

Treatment of women in the man of mode



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George Etherege's *The Man of Mode* is a play that utilizes humor, wit, and satire to criticize the foolishness and vulnerability of women. In this illustrative and vulgar play, Etherege examines the mannerisms, dialogues, and behaviors of different female characters, such as Mrs. Loveit, Bellinda, and Harriet, in order to develop the argument of female oppression and the inability for women to rise in a society because of legal and social biases. By examining Mrs. Loveit's unbridled passion and ruthless drive to win the affections of the protagonist, Dorimant, Etherege epitomizes women as slaves to their own desires. By analyzing the means by which Dorimant treats Bellinda, Etherege disparages women as easily manipulated and nonsensical. Lastly, by contrasting Dorimant to Harriet, Etherege manifests to readers that women are only leveled with men if they possess qualities of wit and humor and the ability to manipulate affection. Even so, they will ultimately become objects or commodities as they surrender themselves into marriage. Therefore, by scrutinizing the juxtaposition and the treatment of the female characters in this play, one can not only see the inequality between men and women with regards to reputation, social status, and the natural conditions of women as oppressed commodities, one can also see the futility of women's attempts to defy social restrictions imposed by male figures during the Restoration period. From the inception of the play, readers are introduced to the protagonist, Dorimant, an infamous libertine who juggles multiple affairs simultaneously. As the play opens, Dorimant is found in his gown and slippers, reciting verses from a note to be given to Mrs. Loveit. He openly confesses to the audience that the "dull, insipid thing is a billet-doux written in cold blood, after the heat of the business is over" (I. i. 4-5). The harsh reality is that Dorimant is that is no longer interested in Mrs.

Loveit now that he has already conquered her. In addition, Etherege not only presents Mrs. Loveit as a woman who is quickly used and cast aside by Dorimant, but he also mocks her by naming her as Mrs. Loveit. The name, clearly intentional, not only suggests her love for sexual gratification, but also identifies her as a woman enslaved to sex. By molding Mrs. Loveit's name into her identity as a whore, Etherege compels the readers to disrespect her reputation. In addition, Mrs. Loveit is fooled into a rage of jealousy upon hearing that Dorimant has betrayed her affections by entertaining another woman at a play. Unwilling to accept neglect and rejection, yet acknowledging Dorimant's disloyalty, she curses Dorimant for being a "faithless, inhuman, barbarous man - without sense of love, of honor, or of gratitude" (II. ii. 161, 163). Mrs. Loveit serves as both a representation of women being used as objects of pleasure and the naïve and the foolish, believing jealousy to be "the strongest cordial we can give to undying love" (III. iii. 213). At the conclusion of the play, it is Mrs. Loveit's unrestrained and assertiveness passion and love for Dorimant that repels his affection for her. In hopes of winning a man's affection, Mrs. Loveit willingly relinquishes her reputation. In hopes of rising above the male gender, Mrs. Loveit loses her femininity, surrendering herself to the violence of her passion. Based on the depiction of Mrs. Loveit, Etherege establishes the women as slaves to their lusts and passion, too feeble and weak to control their body and their mind from the wit and charms of men like Dorimant. Through the analysis of Dorimant's second mistress, Bellinda, the play continues to exude a sense of male superiority. Bellinda is first introduced to readers as a façade; she is the "lady masked, in a pretty dishabille, whom Dorimant entertained with more respect than the gallants do a common

vizard" (II. ii. 88-90). Immediately, Bellinda voluntarily gives herself away as an object, allowing herself to be used to deceive her friend. After witnessing the abuse of Mrs. Loveit, Bellinda exclaims that " I wish I had not seen him use her so" (II. ii. 301), but pathetically assumes Mrs. Loveit's position of Dorimant's mistress, only to " sigh to think that Dorimant may be one day as faithless and unkind to [her]" (II. ii. 304-305). Ultimately, Etherege emphasizes a woman's blinded love from excessive and obsessive infatuation by having Bellinda come face to face with reality, admitting that " I knew him false and helped to make him so. Was not her ruin enough to fright me from the danger? It should have been, but love can take no warning" (V. i. 330-333). By succumbing herself to Dorimant physically and emotionally, Bellinda has simply become another one of Dorimant's conquests. In fact, she is even more imprudent than his previous conquests because she still eagerly surrenders herself to Dorimant despite having witnessed many incidents of infidelity and betrayal. In addition, by examining the distinction between Bellinda and Mrs. Loveit, Etherege distinguishes the different forms of oppression women are bound by. Whereas Mrs. Loveit is bound to her unreasonable and illogical love for Dorimant, Bellinda is bound to her reputation in the society. At the end of the play, Bellinda tells the audience that "[Dorimant] is tender to my honor, though he's cruel to my love" (V. ii. 303-304), which protects her from the disgrace and dishonor of being labeled as an unchaste woman. From Bellinda's point of view, her reputation and honor are more important than her heart; as long as Dorimant does not expose her impurities to society, Bellinda will tolerate even the fear of heartache and jealousy. The emphasis on female honor and virtue is significant because it manifests her purity and

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reputation. Etherege uses this emphasis to point out the double standards that exist between men and women. If a woman is found to be wild and unchaste, no man will want her as a wife and she will forever remain tainted. On the other hand, if a man has a reputation to be an unfaithful lover, as represented by Dorimant, women will still flock to him. Etherege seems to put women on higher pedestals of maintaining virtues, showing that men and women will never achieve equality with regards to their social reputations. From a patriarchal Restoration society, women must adhere to the values of chastity in order to maintain an acceptable social status. In a patriarchal society, men are the only characters capable of pursuing the libertine lifestyle without condemnation. Women, who not only have to uphold their reputation, also have to seek marriage as a means to secure economic statuses. If Bellinda's unchaste behaviors are revealed, she will lose all prospects for marriage. Therefore, bound by social and legal restrictions, Etherege can only present women as weak and immobile, fully dependent on men for economic and social security. The last female character positioned to stand against Dorimant is the "fine, easy, clean shape" (I. i. 138) Harriet. Though her beauty is natural and pleasing to all eyes, she, unlike the other female characters, also possesses the rare quality of wit as "more than is usual in her sex, and as much malice" (I. i. 149). Harriet is unlike the commonly represented, feminine, virtuous, and obedient women; she does not follow the crowd into being fooled by Dorimant and she is able to detect and even mimic Dorimant's true nature. In fact, Harriet appears to be a representation of hope for the failure and defeat of the other women in the play. Whereas Mrs. Loveit has to contrive schemes to avenge Dorimant, Harriet observes Dorimant as an outsider and simply mimics him.

Whereas Bellinda's actions are self-deceptive and rooted in fear of society's disdain, Harriet's decisions are bold and courageous, free from "hoods and modesty, masks and silence, things that shadow and conceal" (III. i. 25-26). When her mother, Lady Woodvill, insists that she marries Young Bellair, Harriet outwardly refuses by proclaiming, "Shall I be paid down by a covetous parent for a purchase? I need no land. No, I'll lay myself out all in love" (III. i. 71-73). Harriet is able to control her emotions by disguising them; as she becomes more and more infatuated with Dorimant, she feels "great a change within, but he shall never know it" (III. iii. 65). In addition, she is able to shape and mold Dorimant's thoughts and actions by acting as his mirror, reflecting the wit and abuse Dorimant uses in his treatment of Bellinda and Mrs. Loveit. When Dorimant tries to confess his love for her, she gives him a taste of his own medicine by saying, "do not speak it if you would have me believe it. Your tongue is so famed for falsehood, 'twill do the truth an injury" (V. ii. 131-132). By withholding herself from Dorimant's seduction and mimicking his wit, Harriet insists on a fair treatment of all women. Etherege gives Harriet a chance to rise above Dorimant by equalizing their rhetorical freedom. Unfortunately, though Etherege contrasts this free-spirited, independent woman from all the other female characters in the play, she too eventually becomes another one of Dorimant's possessions. At the end of the play, though Dorimant renounces "all the joys I have in friendship and in wine" and "sacrifice to [Harriet] all the interest I have in other women" (V. ii. 152-154), he will still have Harriet in his hands. Because Harriet's greatest fear is that Dorimant will hate her and dispose of her as he has done to the other women, exclaiming that to be "a curse that frights me when I speak it" (V. ii. 183-184), her great love for him prevents her from

further scrutiny of the earnestness and sincerity of his motives. Although Etherege leaves the marriage of Dorimant and Harriet vague and unsettled, he subtly confirms Harriet's final form of surrender as she willingly submits to the values of marriage by confessing that she " would, and never will marry any other man" (V. ii. 348). Consequently, Etherege takes away the slightest bit of hope from even the women who have wit to achieve equality with men by exposing the uncertainty of Dorimant's love for Harriet. In addition, he reaffirms the anti-feminist argument that women do not have a place in society apart from men. At the end of the play, there is still evidence that Dorimant has not fully repented from his mistakes and that his feelings are not founded on genuine devotion and unselfish ambitions. After the final confrontation with Mrs. Loveit, Dorimant, and Bellinda, Dorimant turns to Bellinda and says, " We must meet again" (V. ii. 321). As a result, Dorimant becomes the model for every man. The infamous libertine exits the stage with his prize in his arms and quite possibly another meeting with his mistress; not once does he express regret, not once does he experience heartache. George Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, therefore, portrays women as inferior objects used primarily for self-gratification. In addition, Etherege depicts characters like Mrs. Loveit, Bellinda, and Harriet, to show that equality between men and women cannot exist. In order to prevent women from climbing the social ladder, Etherege shows the confinement of women in their respected realms. The role of women, no matter how intelligent or wealthy, is to serve men. A wife must always be submissive to her husband; a woman always in servitude to a man. The once assertive Mrs. Loveit is now battered to an uncontrollable woman who wears her emotions on her sleeves. The seemingly controlled and conniving Bellinda ends up being an

object to Dorimant and is forever enslaved to her self-deception. Lastly, the honorable and witty Harriet, the representative of hope for the female characters, loses to Dorimant by ultimately yielding herself to a society where only marriage can sustain a woman's social and economic reputation. By presenting *The Man of Mode* as an antifeminist play, Etherege, in essence, is following the patriarchal Restoration society that does not support the equality of men and women in the social world. Due to societal and legal biases, women can only be delineated as mere objects, easily manipulated, used, and discarded.