Perception and the Body: A Feminist Critique of Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room”

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This essay was written for British Literature 1660 - 1800, taught by Dr. Rooks. The assignment was to write a response paper based on a close reading of a course text.

Feminist theory teaches us how, through traditional gender roles, patriarchy oppresses women. According to feminist thought, biology determines our sex, while society constructs our gender. We are not born masculine or feminine; we are conditioned to be one or the other. It is through social construction that our roles are determined by a patriarchal society. In Jonathan Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” we are confronted with the ways in which these gender roles can affect how we perceive other bodies. Swift presents us with a poem in which the gender roles prescribed by society are clearly defined. He re-enforces the stereotypical roles of masculine and feminine bodies. Some might argue that Swift is critiquing vanity; however, the weight of vanity lies entirely on Celia. Strephon is just a poor soul who has been forced to see the truth. Despite his misogyny, Swift’s poem offers us an opportunity to consider the ways in which our perception plays on bodies to show us how they are repressed and how they resist. It also lets us examine how space, both in terms of distance and occupation, influences how we internalize gender. Finally, we see that Strephon begins from a point of gender difference but is forced to confront the lack of gender difference. For, looking into Celia’s chamber pot is like looking in the mirror. So Swift’s poem is not just a critique of vanity, it is a presentation of the violability or inviolability of boundaries; those boundaries being, primarily, the masculine and feminine (Bordo 16).

Before continuing, I’d like to offer general definitions of perception and space. John Locke writes that perception is “…the first faculty of the mind…it is the first and simplest idea we have from reflection, and is by some called thinking in general” (142). So our perception of the body is how we think about the body and it is the “simplest” idea we have of the body. If perception is “thinking in general,” then things outside of our minds can have influence on, or a “direct grip” upon how we perceive bodies in the world. Also, according to Locke, the simple idea of space comes to us through “…sight and touch…” and is the way in which we perceive “…distance between bodies of different colours…” (162). It is through the idea of space that we conceive of distinctions between ourselves and others. It is through the distance between our bodies that we create the perception of difference. It is also through distance and space that things, or “life,” are hidden from our perception or thinking processes. Society and culture play a direct role in shaping our perception of other bodies by using institutions or powers—government, religion, television, education, and science—to tell us how to think about our bodies. Society also takes advantage of distance and space to emphasize difference between bodies, and to keep certain “categories of life” hidden from people.

Susan Bordo, in her book Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, presents us with the predicaments of the body in a patriarchal culture. She puts it in Foucauldian terms when she writes of:

…the “direct grip” (as opposed to representational influence) that culture has on our bodies, through the practices and bodily habits of everyday life. Through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is “inner” and what is “outer,” which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body may be claimed, and so on. These are often far more powerful lessons than those we learn con-
sciously, through explicit instruction concerning the appropriate behavior for our gender, race, and social class. (16)

As we see in “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” it is Celia’s daily habits and private parts that Strephon, through his violation of Celia’s space, is “forced” to witness the remnants of. It is through his violation of Celia’s space and the resulting confrontation with the habits of Celia’s “vanity” that makes Strephon come into the real confrontation of the poem, that is the masculine and feminine, and the violability of the gendered boundaries of our bodies. What forces this conflict into being is the “direct grip” that society has on Strephon’s perception and on Celia’s body. Both have internalized the gendered views of society. In particular, Strephon and Celia have been taught what the appropriate body image of a woman should be, though in the poem, Celia is the one who is disciplined for the vain “upkeep” of that image. The fact that the image society projects onto women does not equal what he finds in Celia’s space causes Strephon to break down. He and the reader, as well, see immediately the violability of our gendered boundaries.

We see immediately how Swift, through Strephon, constructs Celia’s anatomy from the objects, bodily remnants, and odors in Celia’s room and attempts to project shame onto her:

And first, a dirty smock appeared,  
Beneath the armpits well besmeared.  
Strephon, the rogue, displayed it wide,  
And turned it round on every side.  
In such a case few words are best,  
And Strephon bids us guess the rest,  
But swears how damnable the men lie  
In calling Celia sweet and cleanly. (11-18)

Every object in Celia’s room, such as the smock, represents a part of Celia’s body. Each body part becomes increasingly disgusting in the eyes of Strephon. Ultimately, we get a picture of Celia as a whole body that is inconsistent with the image that Strephon and society has attempted to project onto her and women in general. When she fails to live up to her gendered responsibilities, she is essentially raped; her private space violated by Swift through Strephon, and made to appear as disgusting as possible by Swift.

It is also through the violation of Celia’s space that we see gendered attitudes in regard to the private space a person occupies. Swift seems to consider himself justified in allowing Strephon to violate Celia’s private space as a pretext for disciplining her for her vanity. In fact, the only commentary about Strephon’s violation is that he comes to hate all women, for, “His foul imagination links / Each dame he sees with all her stinks…” (121-122). He hates women because he discovers that they shit and ooze just as he does. Space plays an important role in how gender is presented in the poem. Not only is it alright to violate a woman’s private space, but the distance from that space determines her goodness. For, had Strephon kept his distance from her space and her private habits, as well as her private parts that each object in the room represents, Celia would have continued to appear as a “beautiful angel.” However, the closer into Celia’s space Strephon gets, the more she becomes a monstrous figure responsible for all the evils of human kind. In fact, Swift’s depiction of Celia is so over the top that it seems to move beyond a satire about vanity into genuine fear and misogyny.

Celia is revealed to us as a disgusting “…nasty compound of all hues…” (41) that “…spits…and…spews…” (42). However, not only is Celia disgusting, she is also vain because she attempts to present herself in the way society requires by using “…washes, some with paste, / Some with pomatum, paints and slops…” (34-35). She is shamed by Swift for this vanity. Wendy Weise writes that “[t]his shaming gesture diverts attention away from the roles of heterosexual desire and capitalism in the commodification of women’s bodies and in the production of commodities that express gender difference” (711). So it is not Strephon’s desire to objectify and possess Celia, but her forced attempt to fulfill and express the desires of society that is shameful. In utilizing shame as a device, Swift removes all the weight of vanity from men and places it entirely on women. Weise also writes of the “matter” that “litters” the room which Strephon presents and clarifies. She writes that Strephon’s enumeration of the room “…emphasizes his gendered difference of perception and the disciplining power of his look” (711). So by placing the shame for vanity on Celia, Swift is essentially disciplining women. Instead of turning his lens on the
ways in which society thinks about bodies and objectifies bodies, and the fear of what really exists—which is unthought—as well as how society produces boundaries by way of gender construction, Swift re-enforces these boundaries and the accompanying fear through Strephon’s “gendered difference of perception.” He also seems to imply, perhaps not intentionally on Swift’s part, that one is better off not knowing what a body can do.

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze writes of the attitudes and postures of bodies. He writes of the efforts and resistances of bodies. In an exquisite passage Deleuze states it this way:

The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life. Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life. Life will no longer be made to appear before the categories of thought; thought will be thrown into the categories of life. The categories of life are precisely the attitudes of the body, its postures. ‘We do not even know what a body can do’: in its sleep, in its drunkenness, in its efforts and resistances. To think is to learn what a non-thinking body is capable of, its capacity, its postures. (189)

What is Strephon confronted with? He is thrown into the categories of life: shit, piss, ooze, and nauseous odors. By violating Celia’s space, by entering her dressing room, he is forced to think about what has been hidden from his perception. He is forced to see what is concealed from thought, which is life. Things no longer appear as they once were. He is thrown into the “attitudes of the body,” as we see in the “Pandora’s box” passage when he plunges the depths of Celia’s toilet, only to find the “unthought” that is life. He finds only the resistance of Celia’s body to his vain attempts to define “her” body and possess “her” body. Strephon discovers that the body is no longer feminine, nor is it masculine. It is undefined, so it is dangerous, monstrous, terroristic, and a threat to his existence. He is ultimately faced with primarily two ways of being. He can become active and progressive, and embrace the

new reality of things appearing as they have never appeared before. He can move forward into life and into thinking that which is “unthought.” Or, Strephon can become reactionary. He can choose to embrace fear and the violence of gender. He can choose to reject the other, and hate the other, and therefore, end up rejecting and hating himself. As we have seen, poor Strephon chooses to become the latter, hateful and self-loathing.

I think Swift presents the ultimate scene in which this confrontation with boundaries and the lack of difference is fully displayed in the following passage:

As from within Pandora’s box,
When Epimetheus oped the locks,
A sudden universal crew
Of human evils upward flew,
He still was comforted to find
That hope at last remained behind.

So Strephon, lifting up the lid
To view what in the chest was hid,
The vapours flew from out the vent,
But Strephon cautious never meant
The bottom of the pan to grope,
And foul his hands in search of hope. (83-94)

The reference to “Pandora’s box” implies that Celia is responsible for the evils of human kind. But, as well, her efforts at vanity lure “poor men” like Strephon, unknowingly, into these terrible traps because her vanity hides the truth. Not only are women like Celia responsible for these evils and misleading unsuspecting men, but they also carry them in their bodies, and “spew” and shit them out of their bodies. These evils have been hidden from Strephon by Celia, so she has deceived him, and now he is forced to confront them, though through his own violation. And poor Strephon must “foul his hands in search of hope” by touching Celia’s disgusting bodily fluids, which are, of course, all the evils of the world, and for which she must be disciplined for covering up by way of her blatant and deceitful vanity.

But what is really happening here? Strephon has discovered that Celia shits. That she is just like him. He shits and oozes, and spits and spews. If we violated his private space and examined his daily habits, we would find the same disgusting objects and fluids. In this short moment, Strephon is forced not to see the deceitfulness of vanity, but to recognize the other as him-
self. The chamber pot becomes a mirror. This brings into question the inviolability of boundaries. This is a confrontation between the masculine and the feminine boundaries, and what we see is that these boundaries break down when we are confronted with what lies behind veils. We see what a body can do, what it does do, and that gender cannot define a body, and in fact, places limitations on a body. Strephon becomes unhinged from the “direct grip” of society and culture, and, at least for a moment, is thrown into the position of thinking about what society conceals from thought, which is life.

Does this relieve Swift of the charge of misogyny and mean that he actually hates all people, not just women? I don’t think so. Strephon, in the end, still comes to hate all women. And the moral of the poem, for Swift, is a lesson about the stupidity of vanity and how it lies, rather than a lesson about the violability of the masculine and feminine boundaries or just the violability of the boundary between self and other. If Swift is saying that we are all the same, it doesn’t seem to be a very serious claim for him. For, the weight of vanity does lie more heavily on Celia than on Strephon. Swift’s “disciplining look” is directed more at women than at men. If Swift was serious about our sameness, why didn’t he send Celia into Strephon’s dressing room; to construct his body, enumerate his disgusting objects and habits; and violate his space? Why put the emphasis on women? Also, in terms of distance, the ending of the poem is ambiguous. Does Swift mean to tell us that we should inquire to know more by decreasing our distance to one and other? Or, does he think we are better off not knowing what is hidden from us? This would imply the necessity of boundaries for Swift and re-enforce an argument that he is a misogynist. I think this is left to the reader of “The Lady’s Dressing Room,” but I believe the poem implies we are better off not knowing what is concealed from us. It strikes me as strange that Swift would not make a more clear statement about knowledge at the end considering his obvious interests in science and his satirizing of ignorance. Why leave open any possibility that a reader might leave his poem thinking that we are better off not knowing certain things, particularly regarding women? This makes it difficult to take a sympathetic attitude towards Swift regarding his view of women. The depiction of Celia is so extremely disgusting, it causes one to ask: Is Swift satirizing vanity, and so men and women alike, thereby suggesting the more one knows the better? Or, is he satirizing women, and hence arguing that men should know the truth about women’s vanity so they are not deceived, but the greater distance they keep between themselves and women the better off they will be? I believe it is the latter.

However, despite the misogyny, the problems with the ending, and the satire itself, I think we can discover, or maybe it’s possible for us to create out of the poem, through interpretation, a lesson about the violability of boundaries. When we read Swift’s poem, we, like Strephon, are thrown into the “categories of life.” We are forced to become unhinged from the “direct grip” that society has on our bodies by way of our perceptions and limitations of space, as well as our habits and practices. When we are unhinged, then we are able to think about the body, about what is “unthought,” what is concealed from us; that is life. However, unlike Strephon, we can let ourselves remain unhinged and explore the lack of difference and boundaries through interpretation and experimentation. We can move the poem beyond Swift’s simple satire of vanity and use it to throw ourselves into the possibilities of bodies that can make “efforts” and can resist. We can create active bodies that are free from gendered attitudes and reactive forces, like Strephon, that tried to push back Celia’s body that was resisting his and society’s repression through their idea of what a body, particularly a feminine body, should be. We can embrace the breaking down of boundaries because we truly “do not even know what a body can do.”
Works Cited


