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ENG 240

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10 December 2013

The Objectification of Women in John Donne's Poetry:

Through the Lens of Laura Mulvey

Throughout both cinematic and literary history, the man has often objectified the woman for his own sexual pleasure. In her 1974 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Laura Mulvey delves into the way in which women are fetishized and theorizes why this occurs. While Mulvey focuses on cinema from the 1930s to 1950s, her psychoanalytic theory applies to literature as well. Reading is a visual activity and while one reads, one creates images of the characters and settings to accompany the literature through the use of the imagination. Readers begin to relate to the protagonist and "sees" their experience as described. Reading also allows the mind the freedom to imagine the characters any way in which one desires as opposed to cinema which provides the audience with the images that the director creates. Consequently, literature may foster a deeper connection with the reader than cinema does with the viewer. The psychoanalysis presented by Mulvey, then, should apply to literature in the sense that the images objectifying women when reading are at least as powerful as those in the cinema. A good example, of the objectification of women in literature would be the poetry of John Donne, specifically "Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed" and "The Indifference." In these poems Donne objectifies women and thus lowers them to a position of being useful only

for sexual gratification rather than acknowledging their worth as people intellectually and emotionally.

In films, the woman is fetishized through the camera angles used. The audience sees the woman from the man's perspective, as if the camera is the eyes of the man. In Donne's poem, "Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed," Donne watches as he commands the woman to undress herself, one article of clothing at a time, all the while referencing the erection he has. The way in which he addresses his erection is a metaphor. The line, "The foe oft times having the foe in sight, / Is tired with standing though he never fight" (2-3). In these lines, the foe is his erection, which stands without fighting. His desire to physically touch her and be with her sexually is obvious as well: "Until I labor, I in labor lie" (2). This line employs a double entendre of the meaning of "labor;" it is used to mean that until he gets to work sexually, as is said in the first part of line two, he will remain in a state of distress, as he says in the second part of the line. In Donne's poem, the woman becomes "a perfect product whose body [is] stylized and fragmented by close-ups is the content...and the direct recipient of the spectator's look" (592). She is idealized and glorified for the advancement of sexual satisfaction: "Your gown going off, such beauteous state reveals / As when from flowery meads th' hill's shadow steals" (13-14). In this poem, the reader sees the woman through Donne's eyes, similar to watching a movie. It builds up her physical beauty, thus transforming it "into something satisfying in itself" (591). In "The Indifference" the woman is literally objectified, as Donne only wants to use her as a means to an end, his sexual satisfaction: "I can love her, and her, and you, and you" (8). This line implies just how little the woman that he is with means to him; he could literally be with any woman. The woman

merely “plays to and signifies male desire” (589) rather than having any lasting importance to the male.

According to Mulvey, the cinematic world is phallogentric, meaning it is male-dominated and thus films are created to appeal to men. The main audience in the time of Mulvey is male, so films catered to their phallogentric sexual desires: “The paradox of phallogentrism, in all its manifestations,” argues Mulvey, “is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world,” (585). The woman’s visual lack of a phallus is necessary; it makes the man’s phallus and power apparent. The woman is what creates the concept of phallogentrism with her lack of male genitalia, which produces a symbolic presence and the phallus itself signifies her desire to “make good the lack” (585). Men become fascinated with the concept of watching the woman. Mulvey calls this scopophilia, which is arousal from “using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (589). This can be applied to Donne’s poetry as well. In his rather intimate poem “Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed” just the sight of this woman drives him mad with desire. Donne writes, “License my roving hands, and let them go / Before, behind, between, above, below” (25-26) to express how much he wants to be physically intimate with his mistress. He just wants to touch her; he has been watching her undress and his desire to physically touch her now is growing stronger with each passing moment. A sense of voyeurism is present on the reader’s part as he or she feels an “illusion of looking in on a private world” (588). In this poem especially, the reader feels as though he or she is part of Donne’s most private world. With the poem taking place in the bedroom, one of the most intimate and vulnerable locations for people, the reader has a sense of projecting his or her repressed desire onto the woman in the

poem. Because it is literature, the reader creates an image of the woman that caters to his or her own personal desires; the brain becomes a critical sex organ as it creates the image.

Even the language used in “Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed,” Donne is sexual and crude in nature, treating the woman as an object and ignoring her value as a person “Off with that wiry coronet and show / The hairy diadem which on you doth grow,” (16-17). These lines also have a double entendre that creates a more sexual tone to the poem. Full of sexual innuendos, Donne is clearly fixated on having his way with this woman. He retains, however, a lighthearted tone throughout the poem, which suggests that he is trying to down play sex as a concept. He does not want the woman to worry about the social consequences of engaging in sexual intercourse outside of a marriage, but rather to focus on the physical pleasure it will bring her in the moment. It is evident that Donne is not focused on love in this poem, but rather lust. It is written as if the woman is performing a strip tease from the 1600s. In “The Indifference” as well, Donne uses rude phrases such as “Must I, who came to travail through you, / Grow your fixed subject, because you are true?” (17-18) to further assert his lack of respect for women and disregard for their feelings. Based on the interpretation of the phrase “grow your fixed subject” to mean falling in love with or at least becoming devoted to, he is asserting that his only intent with the woman is to “travail” through her as a sexual conquest until he moves on to the next woman. He does not want her to fall in love with him and is asking, in these lines, why she would potentially fall in love with him, even though his intentions are only for sexual gratification. He even resorts to insulting the mothers of all women: “Will it not serve your turn to do as did your mothers?” (11). Here, he appeals to insulting their lineage to try to convince the women that his desire is

for a natural and inevitable behavior that has its roots in human history. He is implying that even the mothers of women engaged in recreational sexual behavior to strengthen his argument, insisting that the women are equal players in his game; they desire the sexual satisfaction just as much as he. While these lines are both insults, they also appeal to the woman's sense of independence or power. They desire some control over their lives.

Mulvey insists that the woman is represented as a signifier for the male's other, "bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman" (586). In Donne's poetry, the woman never has a voice or a name and is literally silent throughout the entire poem. Undressing her literally objectifies her because she says nothing and nothing about her character, her intrinsic value, is important. The focus on the poem is purely physical and sexual. In fact, Donne implies in the poem that other men wish to objectify her as well. "Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear / That th' eyes of busy fools may be stopped there" (7-8). He also commands her to undress herself, asserting his male dominance. The woman is the "bearer of meaning" rather than the "maker of meaning" implying that she is to be looked at rather than to create her own identity and thoughts (589). The man in the poem is active and the woman is passive, and the male's gaze projects his phantasy onto the female. The woman in this poem gives off a strong erotic, visual impact as the reader undresses her in his or her mind as she undresses herself in the poem. By willingly undressing herself, Mulvey argues, the woman in the poem is essentially giving herself to Donne, becoming "his property" (591). This allows the reader, who is presumably male, to indirectly own the woman, as well as be a voyeuristic audience member. When the reader is female, however, the

perspective is different. It complicates Mulvey's assertions because her interpretations were for a primarily male audience. When women read either of these poems, they have access to a perspective of control and power that, at the time of Donne, was nonexistent. In modern time, women having power in sexual relationships is much more common; thus, woman readers today may find the poem relatable.

What follows, then, is Mulvey's observation that "man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (590). Men do not like to gaze at other men, or themselves for that matter, because they cannot endure sexual objectification. John Donne does not describe himself physically in either of these poems. Even when he refers to his own erection he uses verbs rather than adjectives, as is present in the aforementioned lines about his erection being a soldier not having fought, rather than physically describing it. It seems a bit ironic and hypocritical, then, that he so freely is able to objectify the woman of his desire when he cannot endure objectification of himself even by himself. Rather than subject himself to objectification, he would rather hold the power in the situation, being the "bearer of the look" rather than the image, as is the woman. According to Mulvey, this also allows the reader to project his gaze onto the woman being objectified, creating a feeling of power and omnipotence. For a brief time, the reader gets to escape reality and feed his ego with erotic power.

Instead of focusing on the eroticism of sex, "The Indifference" is a poem that centers on Donne's unfaithfulness in relationships and the social norms that allow him to objectify women. He encourages women to follow in his actions and be unfaithful, as well. Directly addressing the reader, "I can love her, and her, and you, and you, / I can love any, so she not be true" (8-9), Donne objectifies women in a slightly different way

than in “Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed.” Here, the women with whom he wishes to engage in sexual relations act as “sexual objects,” but he also encourages them to objectify their sexual partners as well. This is creating a more equal relationship and implies that he can have any woman he desires, but that the same applies to the women. He desires a mutual objectification so that both parties may engage in sexual relations without any metaphorical strings being attached: “Rob me, but bind me not, and let me go” (line 16) Donne pleads, wanting no commitment, just sex. He further cushions his opinion with the line, “Let me, and do you, twenty know” (line 15), which implies the number of women he has been with already. This line is illustrating his sexual tendencies by providing a number of women he has engaged in sexual relations with, while also insisting that women should live lives such as his, as well. This is the kind of relationship men have desired for centuries: one in which a man can engage in sexual activities with the object of desire and then leave without any regrets or consequences once the satisfaction has been achieved. He is essentially against monogamous relationships.

The kind of encounter that Donne suggests in this poem is one in which one lives in the moment, without regard to the relationships or social constructs of the people involved. It seems to be an indulgence in physical pleasure, not an act that particularly furthers one’s goals or life. This is a necessity, in Donne’s opinion, to live a full and happy life. Mulvey confirms this concept in her insistence that the woman’s “visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (589). In both of these poems, there is no plot line. They merely capture a moment or two in life, a pause during which Donne

appreciates the woman objectively. He establishes credibility by referencing Venus, the goddess of love, and insisting that she approves of his promiscuous lifestyle. After the protagonist approaches Venus and proposes his lifestyle to her, Venus says, “Since you will be true, / You shall be true to them who are false to you” (line 24-25), which suggests that there is approval of his lifestyle because his promiscuity is the one thing to which he stays true, thus rendering Donne the powerful male influence who always gets his way.

Although the woman does not have to indulge the man in his sexual desires, however what she cannot avoid is the objectification; her “to-be-looked-at-ness” in these poems lives on infinitely because it has been committed to paper and read by countless numbers of people. In fact, part of Mulvey’s theory of scopophilia is that there is a certain pleasure in being viewed. So, while the woman has no choice of whether or not the man, or other women for that matter, is objectifying her, she herself takes some sexual satisfaction out of being objectified and desirable. Therefore, one cannot interpret the male objectification of the female as completely one-sided and negative all the time. But in the case of Donne’s poems explored here, the woman had no choice in the objectification because Donne was in control of the words he put onto paper. It is unknown how the woman in this poem felt about it because her anonymity remains to this day. However, to the extent that she complied with his request to undress as he directed, she may have derived some feelings of power or satisfaction.

Throughout this essay, Laura Mulvey’s psychoanalytic theory about male phallogentrism is applied to literature and, more specifically, two of John Donne’s poems, “Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed” and “The Indifference” because

reading is as much a visual activity as is watching a film. Mulvey asserts that men objectify women because women have a lack of male genitalia. They are sexually aroused by looking at women because of the concept of scopophilia, which is pleasure derived from looking. Readers add a sense of voyeurism because they are looking into the private world of the author through the author's eyes. There is more freedom for the reader, however, to project his or her own sexual desires onto the woman in the poem because there is no picture of her; the mind creates the image for the reader, rendering it an important sexual organ. An interesting follow-up study, then, would be to explore the way men and women are portrayed in literature written by women. Woman authors may objectify men by focusing on their physical appearance or their imagined physical prowess but they may also objectify women by focusing on their appearance and referring to the beauty of their physical characteristics rather than describing them in terms that create an intellectual and emotional being. If a study found that woman authors also objectified women characters more than men characters, the traditional definitions of a sexuality bias may only be applied in an abstract psychoanalytical sense. However, if woman authors tended to objectify men but not women, Mulvey's analytical arguments would still be in question because she bases so much of her theory on the possession of a phallus, which drives men to obsessions. Because women who are not so physically encumbered, those obsessions would not be available to them. The best result to support Mulvey's theory would be if woman authors did not objectify either gender, leaving male authors alone in having their sexual desire shape their view of the world.

Works Cited

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