

On the Elements of Masculinity and Femininity in Arthur Miller's Dramas^{*}

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Arthur Miller is universally recognized as one of the greatest dramatists of the 20th century in the United States, together with the conscience of American drama. Nevertheless, his works have always been considered as having misogynic inclinations. This paper, on the basis of gender theories, seeks to undertake an interpretation to the elements of masculinity and femininity regarding female characters in Arthur Miller's dramas. Taking *The Crucible* and *A Memory of Two Mondays* as a case in point, the author seeks to identify and discuss three categories of female characters, comprising "the angel in the house", the figure of Medea, and the silenced and absent females, in order to deconstruct Miller's dichotomized outlook on females.

Keywords: Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*, *A Memory of Two Mondays*, masculinity, femininity

Introduction

This paper seeks in the first place to give a concrete illustration of the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Also presented is Miller's outlook on females from some literary critics. In this part, the theory of gender studies will be applied. Further, this paper is going to demonstrate the elements of masculinity and femininity in Arthur Miller's two dramas. The first part explores the role of Elizabeth in *The Crucible*. Elizabeth is described as a dependent female, while her submissive consciousness to political theocracy is inextricably linked to the tragic ending of Proctor. The second part examines the figure of Abigail in *The Crucible*, whose presence exposes patriarchal powers as the cause of the unequal and subordinate status of females. The third part aims to analyze the images of the silenced females represented by Lilly, Agnes and Patricia, in *A Memory of Two Mondays*. The conclusion will be reached in the last part that Miller's female characters are quite complex, as they are a combination of masculinity and femininity. Miller's characterization can be deemed as an alarm for current males and females in America and the world.

Masculinity, Femininity, and Arthur Miller's Outlook on Females

As Connell (1987) puts it, gender can be defined as the ways in which the "reproductive area", including "bodily structures and processes of human reproduction", organizes practice at all levels of "social organization from identities, to symbolic rituals, to large-scale institutions" (71). As a central feature of gender relations, Connell defines masculinity as "[...] simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which

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men and women engage that place in gender” (71). The form of femininity is defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men. It is also defined by “complex strategic combinations of compliance, resistance and cooperation” (Connell, 184-185).

In the last 50 years, critics such as Eric Mottram have pointed to the fact that Miller marginalizes females from a male perspective in most of his works (Mottram, 23-57). Neal Carson later on contends that a peculiarity of Miller’s early works is the essentially masculine nature and that “his vision of the world reflects some curious anti-feminine biases” (154). The feminist Jeffery Mason declares that Miller’s sexual perspective “borrows the methods and expounds the sexual policies of melodrama [...] If Miller writes tragedy [...] he makes it a male preserve” (103-115). Nevertheless, the female characters Miller created have been reinterpreted and gained much more approval ever since the 1980s. His dramas were deemed as giving a concrete expression to American females’ aspiration for new images. In this respect, Miller challenged the traditional American cultural values, noting that his female characters are in effect not merely complex and tragic, but also tough and respectable.

The Elements of Masculinity and Femininity in Arthur Miller’s Dramas

“The Angel in the House” in *The Crucible*

Gender is, as Judith Butlet maintains, the socially constructed binary that defines “men” and “women” as two distinct classes of people. The discursive construction of gender assumes that “there are certain behaviors, personality traits and desires that neatly match up to one or other category” (Butlet, 35). In view of gender differences, female characters tend to be put at a disadvantage in Miller’s most works, in regard to social equality and individual freedom. The same goes for the female falling into the category of “the angel in the house”, which can be affirmed by Proctor’s wife Elizabeth in *The Crucible*. “The angel in the house” is from the title of a narrative poem by Coventry Patmore (1823-1896). The “angel” was described by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) as “immensely charming”, with “purity” as her “great grace”, “sacrific[ing] herself daily”, and “so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others” (Woolf, 126). “The angel in the house” coincides with the features of femininity, which provides the hegemonic scaffolding for relationships between men and women as a relationship of dominance and submission. Elizabeth is constructed as the character pale and lifeless out of her getting sick very often. Her image tallies with patriarchal ideologies which regard females as afflicted with natural defectiveness, such as being weak, helpless, and in need of protection from males. Luce Irigaray accounts for the “non-essentiality” and ritual exchange by showing how speculation, both visual and philosophical, constitutes gender identity in her theory of the “speculum”, that

[...] the masculine can partly look at itself, speculate about itself, represent itself and describe itself for what it is, whilst the femininity [...] cannot describe itself from outside or in formal terms, except by identifying itself with the masculine, thus by losing itself. (Irigaray, 65)

It is unfortunate that Elizabeth weds herself to a male world, but never marries herself to her own female self. Before her husband Proctor’s execution, without any condemnation to Proctor, Elizabeth terms that it is her coldness that attributes to Proctor’s disloyalty. Elizabeth has no consciousness to struggle for specific rights in any manner available to her. She has to inscribe herself in the masculine and phallic way of relating to the powerful feminine wish.

Proctor has been unfaithful to his wife, as his infidelity violates his personal code of behavior. To be sure, from Abigail Proctor perceives the sexual passion which he fails to experience to his heart's content from his wife. Equally important is the legacy of the years spent with Elizabeth—his emotional and spiritual emptiness. Elizabeth is relegated to the margins, sexually and socially, and is thus a non-essential ground for masculine sexual identity. In this sense, women's body, their desire and availability, become for the type of symbolic exchange between men. Thus, it is both his early affection with Abigail and later indifference to her that he now habitually conceals from the world; and it is only by careful observation of the social and theocratic modes of existence that he has been able to reconstruct his life and says to Elizabeth that "[...] it speaks deceit, and I am honest! I see your spirit twists around the single error of my life [...]" (Miller, 393). He chooses to avoid all the occasions that would lead to the exposure of his past feelings or necessitates the revealing of the immoral person beneath the loyal persona.

The girl whom Proctor loved, jealous and resentful of being rejected, accuses his wife of witchcraft, and so Proctor who has in this peculiar fashion, caused his wife to be accused, has a special obligation to save her. At the climax of *The Crucible*, in trying to save Elizabeth, Proctor is put in jail and sentenced to death. Realizing that it is not worthwhile to die such a death, Proctor expresses his wishes to confess his trumped-up charges. Nonetheless, Elizabeth in a large manner results in Proctor's ultimate persecution, as her position of Christian moral judgment cannot allow for Proctor's admission of such unwarranted charges. It follows that Elizabeth serves as a devastating impetus to Proctor's death in an unconscious manner, which to some extent deals a heavy blow to patriarchal domination. Miller seems to deconstruct dominant male patterns of thought and social practice and reconstruct female experience previously hidden. This formulation posits as oppositional as essentially problematic male system beneath which essentially true female essences can be discovered.

The Image of Medea in *The Crucible*

Another type of female character created by Miller is with the image of Medea. Medea is the female with cruel image and crazy revenge in the western Literature, and the devil for males as well. Abigail Williams in *The Crucible* shares many similarities with Medea, as she has strong destructive power, with extreme emotions, and is always up to all dodges.

"The setting of *The Crucible* is in Puritan New England of 1692, which indeed has had its parallels to McCarthy's America of 1952" (Schissel, 463). The play revolves around the Salem witch-hunting trails, in which there are "[...] filled with witches, from the wise woman Rebecca to the black woman Tituba, who initiates the girls into the dancing" (Schissel, 463). But the most obvious witch in Miller's invention upon Salem history is Abigail Williams. When she appears first on the stage, she is described as a strikingly beautiful girl, with endless capacity for dissembling. Abigail has the same abilities of manipulation and destruction as Medea. Medea destroys all her beloveds with magic. In the same vein, Abigail succeeds in brainwashing the girls who have danced naked in the wood with her, and initiates the witch-hunting event which wreaks havoc on the whole Salem town.

The greatest misfortune for Abigail is that "not only is her independence the deceptive reverse side of a thousand dependencies, but this very freedom is negative" (Beauvoir, 698). Abigail lives under her pastor uncle's roof, and works afterwards as a maid in Proctor's house before being driven out by the mistress Elizabeth, out of her sexual relations with Proctor. However, the power of love goes far beyond the boundary of ethical morality. Abigail's passionate love to Proctor equals her jealous hatred to Elizabeth. Abigail is

originally in a marginalized position; nonetheless, she becomes the central character in Salem, on account of setting forth the massive witch-hunting event. She frames an increasing number of townspeople as witches, as to conceal the truth of cursing Elizabeth with witchcraft, and to shun from the punishment of dancing naked in the wood with other girls. The objects Abigail aims at in the very beginning are the females with lower social statues, under which circumstance they are liable to be deemed as engaging in witchcraft. This can be seen as the awakening of Abigail's feminist rebellious consciousness, through brushing aside the weak forces for want of feminist consciousness and rebellious capability. In the meantime, Abigail assembles the groups with the same power as hers by allying with the other girls partaking in the dance, in an attempt to fake the trial together. However, as the witch-hunting trial grows in intensity, with the entire town involved, families broken, and numerous innocent people coming to the gallows, Abigail resists against everything standing in her way by hook or crook, while trumping up charges against Elizabeth, in an attempt to get rid of her.

It is not that women are incapable of containing and embodying male energy. There are individual effects—occupying the masculine position and performing it affects the way individuals experience their sense of self and how they project that self to others. Masculinities and femininities can become “gender projects” in the lives of individuals. “Instead of possessing or having masculinity, individuals move through and produce masculinity by engaging in masculine activities” (Schippers, 46). Like Medea, Abigail gradually turns her love towards males into hatred. What she aims at is not more than the subordination of other females, but the subordination and marginalization of masculinities. When Proctor intends to lay bare Abigail, as to rescue his wife, Abigail seizes the opportunity to take revenge on this unrighteous man. In the court, she leads other girls to put pressure on the witnesses with their acting skills. Abigail's means falls in line with Kristeva's struggles to lift prohibitions on the maternal body imposed by the castration complexes. Kristeva confesses that “[...] it was perhaps necessary to be a woman to attempt to take up that exorbitant wager of carrying the rational project to the outer borders of the signifying venture of men” (Kristeva, 45). Under Abigail's coerce and threat, Proctor not merely fails to rescue Elizabeth, but is also put in jail and winds up in execution.

“Implicit in Puritan theology, in Miller's version of the Salem witch trials, and all too frequent in the society which has produced Miller's critics is gynecophobia—fear and distrust of women” (Schissel, 463). The play ends with the dissipation of the Salem witch-hunting trial, where truths have been brought into daylight. Nonetheless, Abigail as the evil-minded and conscienceless maid turns up as a prostitute in Boston, while Proctor who commits adultery with Abigail is portrayed as a tragic hero. In this sense, Miller's patriarchal ideology looms large. To speak without figure, Abigail is under the dual oppression of patriarchy and theocratic politics. Theocracy is an embodiment of power, where such immorality as adultery is strictly forbidden while the power of males is maintained. As Foucault noted, “power operates through a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (100). Nonetheless, it seems ironical that Abigail, as a helpless maid at the beginning, puts so many townspeople to death through dominating the acquiescent discourse power. Such sort of power is acquired by the female characters through their feigned insane behaviors and languages. When this insanity is exposed to the court as evidence, Abigail and other girls themselves would no longer be the powerless ordinary females. They are in this regard under the protection of the court as evidence. It is beyond doubt that the power Abigail gained from the society awash with supreme theocracy comes as a subversive force to males to a large extent. To this end, the rebellion amidst females can be seen as dreadful, as it has threatened the patriarchal order. The struggles against the male-dominated social system speak for the redemption amid females.

The Absent and Silenced Females in *A Memory of Two Mondays*

Also noteworthy is the silenced and absent females under the patriarchal discourse of males, which manifest themselves largely in *A Memory of Two Mondays*. Some lights have been shed on the females regarding their repressed identity and sexuality, as well as their life restricted by domestic confinement. Women's complicity with patriarchy undermines the subversive potential of *A Memory of Two Mondays* as an important manifesto of female autonomy.

The pursuit and disillusionment of American Dream is one of the several Millerian themes running through *A Memory of Two Mondays*. Nevertheless, the privilege of pursuing such a dream falls to men, whereas women are excluded and alienated. *A Memory of Two Mondays* is a realistic play with the modern workshop set as its social background. However, female characters are marginalized in a direct manner. The play centers evidently upon the male perspective, with most narrations given to male characters. Female characters are but subordinated to the narrated and absent parts, whose thoughts and behaviors seem to be astonishingly unimportant. Directed and controlled by a male presence, the males and females in this drama are severely disproportionate. Of the 14 characters showing up on the stage, only two are females, while another one is even arranged behind the stage. It seems that female characters count for little to the development of the scene.

There can be no doubt that the female characters in this drama dwell in the middle of patriarchy. Implicit in the confrontations with male characters, the females sink into a struggle with a male domination expressed in social intercourse. Gus in particular is identified in relation to the patriarchy first and in relation to his wife afterwards. Egotism and aestheticism are shown in close relationship in most of Gus' discourses during the scene, and the egotism is displayed in its most blatant form when he appears on the stage with the image of flirting with his female workmate Agnes.

Lilly as the female character absent on the stage, is mentioned solely thrice. One is through the enquiry of Agnes—another female, about Lilly's recent condition, where the vulnerability of Lilly's image is suggested by the expression all the time sick; another is when Lilly's husband Gus roars to her with vulgar language on the phone; and still another is through the phone-call where Gus is informed of her death. Sickness has been a metaphor on the living condition and identity of females. What it signifies is not solely the physical condition, but the projection of female dependence on the male. The vulgar talk of Gus with Lilly represents the masculine principles, articulated in a masculine language, and is thus the epitome of male discourse. Lilly, on the flip side, is rendered with voiceless cries of help, as maleness asserts its control over her life. The nature of their discourse can be clarified as representing institutional authority. It dictates and privileges the rational, the practical, and the observable, and even more important, it translates the reality of the human body into human language. As identified in this drama on masculinity, the ability of males looms large on using verbal violence in the face of conflict and authority. This characteristic guarantees men's legitimate dominance over women only when they are symbolically paired with a complementary and inferior quality attached to femininity.

Gus remains throughout a kind of patriarchy, although capable of showing concern over his wife, he is prevented by his enormous vanity and egotism from perceiving his own egotism as a male and from feeling sympathy, love, or guilt to her condition. It is beyond doubt that the death of Lilly comes as a heavy blow to Gus. It is noticeable that Gus is the only one in the drama that ends up with suicide. His tragic ending can be partly ascribed to the senses of perplexity and loneliness for his loss of wife. Therefore, the role Lilly played as a wife should never be neglected.

As regards the other two female characters in this drama, they work in a workshop, surrounded by male workmates, and are both with some dissolute images. Their discourses on the stage with males are every so often accompanied by laughter. Noticeably, they are both arranged as frequent visitors to the toilet or on their way to the toilet. It seems that women's activities are confined to narrow spaces in social space. Their repetitive going back and forth to the toilet asserts both their identity and existence. The presence of male dominators gains the upper hand, while females are pushed away to the margin of narration, and appear as the observed, in a subordinated position or under the absent state.

Nevertheless, it is under such silenced and absent conditions that female characters embrace opportunities to utter their alarming voices. The moment Bert tells Raymond about the news on *New York Times*, on which writes "Hitler took over the German government", Raymond considers that Bert is just making a fuss. He never realizes that the news he takes as mere trifles is to take place years later, and tens of thousands of people are to be deprived of lives. Toward this everyday news, Angas as a female shows her concern. For males, their only focus is on endless orders and deliveries, and indulgence in debauchery. It is the female character in this drama that takes current affairs very much to heart, and proclaims her existence as a well-deserved member of the male-dominated society.

Conclusion

It seems safe to say that the elements of masculinity and femininity are implicated in and intersect with both male and female characters in Arthur Miller's dramas. Miller's female characters in particular, cannot be categorized simply in line with better or worse standards. They seem to have masculinity in feminine disguise. Although acting as the marginalized subjectivity, they have a subtle impact on males in the family or in the society. Above all, in these two dramas, such female characters as Elizabeth, Abigail, and Agnes, characteristic of multi-centrality, openness, mobility, and parody, come as a subversive force to the single-centered world, and the western rationality and patriarchy. The images Miller endows with his characters function as a challenge to the existent authority, which are deconstructive to the male-dominated symbolic order. Miller's feminist outlook takes on multilateral features, which can be seen as his intention in dramatic creation, through lifting up his female characters into an aesthetic sublimation.

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