

Gender and the renaissance: female sexuality in jonson's volpone



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In Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, Celia represents the epitome of femininity in Renaissance literature. She is beautiful, submissive, 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, this essay seeks to unravel the reasons as to why masculinity is threatened by female strength and autonomy, not to victimize the female characters within Jonson's play or to vilify the men as the root of this injustice. 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.

Celia, the wife of Corvino (one of Volpone's victims) has entirely conformed to the feminine role of a proper married woman. Mosca introduces her character into the play by informing Volpone, " She's kept as warily as is your gold:/ Never does she come abroad, never takes air/ But at a window. All her looks are sweet/ As the first grapes or cherries, and are watched/ as near as they are"(Jonson 2. 0 ll. 118-122). Although Corvino married Celia because she embodied the virginal and moral qualities of " the feminine", now that she lives in his home it becomes his responsibility to maintain her virtue. He keeps her locked up inside so that she is not corrupted by outside influences. Volpone, upon hearing this news, finds Celia sexually appealing

not only because Mosca tells him of her beauty but also because he compares her to Volpone's gold. To Volpone, wealth is the source of his power in the community and therefore reinforces his own masculinity. If Celia is Corvino's gold, Volpone ultimately wants to have sex with her to prove that he is more masculine than any of the men involved in his scam. In the article "Desire and Dominance in Volpone," Howard Marchitell explains that the reason that Celia is sought after by both Corvino and Volpone as a prize is that "Celia is the model of a woman who is commodified and exchanged between men"(298). Throughout the play, Jonson characterizes Celia as flat, one-sided, and static to use her as an example of any woman who conforms to her feminine role and then becomes a target for men like Volpone, who simply want to use her to boost their own reputations. Blissfully unaware at the moment of the danger that surrounds her femininity, Celia buys a powder from Volpone (in disguise) that he claims Venus used and which, "kept her perpetually young, cleared her wrinkles, firmed/ her gums, filled her skin, [and] colored her hair" (Jonson 2. 2 ll. 234-236). Conforming to her feminine role has undoubtedly placed Celia in a position where she is easily victimized by then men in her community, yet the consequences of not conforming are perhaps even more severe than the danger she now faces. She buys the powder because she feels that it is necessary to preserve her feminine appearance in order to stay in her husband's favor. By marrying a nobleman, Celia has gained status within the community and lives the lifestyle of a noble woman. By straying away from the feminine she risks losing her status as her husband's wife and is also in jeopardy of being alienated from her community.

Lady Would-Be Politic, on the other hand, is an example of a woman who is seen as somewhat masculine by members of society and is therefore often ignored and shunned by men of status. When Lady Would-Be visits Volpone, whom she believes is gravely ill, and attempts to have a conversation with him, he seems entirely disgusted by her presence, stating “ The Sun, the sea will sooner noth stand still/ Than her eternal tongue! Nothing can scape it.”(Jonson 3. 4 ll. 84-85). Not only is Volpone uninterested in anything that a woman may have to say to him but he also seems surprised that a married woman would lack proper feminine modesty and show up unaccompanied to his home. Her independence is extremely unattractive to Volpone because autonomous women in this community are likely prostitutes. Volpone is not interested in women who are viewed as promiscuous because he cannot prove his masculinity by having sex with a woman who is not a model of femininity. Yet, while Lady Would-Be is not feminine enough for Volpone, she is in many ways trapped in the same double bind as Celia. When Mosca interrupts her conversation with Volpone and tells her that her husband is “ Rowing upon the water of a gondole/ With the most cunning courtesan in Venice”(Jonson 3. 5 ll. 19-20), Lady Would-Be immediately departs so that she can intervene. She is aware that other women who have embraced their feminine roles may have more of an appeal to her husband than she herself. This is a threat to her own quasi-independence, because as a married woman she is somewhat accepted into the social realm of the community, whereas without her husband she would no longer be welcome. Although she pushes the boundaries of her role as a wife, she is not willing to entirely let go of her position because without that status she would be entirely alone with no way to support herself. This cycle of oppression therefore leaves her

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with only one valid option, which is to perform her gender with enough effort to maintain her marriage.

Lady Would-Be performs her gender only when she feels threatened; however, because Celia is married to a man who is consistently trying to prove his masculinity, she must constantly remain the model of femininity, especially in her sexual behavior. Unfortunately, she makes the mistake of showing herself in public when a disguised Volpone sells her his miraculous powder. When Corvino catches her in the act, he is full of rage; ranting, “ You were an actor with your handkerchief!/ Which he most sweetly kissed in the receipt,/ And might no doubt return it with a letter,/ And point the place where you might meet”(Jonson 2. 5 ll. 40-43). Although Celia simply handed Volpone her handkerchief with a coin inside to pay for the powder, Corvino sees her public appearance with another man as a sexual act. The social implications of Celia being seen with another man threaten Corvino’s power and ultimately his masculine status within his community because she is his wife and therefore his property, which he should have control over. In his article on Volpone, Marchitell reveals the reasons behind Corvino’s behavior, stating, “ Corvino fears that Celia, by cuckolding will displace him from his several social bonds with men: that he will lose his honor and his place in male society which is predicated primarily upon the domination of women”(Marchitell 297). Although Celia is one of Corvino’s most prized possessions, she is also potentially the most dangerous hazard to his status. In a society where a man’s wife is a reflection of his own character, Corvino believes that any public sexual behavior shown by Celia could irreparably damage his own reputation.

Celia's sexuality is initially a major threat to Corvino, but after he realizes that he may be able to use it as a tool for his own gain, Celia's virtuosity is no longer as important as his complete control over her body. When Corvino agrees to let Volpone have sex with Celia in return for making him the sole heir to his fortune, Celia cries out in surprise, " Oh God and his good angels! Whither, whither/ Is shame fled human breasts, that with such ease/ Men dare put off your honors with their own?"(Jonson 3. 7 ll. 133-135). Celia has assumed up to this point that conforming to her feminine role would protect her to a certain extent from being forced into immoral behavior. Although she understands that she is her husband's property and must obey him, she previously thought that since her sexuality belonged to him and him alone, he would not willingly give her body to another man. Yet, since power and masculinity are so intertwined in the social structure, Corvino does not see his wife's rape as a threat to his honor because he is the one forcing the sexual behavior upon her. To pressure Celia into having sex with Volpone, Corvino not only threatens her but also commands her to be a proper wife and do as she is told. In Ivan Canadas' article regarding Volpone, he states, " By appealing to Celia's wifely duty, or loyalty, Corvino reveals his fundamental vision of Celia as just another commodity"(8). In the same way that Volpone's gold is a possession that enhances his masculine reputation within the community, Corvino believes that his ultimate control over his wife will have the same effect. Because Celia is in fact his property, she realistically has no choice but to follow her husband's orders and fulfill her wifely duty. She now realizes that the moral protection she thought she would receive for being a model of femininity has no bearing on this situation, since she is a commodity and nothing more.

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The double bind that both Celia and Lady Would-Be Politic find themselves in directly relates to the patriarchal assertion that society must uphold masculinity and femininity as natural qualities attributed to one's sex to keep the social order. Throughout *Volpone*, Corvino and Volpone desperately try to maintain their power and wealth by asserting their own masculinity while Celia, the model of femininity, attempts to maintain her status as a proper wife. Yet, unintentionally, Celia becomes a commodity and a prize caught in the midst of her husband's greed. She soon realizes that the morality and virtuosity assigned to "the feminine" will not save her when she becomes a threat to her husband's wealth and power.