Gender dynamics in "the lady’s dressing room”

The gender dynamic constructed in the Restoration and early eighteenth century British literature manifested itself around the conceptual binary of man and woman. The debate that appears in literature of this time roots itself in societal expectations for the performance of gender: when these expectations are not met, gender roles that were once in place may be thought of critically and reevaluated. However, the threat of these gender roles transforming also inspires a lot of contempt. While male authors in the Restoration and early eighteenth century Britain certainly portrayed gender dynamics in unconventional ways, it is important to recognize when this portrayal is exclusive, rather than inclusive, of women. Jonathan Swift presents a peculiar case of this exclusion in “ The Lady’s Dressing Room”. While this piece challenges our understanding, and certainly the 18th century British understanding, of gender roles, it also uses the criticism of women as its vehicle.

The object of satire in Swift’s poem “ The Lady’s Dressing Room” is misleading. In the poem, Swift documents a young man wandering through the dressing room of the lady that he loves. The young man, Strephon, is depicted as quite dimwitted. He is satirized for his ignorance of women’s nature as human, with accompanying and often disgusting bodily processes. This criticism of gender roles could be executed very well, and could potentially bring light to the fact that women are wrongfully expected to exist as consumable and pleasing to the male gaze despite being human. However, Swift satirizes Strephon through a thinly veiled type of violence towards women as beings. The satire is formed in Strephon’s ignorance of women as human beings, but the sentiment is not that women are therefore

free to be human beings. This is because Swift details women’s existence as human through a graphic depiction of personal bodily functions. This graphic representation is not meant to criticize Strephon, but women, as they are the object of disgust. Strephon may be seen as silly for thinking women are always perfectly coiffed, but women are also depicted as revolting. Women are allowed to be disgusting, but Swift’s poem reveals the idea that this is something to be forgiven. We can see this at the start of the poem, where Swift writes, “ Five hours (and who can do it less in?)/ By haughty Celia spent in dressing” (Swift 1-2). By tacking on “ and who can do it less in?” Swift is making a jab at women for the time they spend getting ready. Five hours is excessive, and merits critical thought, which is exactly why simply making a jab does not suffice. The question “ and who can do it less in?” doesn’t criticize the institution of oppression that women face and in which they must compulsively conform to expectations of beauty. It instead criticizes “ haughty” Celia alone, and does so condescendingly.

Swift’s condescending sentiment appears again at the close of the poem. He writes, “ I pity wretched Strephon blind/ To all the charms of female kind;/ Should I the queen of love refuse,/ Because she rose from stinking ooze?” (Swift 237-240). Swift creates a playful tone here by creating an expectation in the reader for an actual affirmation of women. This expectation is created in the line “ To all the charms of female kind” (Swift 238). However, he follows this expectation with an affirmation of women being disgusting. Therefore, the “ charms” of female kind he references is what Strephon finds revolting while searching the dressing room. This may seem like insignificant and harmless humor, but it is humor at the expense of the societal

conception and expectation of women’s performance of gender. Swift writes these lines with the attitude that he is properly appreciating women as human beings, but he is in actuality simplifying them to “ stinking ooze”. Swift ends the poem with the lines, “ Such order from confusion sprung/ Such gaudy tulips raised from dung” (Swift 251-252). This finalizes his inappropriate “ forgiving” attitude. These lines make women problematic, not the societal expectation for women to be pretty problematic. Here Swift essentially states that he loves women despite their disgusting nature, which in turn solidifies his idea of women as being inherently disgusting. You would not refer to men as being “ raised from dung” simply for existing. Swift’s analogy would actually be more fitting for men because men do not counter this natural state, don’t present themselves as “ gaudy tulips”. These nuances may seem redundant, but they are vital because while women are forgiven for being disgusting, men are disgusting without consideration and without the expectation to be forgiven.

Much of the aggression directed at women within “ The Lady’s Dressing Room” is hidden beneath Swift’s satire and use of humor. However, the encompassing sentiment of Swift’s poem does little to counter the typical binary thinking of gendered discussions. In fact, Swift reinforces this binary thinking by depicting women as “ other”. In Swift’s poem, women are the beings “ sprung from confusion” and “ raised from dung” (Swift 251-252) , and the humor of this context is the expectation for women to be otherwise. The most significant point here is that this humor and Swift’s satire would have no basis if Swift actually thought of women as equal beings with equally gross bodily functions: if that were the case this would simply be a

poem detailing a woman’s room. Swift writes women as human in this poem, but writes them as funny or faulty humans, deserving of forgiving men like himself who can look past their disgusting nature. Swift doesn’t counter the expectation for women to be pretty despite being human, he executes it.