

1. A Feministic Reading of Thomas Middleton's Women Beware Women

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Abstract:

No one would ever disagree about the superiority of men over women in the society overtime as some movements, such as feminist, have been formed to riot against it. This superiority is even noticeable in the bulk of the written works produced by men and women during history. Not a real weapon to shoot or kill women, the pen has mostly played the role of a weapon to create the aura of supremacy of male over female in the written works. Drama, as a genre of literature, has been used a lot to transfer this ideological viewpoint to people since most plays have been acted on the stage and seen by a lot of people. How the writers used ideas in their pieces of writing to help this supremacy has always been the key issue of analysis. In this article, the feministic approach has been applied on the play "Women Beware Women," written by Thomas Middleton, to show how the ideas are used by writers to help the dominance of male over female.

Keywords: *Thomas Middleton, Women Beware Women, Feminism*

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One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.

—Simone de Beauvoir

If one seeks the root of discrimination between male and female, he will find the source in the story of Adam and Eve, first the creation of Adam and then creation of Eve out of him; afterwards, the irrationality (as it is believed) of Eve that caused their downfall from heaven. Whether or not this story is true, some believe this story *constructed* the overall foundation of discrimination among genders.

Gender discrimination was not conspicuous till the time literature started to have an important role in the life of people. Afterwards, literature commenced to be in the hand of power to slake their desire. As Judith Fetterley (1997) believes, "literature is political" (p. 564); accordingly, in order to decode the role of policy in literature, one needs to take a different look at literature, as Fetterley (1997) continues,

Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects. To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change.... feminist criticism provides that point of view and embodies that consciousness [needed for revealing the hidden part of the work of art]. (p. 569)

So, as it is seen, a feministic overview towards a work of art can properly show the scale of discrimination which has been provided, especially by men, towards women by knowing which the movement towards "changing the [improper] culture that the literature reflects" can be begun.

Confronting with such literature mentioned above, one faces with the system of patriarchy or patriarchal system and the movement of feminism against it. Chris Weedon's definition of patriarchy in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987) tells us that,

The term 'patriarchal' refers to power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. These power relations take on many forms, from the sexual division of labour and the social organisation of procreation to the internalised norms of femininity by which we live. Patriarchal power rests on social meaning given to biological sexual difference. (Qtd. in Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, 2006, p. 3)

Nowadays, for sure, feminism does not keep silence encountering with this kind of system because every single piece of writing by men tends to be against women, consciously or unconsciously; as Cora Kaplan states, "men's writing across discourses, as feminism has rightly argued, constructs a range of denigrating ideological representations of 'woman', in order to attach a virtuous masculinity to a miscellany of valorised concepts—aesthetic, philosophical, political or scientific" (pp. 753-754). As a result, especially male writers use the existence of women to improve and empower the existence of men so "when we get to feminism" according to Julie Rivkin (2004)" you will encounter feminists who speak of the "discourse of patriarchy," the set of ways of thinking and of practicing language that lend coherence to male rule in society" (pp. 55). The word "feminist" itself is of high importance because as Margaret Walters (2005) quotes from dictionary "the word 'feminist' is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women'" (p. 2); accordingly, a feminist plays a key role in feminist movement. Being a woman, in its place, by an overlook on the binary opposition of male/female, has no definite meaning in itself and for itself. Spivak (2000) argues that, "my own definition of woman is very simple. It rests on the word 'man'" (p. 477). This centrality of men as Roman Selden (1997) says, causes "he is[to be] the 'one', she the 'other'" (p. 127).

Based on what have been mentioned so far, this paper tends to focus on a feministic reading of a drama by Middleton, *Women Beware Women*, trying to decipher the overall viewpoints of men, especially the writer as a representative of men in society, towards women in the work of art.

Discussion:

Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), an English playwright, is famous for some of his plays e.g. *Women Beware Women*. The play tells us,

Leantio, a factor, has married Bianca, a beautiful Venetian lady, against the wishes of her parents. A lady at court Isabella threatened with marriage to a rich numbskull, at first refuses. But when she and her uncle Hippolito fall in love, she consents to the marriage to provide cover for their incestuous relationship. The Duke of Florence, who lusts after Bianca, succeeds in seducing her. Once allied with the Duck, Bianca becomes vain and hardly greets her husband Lentio when he returns home after an absence. The Duke sends for Bianca to attend his banquet, and Leantio realizes that he is being cuckolded. However, Leantio finds some consolation when the duck promotes him and when Livia, Isabella's aunt, falls in love with him. The Duck informs Livia's brother Hippolito that Livia is consorting with a servant, and Hippolito kills Leantio in a sword fight. The Duke is now free to marry Bianca. At the wedding a masque is performed, during which Isabella, Livia, Hippolito, the Duke, and Bianca all die. The Duke's virtuous brother the Cardinal lives on to reflect on the price that has to be paid for lust.ⁱ

I. Women as Property: Believing in the system of patriarchy, the dominance of men over women motivates one, especially man, to look down at women as his property. Anna Yeatman (1990) states that, "under the condition of household economy wives, children, and household servants were located within the private property of masculine individuals" (p. 287). This view of man over woman is clearly seen in the play. In the beginning of the play, when Leantio talks with his mother he mentions:

As often as I look upon that treasure,

And know it to be mine-there lies the blessing-

It joys me that I ever was ordained

To have a being, and to live 'mongst men; (I, I, 14-17)ⁱⁱ

Scrutinizing this four lines, one can easily notice some words referring to ownership of people, such as: "treasure," "mine, and the worst of all "have a being" which descend women

to the rank of animals. It is not the end of the story; the other example follows these lines where Leantio mentions,

Look at her well, she's mine; look at her better-

Now say, if't be not the best piece of theft

That ever was committed.... (I, I, 42-44)

Again, the possessive pronoun "mine" and the word "piece" catch the eyes of a conscious reader. These lines show how Leantio- representative of men- looks as an object to women whom he can have, buy, or steal. These kinds of view of men towards women in the play at last raises the complains of Isabella to this situation when she says,

What an infernal torment 'twere to be

Thus bought and sold and turned and pried into;... (III, III, 34-35)

II. Women as Sexual Objects: Looking deep into the philosophy of partnership or marriage and putting the conventional convincing mottos of men aside towards this phenomenon nearly all men confess that one of the main reasons for marriage or partnership is sex or pleasure. But for women it seems to be a kind of "security" as it is believed by Stephanie Hodgson-Wright (2006) that ,

Women had no recourse to law for equality of pay and conditions, and married women had no legal independence from their husbands. This latter condition was exacerbated by the fact that it was very difficult for women to achieve economic independence, and so **marriage** was one of the few ways in which women could secure their future. (p. 4)

These views of sexual objectivity of women by men are frequently seen in the play as Leantio states,

View but her face, you may see all her dowry,

Save that which lies locked up in hidden virtues,

Like jewels kept in the cabinets. (I, I, 54-56)

.....

Brings forth more children..... (I, I, 96)

.....

'Tis ev'n a second hell to part from pleasure

When man has got a smack on't. (I, III, 5-6)

.....

Sordido completes this attitude when he explains the erotic characteristics of wife to Ward,

The wife your guardiner ought to tender,

Should be pretty, straight and slender;

Her hair not short, her foot not long,

Her hand not huge, nor too too loud her tongue;

No pearl in eye nor ruby in her nose,

.....

She must have teeth, and that no black ones,

And kiss most sweet when she does smack once:

Her skin must be both white and plumpt,

Her body straight, not hopper-rumped,

.....

She neither must have bump in back nor belly.

These are the faults that will not make her pass. (II, II, 101-117)

The Ward even goes farther and tells to Isabella,

Will it please you walk, forsooth,

A turn or two by yourself? You are so pleasing to me,

I take delight to view you on both sides. (III, III, 113-115)

These overlook of men towards women can be seen in most of the literary works.

III. General Accusation about Women: As I mentioned before, it is believed that because God created woman, Eve, out of man, Adam, women are not complete; or because Eve did not think what she is doing by eating the forbidden fruit she caused the downfall of Adam. This view of irrationality or incompleteness of women is reflected in most literary works as in *Women Beware Women* when Fabritio poses the question:

..., do you think that women love with reason?

.....

I had a wife

She ran mad for me; she had no reason for't

For aught I could perceive. (I, II, 16-21)

These dialogues of Fabritio under question the rationality of women; furthermore, I think it reflects the idea of the playwright and reveals his unconscious or maybe conscious which in its place reflects the attitude of men towards women.

IV. Women as Obedient Creatures: We are all familiar with this famous expression, "angels in the house" which refers to women and put them as housewives in the house to do laundry, breed children, and the most important of all to serve husband and be a follower of his order. These kinds of expressions, for sure, are made by men as Habib (2005) states, "indeed, the depiction of women in male literature – as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures – was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender" (p. 667). There would be a question here: why men are able to use this ideology for themselves and against women? The answer to this question is not difficult, because as Nancy Hartsock (1990) says, "power is associated firmly with the male and masculinity," (p. 157) that's why all men try to keep this power in their hand and do not let women get their right because if women get their right, the power would equally be contributed between

sexes, as a result, there would not be a sole power of one sex, especially men, to torture women. That is why, recently, women started to get back their power under the flag of feminism to stop this oppression, as Judith Butler (2002) believes,

The political assumption that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination. (p. 6)

Interestingly enough, both genders believed that women *should* obey men as it is echoed in works of art. In *Women Beware Women*, we constantly face up to this idea as when Leantio tells to her mother about Bianca,

I pray do not you teach her [Bianca] to rebel,

When she's in a good way to obedience; (I, I, 74-75)

Or when Isabella as a woman states,

How can I, being born with that obedience

That must submit unto a father's will?

If he command[s], I must of force consent. (II, I, 86-88)

Here, it shows that during the ages, by injecting into the minds of women as an inferior creature men wanted to keep their (men's) supremacy alive; and the result is quite clear: "*we women should obey men*" as most women may say.

Conclusion:

As it is discussed in this paper, a work of art which is written by a male writer carries the idea of 'man being a centre' and 'woman being an other', whether intentionally or unconscious, to continue the process of oppression of woman. What a work of art, nowadays, tends to do is to internalize the sense of inferiority of women and superiority of men in order to control and marginalize the role of women. Thomas A. Schmitz (2007) properly deciphers this ideology of men when he mentions,

In Western history and thought, “human” has always been equated with “male” (as a term such as “mankind” suggests). Women were defined as “the other,” in opposition and contrast to men, and this alterity was usually perceived as being deficient: women are not human beings in the full sense of the term. In philosophy, art, and literature, the woman usually is the object toward which the male subject directs his gaze and his desire. (p. 177)

What we get from this paper is to get the ways men use these ideologies or the way they look at female so that men can take advantage of women. The ideology such as interpolating the role of women as 'other', or looking woman as his property, sexual object, or obedient creature and using these kinds of ideologies for his own benefits. It is highly important for women or female writers to recognize the ways by which men are used to torturing women and try to block this process.

At last, we should be hopeful that one day woman gains her right and as Rousseau (2002) believes one day "he is [really considered] notorious as the philosopher who declared that woman is made specially to please man" (Qtd. in Deutscher, p. 5).

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Footnotes:

ⁱ The plot is quoted from Michel Patterson's *Oxford Dictionary of Plays*. OUP: New York, 2005.452.

ⁱⁱ All references to play are from Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. Edited by R. Gill, and abbreviated as (number of the Act, number of the Scene, line number(s)).

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