

English 312

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Jonathan Swift and Feminism

Jonathan Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room," taken at face value, is a harrowing account of one man's misadventure in a slovenly woman's dressing room. However, the poem appears to touch on several issues of feminism still pertinent to modern day discussions on gender. While the details are grotesque and most certainly unflattering, Swift is not out to damn the female sex. Rather, he is trying to express how a societal image can be misconstrued and by exposing a kind of female filth, he can allow society to view women as normal people. Through several techniques of satire, Swift is able to illuminate (and throw stones at) the construct of female beauty expectations and by bringing women off of their pedestal, he succeeds in making them more dignified and more human. Excellent introduction. I might question whether his whole strategy should be called feminism, but your main argument is presented strongly and well.

From the very start, Swift establishes the expectation of an outward female appearance. "Five hours (and who can do it less in?)/By haughty Celia spent in dressing,/The goddess from her chamber issues,/Arrayed in lace, brocade, and tissues." (lines 1-4). By using hyperbole Swift draws attention to the time that this particular woman takes to make herself presentable. With his word choice of "haughty" it might appear that Swift is perhaps taking a jab at the upper class and insist that this superficiality is limited to an aristocracy. A modern sense of the word might be misleading here. The second definition in the Oxford English Dictionary defines "haughty" as

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“Of an appearance that seems to claim or assume superiority; imposing in aspect; grand, stately, dignified: often with some mixture of sense” ([OED, haughty, def. 2](#)). It relates more to her appearance than to her character. Celia may well not have feelings of arrogance and superiority that her appearance let on. Also, what would be the the reason to spend this amount of time getting oneself ready to be seen? The fact that Celia must take an inordinate amount of time (maybe not *exactly* five hours) to get herself ready almost makes her pitiable. She spends her time extracting worms from her nose, “[t]o squeeze it out form head to tail;/For catch it nicely by the head,/It must come out alive or dead” (lines 66-68). Swift is painting Celia in a sympathetic light and she comes off as a slave to expectations of outward appearance, as she is locked away, preening herself for the public. The worm “must” come out based on the societal notions of beauty. ← [good](#). And because of this notion, Strephon is mortified upon seeing the inner sanctum of Celia. He cannot fathom how a woman with a radiant outward appearance can have such a grotesque dressing room.

For Strephon, it hurts him to see a woman fall from her lofty pedestal. He is appalled and “swears how damnably the men lie,/In calling Celia sweet and cleanly” (lines 17-18). Swift draws a distinction between the public pristine image that women are forced to put forward, and the perhaps more realistic image of their private quarters. Strephon may have every reason to find Celia’s unkempt room unsettling, but Swift renders him absurd with his use of exaggerated phrases. When Strephon stumbles upon her umm, ahem, err, “fecal box” [[well, they didn’t have indoor plumbing](#)] the poem launches in to a hyperbolic tirade stating, “[a]s from within Pandora’s box,/When Epimetheus oped the locks,/A sudden universal crew/Of human evils upward flew,/He was still as comforted to find/That Hope at last remained behind” (lines 83-88). The allusion serves a couple important purposes. Swift again uses exaggeration to comic effect

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by equating the finding of a chamber pot with Pandora's opening the box containing all the world's evil. But what is perhaps more important is that Swift is drawing on the western myths that women are the source of the world's ills. [Nice way to distinguish your reading](#) The scene's inherent silly nature suggests that the idea of a world doomed by femininity is equally silly. Swift in essence argues against the idea that women are the root of evil by ascribing this allusion to something as raunchy and silly as this scene of toilet humor. [← this is a nice reading](#)

Swift attacks the idea of a mythical feminine perfection by pulling back the curtain and giving his audience the unappealing details. In doing so, he brings women down to the level of reality where they can then be respected. His Celia is not exempt from the bodily functions of a human being and this disgusts Strephon as, "[t]he swain disgusted slunk away,/Repeating in his amorous fits,/’Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!’” (lines 116-118). His horrified reaction is not just due to the fact that he has just seen shit, it is that he has seen shit that has come from such a hallowed revered source. He laments his loss of the illusion of feminine flawlessness. Strephon suggests that she would be better off not letting anyone know of her dressing room stating, “Oh may she better learn to keep/’Those secrets of the hoary deep!’”(lines 97-98). These lines speak to the yearning Strephon has for upholding the status quo of female beauty but Swift is not so fast to endorse this same notion. The over-the-top faux melodramatic lines emphasize that Strephon cannot be taken seriously by the reader. Adding to the absurdity is that Swift chooses Milton's *Paradise Lost* to highlight Strephon's disgust. By taking a quote from such a high-minded work and placing it in a poem with low down potty humor, he renders the scene and Strephon's opinions on the scene, ridiculous. [Good! \(It might be interesting to see in which contexts Milton first used it, too\)](#) What also works toward this end is the jaunty nursery rhyme

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style of the poetry. The poem comes across so lighthearted as to not be taken seriously and yet, in the final stanzas, Swift takes a definitive stand against the feminine myth. Nicely put.

The perspective of the poem is important in considering what is being put on trial. While the audience does see Celia's outward appearance, Swift decidedly stays in the mind of Strephon. It is a poem about a male response, and in depicting the response in his satirical manner the audience can glean Swift's opinions on femininity. Swift never rebukes Celia for having a dirty dressing room, but rather admonishes Strephon for not thinking that Celia is capable of achieving beauty after having seen her most unsavory side. In perhaps a bit of blatant editorializing Swift writes, "I pity wretched Strephon, blind/To all the charms of womankind./Should I the queen of love refuse/Because she rose from stinking ooze?" (lines 130-133). Swift is upset that a man cannot find a woman beautiful after finding out that she has all the bodily processes of men. The problem is that Strephon is thinking of Celia as a symbol first and a person second. Swift even praises women in a round about way saying "[Strephon] soon would learn to think like me,/And bless his ravished eyes to see/Such order from confusion sprung,/Such gaudy tulips raised from dung." (lines 141-144). It is a remarkable feat for a woman to overcome the depravity of being a human – represented by the dung - in order to become the epitome of beauty, like the tulips (Tie your reading closely to the text, just to be sure the reader can follow).

Swift has learned to accept women warts and all and he appears to be all the happier for it. He even embraces the fact that women are not goddesses and how unfair it is to hold them all to the same standard as a goddess. He would rather ? the illusion of faultless femininity What perhaps empowers women is treating them as a sex equally capable of producing these gross sights and smells. Swift allows us to laugh at the poor man who had the misfortune of seeing his

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preconceived notions of women shattered, but more importantly, he gets us to laugh at the notion of an idealized femininity. When one recognizes the absurdity of the unrealistic standards set for women, one can see them as flawed and (hopefully) human. _

Nicely done, as always. This is the first paper on “The Lady’s Dressing Room” that I’ve seen that carefully goes about showing evidence in the poem for the expectation of beauty and thoroughly supports the way that Swift’s humor and satire work. I might quibble with you about how we should define feminism or whether this is feminist – it certainly wasn’t recognized by Swift’s contemporaries as such – but you make a valid case that, at the very least, it’s progressive in that it treats women as real humans rather than beautiful objects, and that even in their disgustingness, Swift paints them as beautiful tulips. This is well argued and an engaging read.

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