and using social conventions to convince her husband of Tartuffe's scheme. Most notably, Elmire uses cunning to expose Tartuffe by advancing on Tartuffe with Orgon hidden. This ultimately leads to Tartuffe's demise, as well as, Orgon dismissing his plans for his daughter. In the scene. Elmire displays a great degree of intelligence in many regards. Firstly, despite Elmire's social status, she uses her position to convince Orgon to follow through with her plan. Furthermore, she displays a great understanding of men and expertly uses persuasive language to expose Tartuffe within her grand scheme. Moliere demonstrates that women are capable beings who deserve more than what the patriarchal hierarchy deems them.

Even though there is no actual sexual encounter in the play, the theme of sex looms large throughout. Lust is the primary vice that both Tartuffe and Madame Pernelle lambast (Tartuffe when he refuses to look at Dorine's bosom, the latter in criticizing the household's lax morality). However, sexual desire also causes Tartuffe's downfall. In actuality, he is defined more by his body for the audience than by his soul. He is a glutton, a drunkard, a slouch, and most of all, a libidinous creature who cannot control himself with Elmire. It is only this final vice that provides the family with ammunition with which to destroy him. The play seems to suggest that sexuality is a natural part of humanity, and one most dangerous when we pretend it does not exist and hide instead behind flowery, empty rhetoric of abstinence and virtue.

In conclusion, women within the 17th century were largely oppressed due to the nature of society. As such, women's roles were limited to function as a bond or contract between wealth and power. Furthermore, due to society largely ignoring women, they were forced to use indirect tactics to influence social decisions. Despite this, Moliere recognizes this as evidence for women's rights and uses the play to shun the oppressive system women lived under.

The Lion and The Jewel

Wole Soyinka examines several gender issues throughout the play *The Lion and the Jewel*. One of the most significant gender issues in the play concerns the role of women in society. Soyinka depicts how women are treated as property in Yoruba culture through the payment of the bride-price. Men are free to buy as many wives as they can afford and women occupy a lower social status than men. Throughout the play, women in the village of 'Illunjinle' play a subservient and domestic role. This is shown through the character Sadiku who is the wife of King of the village, Baroka. Women are expected to be obedient to the men of the village and to cater to them by all means. The way they dress, behave and speak are controlled by the men. Sadiku does this by maintaining the household and raising the children and catering to her husband's needs. For example when he was pretending to be sad from allegedly losing his manhood she massaged his feet. It was even her duty to fetch new wives for her husband. Sadiku can only speak when given permission. This was shown when she entered the King's bedroom and addressed him as 'My Lord' and only continued speaking after he said 'You have my leave to speak.'

Men in the village are seen authoritative and educated. King Baroka is a fit example. His intelligence is seen through his ability of successfully ruling a village thus far and in return this brings great authority to his name. His authority is also shown in the way he has great control over all his wives and the way in which they obey without hesitation as seen in the scene where Baroka and 'favorite' laid in bed.

Baroka's favorite wife is seen kneeling beside him plucking his armpit hairs. She asks him how she is doing but does not get a positive reply so she goes on to say that she will do better. When Baroka announces that he is getting a new wife she attempts to save her spot as favourite by trying to pluck his armpit hairs better. She was plucking his armpit hairs desperate of his approval and when she hurt him he sent her away abruptly. She is completing her task of pleasing her husband as a woman and wife in the village. She proves that she is submissive by leaving when he commands her to. His intelligence also is depicted when his cunning plan to capture Sidi is revealed.

Women are subjected to playing a subservient and domestic role, as opposed to the men who are expected to be authoritative and educated figures. This statement can be easily proven using two main characters 'Sidi' and 'Lakunle'. Lakunle was the village school teacher which meant he was quite well educated as opposed to Sidi, who was like many women in the society Lakunle referred to as 'Bush girls' because of their illiteracy. We see here the imbalanced spread of education between men and women in this society, men had the upper hand in education, while women were expected to look after the home and husband. Lakunle continuously belittled Sidi, by making constant remarks about how she was less intelligent and weaker than he was, simply because she was a woman, and he felt no remorse in saying such things to her because he felt justified in what he was saying and did not even see it as offensive, it was a common known fact to the men in their society; women were worth less than men, they were uneducated and all they were worth was reproduction and servitude to the man and his household. The most unorthodox part about these conversations that Lakunle had with Sidi is that they were in an effort to obtain her as a wife. He insulted her and begged her to marry him in the same breath.

Sidi on the other hand did feel a bit wounded by his remarks, she responded by reminding him of all the work women were expected to do in the community like pounding yams and carrying children and how it was ludicrous to call women the weaker sex. This shows how Sidi

truly felt about the role of women in their society, she truly felt that there was nothing wrong with living in servitude to the men and she even felt a bit proud of the fact that women were able to endure so much; she did not feel oppressed in the slightest bit. She felt that Lakunle was out of place and disrespectful for thinking of it from that angle, in her opinion the men deserved to be served and have the highest authority because that was just the norm, but that did not mean that women were worthless. Despite Lakunle's insults, Sidi still agreed to marry him if he paid the price. It was as simple as that in their society, there was not a lot of love and romance involved in marriage. A man simply had to pick a girl from the community that he liked and pay her family a certain price if she was a virgin, (if she wasn't then he did not even have to) and a few years or even months later he could go out and repeat the same process again and obtain as many wives as he so desired. The women had no say, they were just to submit to their husbands and be accepting of his other wives.

Sexuality is evident in the first scene of the play entitled "Morning," where the village girls tell Sidi that she has become famous because her image is throughout an entire magazine. Sidi is excited and believes that she is more esteemed than Baroka because of her fame. When the girls discuss how many leaves of the magazine her picture takes up, Lakunle counts three leaves, and Sidi says, "One leaf for every heart that I shall break" (Soyinka 13).

In the second scene of the play entitled "Noon," Sadiku tells Sidi that Baroka asks for her hand in marriage. Sidi is quick to reject Baroka's offer and begins to criticize him for his old age. Sidi has become conceited and believes that she is more important than the Bale of Ilujinle. Sidi looks at her images in the magazine and comments that she never noticed her velvet skin before. Lakunle feels guilty for not mentioning her skin and says that he would have said something, but believed it was not the proper thing to do. Sidi pushes out her breasts and says, "There's a deceitful message in my eyes beckoning insatiate men to certain doom. And teeth that flash the sign of happiness, strong and evenly, beaming full of life" (Soyinka 22).

Sidi's comments portray how she views her sexuality as a weapon to entice and bring doom upon men who become infatuated with her beauty. She mentions that she is looking forward to breaking men's hearts and views them as her opponents. In Yoruba culture, the payment of the bride-price is a very important custom. Sidi understands that her worth has elevated and views her virginity as a treasure. Initially, she is not willing to marry Baroka because of his age, which is a modern view of marriage, but eventually becomes his bride after he cunningly seduces her.

Overall in my opinion, in the village of Ilujunle women lived in servitude to the men and the household but they did not feel oppressed by this, it was quite the opposite; they felt empowered.