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English 300: Spy vs. Spy

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Gender as Performance and Power in *M. Butterfly*

The play *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang tells the story of a French diplomat, Rene Gallimard, who falls in love with a Chinese opera singer, Song Liling, who he believes to be a woman but is really a spy for the Chinese government and biologically male. Song acts out a performance that embodies everything Gallimard wants in a woman as a Western image of Asian women as submissive and weak, playing into many of the characteristics of Madame Butterfly in the opera by the same name. She uses this performance as a way to get Gallimard to fall in love with her, which allows her to gain access to information for the Chinese government. In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”, Judith Butler argues that the repeated performance of gender constitutes the identity itself. Gender identity does not pre-exist the performance of gender and is both socially constructed and acted out by individuals, creating the illusion of essential gender identity. When viewed through this lens, Song is a woman within the context of her and Gallimard’s relationship. Song also scripts Gallimard’s masculine role, making him feel more confident in himself as a man. Much of what constitutes male and female identity in the play and particularly in Gallimard and Song’s relationship is connected to power, but who truly has the power in a situation is not always apparent. The performance of gender illustrates how reality can be shaped or obscured to further certain objectives.

In the context of Song’s relationship with Gallimard, the words and actions that she chooses to perform constitute her identity as a woman and cause Gallimard to genuinely see her

as a woman. Song creates an identity that is specifically acted out and revised to fulfill Gallimard's desires and manipulate him for her own gain. This connects to Butler's argument that "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523). Using the language of theater, Butler asserts that the script of gender exists prior to individual actors performing it, and the gendered body interprets and enacts gender in various ways within "the confines of already existing directives" (Butler 523). Although similar to Butler's conception of the performative nature of gender, Song's performance differs in that it is not done to avoid the social consequences of straying outside gender norms but instead for espionage. It also is used by Song to exert power in this situation that she would not have if she was performing male identity.

When Song first meets Gallimard at the beginning of the play, they discuss her performance of the death scene in *Madame Butterfly* and she begins to learn how to manipulate him. Gallimard admits he usually he does not find performances of *Butterfly* believable but that Song was "utterly convincing" (Hwang 17). Song does not see any beauty in the story but says that she understands it's one of Westerners' "favorite fantasies... The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man" (Hwang 17). She learns through this interaction that Gallimard finds something beautiful and genuine in the fantasy of a submissive, adoring woman who gives up everything for her lover, even though he does nothing to deserve it. This only makes sense to him when it is an Asian woman because he sees Asian people as intrinsically female, and therefore inferior and inclined to submit to power. Gallimard's reaction to Song's literal performance of this opera scene helps Song build a performative personality that she presents as her true nature to him. Song reveals a persona similar to this fantasy slowly to Gallimard so it seems genuine, making him believe that her true nature is inclined to submit to him completely

in order to gain his love and attention. She allows him to believe she is revealing who she truly is when she is only revealing another layer of her performance. Throughout their relationship Song continuously adjusts the script of her performance as Gallimard's Butterfly to make it more believable and appealing to him in order to gain information from him.

Song's performance as a woman gives Gallimard a sense of power and ownership over her, strengthening his masculine identity. Gallimard conducts an experiment in his relationship with Song, which he describes by relating it to *Madame Butterfly* and asking himself if he had "caught a butterfly who would writhe on a needle?" (Hwang 32). He wants to know if he has the power to cause Song to suffer emotionally. While refusing to communicate with Song for over a month he feels for the first time "that rush of power – the absolute power of a man" (Hwang 32). He sees being a man as meaning that one has the ability to exert power over others, even to cause others pain. She eventually sends him a letter implying that she will do anything to gain his attention again and saying that she has already given him her shame. Song allows Gallimard to believe that he has caused her to abandon any attempts at confidence or assertive behavior and to accept her true nature as weak and submissive. Making others suffer in order to get what one wants from them is part of being a man in his mind, a view created and validated by the society he lives in and his experiences. After this moment Gallimard begins to call Song "Butterfly" instead of her name, claiming ownership and control over her and her identity.

Throughout the later period in Song and Gallimard's relationship, there are moments where Gallimard deviates from the role of the powerful man in control of his emotions. When Gallimard insists that he wants to see Song naked, Song tells him not to conceal his request with nice words and to just be the "cad" he is (Hwang 60). She tells Gallimard, "know that my love is enough, that I submit – submit to the worst you can give me" (Hwang 60). She makes it clear

that this is not what she wants and that she feels too much shame to strip for him, but insists that this does not matter and she is giving him complete control over her. This does not seem to be intended to make him feel good and powerful, but to make him feel ashamed so that he does not undress her and face the reality of her biological sex. Gallimard tells the audience that the image of Pinkerton from *Madam Butterfly* about to strip Butterfly and “reward her love with his lecherous hands... sickened me... so I was crawling towards her like a worm” (Hwang 60). Gallimard’s image of himself in this moment is one that is contrary to the powerful, masculine identity that his relationship with Song had made him feel confident in previously. This image makes him seem vulnerable and desperate for her forgiveness, and he is the one in this moment whose emotions are influenced by Song’s actions and not the other way around. He describes how the image of Pinkerton left his heart and was replaced by “something new, something unnatural, that flew in the face of all I’d learned in the world – something very close to love” (Hwang 60). Gallimard’s words suggest that at this moment he has come to love the version of Song presented to him in a deeper, more emotional way, and not just to enjoy having a sense of power and ownership of her. This contradicts the masculine role that Pinkerton plays in the opera which leaves little room for genuine emotion or tenderness. This emotional attachment to Song also goes against the worldview and gender roles that he deems natural, a view in which men exert power over women without any remorse or consequences.

Towards the end of the play, there is a reversal of gender performance and identity between the two lovers as Gallimard imagines a conversation between the two of them in. Gallimard comes to accept that Song has always held the power in their relationship, and that the submissive, adoring woman he loved and the powerful masculine identity that he came to identify with as a result was all a deception. He imagines a masculine-presenting Song mocking

him and saying, “I take the words from your mouth. Then I wait for you to come and retrieve them” (Hwang 86). Song’s words imply that throughout their relationship, she was scripting his role by predicting and controlling what he said and thought. In the final scene, Gallimard sums up his mistakes by saying, “the man I loved was a cad, a bounder”, who “deserved nothing but a kick in behind, and instead I gave him... all my love” (Hwang 92). His words echo his earlier descriptions of Pinkerton, but he no longer identifies his role as that of the cruel man but as that of the woman who gave all her love for nothing in return. Gallimard now sees himself as having acted out the role of a woman in their relationship, unknowingly allowing Song to gain his love and all had to offer in exchange for nothing but deception. Gallimard says that his love has changed his judgement and sense of self so that now “I could look in the mirror and see nothing but... a woman” (Hwang 92). This image suggests that by performing a gendered role and being perceived as such by others, one’s perception of oneself can be changed greatly. All of the aspects that Gallimard associated with the power of a man - the ability to understand, to own, and to shape someone or something - were really being done to him all along by Song.

In *M. Butterfly*, a Chinese opera singer seduces a French diplomat by performing a version of Butterfly from *Madame Butterfly* that is too convincing and desirable for him to resist. Song is identified as biologically male in the play but their character reveals little about any inner feelings about their gender. Regardless, to Gallimard she is a woman throughout their relationship, fulfilling all he desires in a woman and strengthening his identity as a man. Gallimard’s undoing emotionally, and the reason he is willing to continue to believe in Song’s performance and give up intelligence information for so long, is his love for the Song he knows. After finally fully accepting the extent of Song’s deception, Gallimard’s identity as a powerful, confident man crumbles with the fantasy of his Butterfly. He feels the loss of dignity, pain, and

powerlessness that comes with playing the feminine role of Butterfly and cannot live on. In some ways the play maintains associations of power with men and powerlessness with women by having Song present as male while she forces Gallimard to accept the way she has controlled him. Overall, however, the play shows how perceptions of what makes someone a man or a woman are constructs perpetuated in society and not natural, fixed categories, and that they can be taken advantage off by those who might usually have less power.

Works Cited

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