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The Many Faces of Tullia d’Aragona

From the accounts of Tullia d’Aragona’s life as a writer, poet, and courtesan in sixteenth-century Renaissance Italy, the portrait of a powerful, yet enigmatic, woman emerges. As demonstrated by d’Aragona’s pride in her vast knowledge of the arts, literature, and philosophy, Tullia considered herself first an intellectual, and then a courtesan.1 This clear sense of personal identity as a valid member of Renaissance academia often conflicted with society’s expectations of d’Aragona as a “cortegiana honesta,” or honest courtesan.2 Ironically, the only reason for d’Aragona’s acceptance into Renaissance intellectual circles was because of her position in society as a courtesan.

Tullia’s passive role as a courtesan, which required her dependency upon patronage for survival, granted her the authority to have an active role in the intellectual circles of Florence, but gave her little flexibility in how she expressed her intellectual, or interior, self.3

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Tullia d’Aragonà’s awareness of the dichotomous relationship between her interior and exterior selves can be readily observed in her self-created literary persona. While the literary persona within Tullia’s poetry could be described as a woman at ease with the societal pressures of patronage and courtesanship, d’Aragonà’s persona as presented in *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* indicates otherwise. At times powerful and reasonable, and at others humble and subservient, d’Aragonà’s literary persona illustrates her ongoing struggle to balance the perception of herself as an intellectual with the societal restrictions placed upon her shoulders as a courtesan. By examining the conflicted interests of d’Aragonà’s interior and exterior selves as presented by her literary persona in *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, d’Aragonà herself emerges as a complex individual capable of tremendous intellectual and analytical insight.

A considerable number of events throughout Tullia d’Aragonà’s lifetime helped to shape her self-image as an intellectual, a perception of self that would constantly conflict with society’s perception of Tullia as a courtesan. At the time of Tullia’s arrival in Florence, a new law had been instated commanding that all prostitutes wear a yellow veil.4 Yet Tullia, who considered herself a “member of the Florentine elite,” and in a class apart from the common whore, refused to wear the required garment.5 Upon being charged with breaking the law, d’Aragonà, with the help of lawyer and intellectual Benedetto Varchi, drafted a letter to Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici pleading for leniency.6 Exoneration arrived in the form of a letter from the Duke, stating, “grant her leniency as a poet.”7

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4 Deana Basile, *Fasseli gratia per poetessa: Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici’s Role in the Forentine Literary Circle of Tullia d’Aragonà Duke*, 136
5 Ibid, 136
6 Rinaldina Russell, Introduction to *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, 26
7 Deana Basile, *Fasseli gratia per poetessa: Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici’s Role in the Forentine Literary Circle of Tullia d’Aragonà Duke*, 136
Tullia used her social relationship with Benedetto Varchi not only to gain his political protection, but also to further her self-image as an intellectual and poet. As one of Tullia’s many lovers with political connections, Varchi granted Tullia the authority she needed to present herself as a valid member of Renaissance literary circles. This authority protected Tullia from Florentine law, while enhancing her reputation as a poet in the eyes of Renaissance society. D’Aragona’s relationship with Benedetto Varchi is an excellent example of her paradoxical character: while she conformed to the passive role of the courtesan, Tullia was able to use the authority granted from her lovers to remain an active intellectual, thus solidifying her self-image as a poet, rather than that of a courtesan.

Although Varchi’s authority helped Tullia to gain Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici’s political protection, the Duke had reasons of his own for promoting Tullia’s intellectual and poetic merits. D’Aragona had cultivated political alliances among the Sienese, with whom the Duke hoped to build a healthy political relationship. The Duke was also an active patron of Florentine literary and artistic circles and hoped to turn Florence into the cultural capital of Italy. By promoting Tullia as a writer, Medici not only helped to solidify his political alliances, but also helped further his vision for Florence.

Cosimo’s wife, Eleanora de Toledo, most likely played a large role in bringing Tullia under the protection of the Medici. Eleanora was a direct connection to Cosimo I, as evidenced by the value courtiers placed on maintaining her favor. Because of Eleanora’s value to the court, she would have been Tullia’s easiest road to gaining Cosimo’s protection. Like her

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8 Deana Basile, *Fasseli gratia per poetessa: Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici’s Role in the Forentine Literary Circle of Tullia d’Aragona Duke*, 136
9 *Ibid*, 141
10 *Ibid*, 137, 139
11 *Ibid*, 138
husband, Eleanora also supported Florence’s rise in the literary world. The Duchess expressly favored poetry, even creating the Accademia degli Elevati in order to further poetic studies in Florence.\(^\text{12}\) As a celebrated female poet, d’Aragona would have intrigued and excited the Duchess and the Accademia.

Yet it was most likely d’Aragona’s political connections to Eleanora’s kinsman, the Sienese, that sealed d’Aragona to the Duchess in patronage. Eleanora, through her marriage to the Duke, was seen as the “intermediary between Cosimo and the Sienese.”\(^\text{13}\) In order to fulfill her diplomatic duties to her husband and kinsman while further promoting her literary interest, Eleanora helped to bring Tullia under the vigilant shield of the Medici. The Medici’s politically motivated acknowledgment of Tullia’s literary and political connections encouraged Tullia’s perception of herself as an intellectual graced with the authority of the Florentine elite.

D’Aragona’s relationship with the powerful was partly formed by her reputation in Florentine society as the “intellectual courtesan.”\(^\text{14}\) As shown by the setting of Dialogue on the Infinity of Love and confirmed by other sources, Tullia often had lively, intellectual debates and discussions held in her private sitting room.\(^\text{15}\) These discourses ranged in topics from literature to philosophy, encompassing popular humanist subjects and theories of the time.\(^\text{16}\) After attending one such event at Tullia’s salon, admirer Battista Stambellino said of d’Aragona, “She is highly knowledgeable and speaks about subjects that are of interest to you.”\(^\text{17}\) Evidently, by

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 139  
\(^{13}\) Ibid, 141  
\(^{14}\) Laura Anna Stortoni and Mary Prentice Lillie, *Women Poets of the Italian Renaissance: Courtly Ladies and Courtesans*, 82  
\(^{16}\) Rinaldina Russell, Introduction to *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, 25  
organizing such intense intellectual discourses in her private home, Tullia d’Aragona was fulfilling a need to not only demonstrate her knowledge, but also to justify her identity as an intellectual.\textsuperscript{18}

Though Tullia may have been recognized by Florentine society as an intellectual, she was still very much a “cortegiana honesta” in the eyes of her male patrons, admirers, and mentors. D’Aragona was constantly reminded of her social identity as a courtesan and was possibly even immortalized in a painting as an “artificial” and “wanton” woman.\textsuperscript{19} This painting, by Moretto da Brescia, now hangs in the Museo Civico in Brescia and depicts the biblical figure of Salome, the woman whose sexual intrigues and wantonness caused the death of John the Baptist.\textsuperscript{20} Commissioned during the sixteenth century, Brescia’s painting illustrates a woman of high social status, wearing rich clothes and furs, a social mark of the well-bred courtesan.\textsuperscript{21} Salome also leans against a marble slab, upon which is chiseled in Latin, “She who through her dancing achieved the [cutting off of the] head of Holy John.”\textsuperscript{22} Perhaps an indication of the model’s “excellence in the art of Terpsichore,” or the art of dancing perfected by courtesans, the quote indicates Brescia’s focus on his model’s sexuality and feminine wiles.\textsuperscript{23} With minimal homage given to the model’s achievements as a poet, as symbolized by the laurel leaves in the background of the painting, the painting illustrates the societal perception of the intellectual

\textsuperscript{18} Irma B. Jaffe, \textit{Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets}, 75
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 175
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 175
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 175
\textsuperscript{23} Laura Anna Stortoni and Mary Prentice Lillie, \textit{Women Poets of the Italian Renaissance: Courtly Ladies and Courtesans}, 81

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courtesan as a sexual being rather than an intellectual one. If d’Aragona truly posed as Brescia’s Salome, the painting would have solidified her exterior image as a courtesan in the eyes of Renaissance society.

As an intellectual courtesan, d’Aragona was faced with the constant threat of marginalization because of her dependency upon male patrons. In order to survive, Tullia was forced to maintain literary relationships with men of wealth and power. Perhaps the best example of Tullia’s dilemma can be seen in her poem to her former lover and editor, Girolamo Muzio:

That honored love which you burned for me
In the Po Valley once, endured so long
That I can’t think so clear a fire has died.
For, if in someone’s face his heart is seen,
I hope that by the Arno’s banks my name
May still be heard to ring through your sweet songs.

This poem not only captures the nature of the sexual relationship between Muzio and d’Aragona, but also reflects d’Aragona’s anxiety about the continuance of Muzio’s patronage, despite their separation. In the lines, “I hope that by the Arno’s banks my name/May still be heard to ring through your sweet songs,” d’Aragona clearly expresses a need for Muzio’s patronage and recommendation of her as a poet. D’Aragona’s poem to Muzio, therefore,

24 Irma B. Jaffe, Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets, 82
25 Laura Anna Stortoni and Mary Prentice Lillie, Women Poets of the Italian Renaissance: Courtly Ladies and Courtesans, 89
served to uphold society’s image of her as a courtesan dependent upon patronage, yet still 
promoted her self-image as an intellectual and skill as a poet.

While Tullia’s poetry indicates a woman acutely aware of the societal pressures of being 
an intellectual courtesan, her *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* tells a different story. Published at 
the end of 1547, the *Dialogue* is presented as a debate between Tullia d’Aragona and her close 
friend and mentor, Benedetto Varchi. The two intellectuals engage in a debate involving various 
theories on Neoplatonic, or spiritual, and carnal love.27 Throughout the debate, Tullia clearly 
places her character on a higher intellectual level than Varchi’s, occasionally bowing to his 
authority in order to give her own arguments more credence.

Tullia’s self-characterization of her literary persona suggests the ongoing conflict 
between her interior and exterior selves. Tullia d’Aragona struggles in the *Dialogue* as well as in 
life to balance her personal desire to be considered an intellectual with the social necessity of 
being a courtesan. Interestingly, throughout the *Dialogue* Tullia’s intellectual self appears to be 
consciously, and oftentimes forcibly, submitting to her passive role as a courtesan. Viewed in 
this manner, *The Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* becomes an opportunity for d’Aragona to 
explore her own struggles as an intellectual courtesan, as well as to analyze the societal structure 
in which she lives.

In *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, d’Aragona’s literary persona draws from and adds to 
previously accepted theories of love in order to establish her character as an authoritative,

27Irma B. Jaffe, *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets*, 84
intellectual force. Tullia’s perception of the “ideal love” is especially fascinating, in that it connects both spiritual and physical love as necessary aspects of a relationship:

Honest love, which is characteristic of noble people, people who have a refined and virtuous disposition, whether they be rich or poor is not generated by desire…but by reason. It has as its main goal the transformation of oneself into the object of one’s love, with a desire that the loved one be converted into oneself, so that the two may become one or four…And [physical love] should not be called lascivious or “dishonest” in [plants or animals], or indeed in human beings. Rather, it can be and should be lauded to a greater extent in humans because they are capable of generating offspring of a more noble and worthy caliber than plants and animals can.

Tullia’s argument for the importance of Platonic love, as well as the necessity of physical love, mirrors the very paradox that causes her internal conflict: while Tullia bases her self-worth on her accomplishments as an intellectual, or rational being, she also realizes that it is necessary for her to remain sexually active in order to survive. D’Aragona continues to probe this conflict by establishing her authority on the principles of love through her experiences as a courtesan, gaining respectful acceptance of her ideas from her fellow debaters.

Although at times d’Aragona’s literary persona is straightforward and intelligent, throughout the dialogue she continually takes on the role of a sexual woman. Tullia’s literary persona playfully teases Varchi’s character, simpering, “You show yourself to be a little

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28 Rinaldina Russell, Introduction to Dialogue on the Infinity of Love, 35
29 Irma B. Jaffe, Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets, 84
inexperienced in matters of love. Forgive me for pointing out that I have known a lot about such
things, and still do.”\[^{31}\] This sexually charged statement seems more like one a courtesan would
whisper to a client, rather than one an intellectual would use to impress a peer. In this manner,
Tullia skillfully plays with society’s perception of her as a courtesan, all the while leading Varchi
in intellectual circles.

Once Tullia has developed her intellectual perception of the ideal love, using her
sexuality to shape the direction of the Dialogue, she leads Varchi through a circuitous dance,
culminating in his acceptance of her theories. After making impressive conclusions on the
“infinity of love” and other issues that arose during the debate, d’Aragona concludes by telling
Varchi, “I shall take what I say to be right only when I have your approval for it.”\[^{32}\] Although
d’Aragona obviously dominated Varchi intellectually throughout the Dialogue, she still needs his
approval in order to be considered as an authoritative voice on the subject of love. As Dialogue
on the Infinity of Love illustrates, Tullia continually faces the same conflict: that as an
intellectual, she can only wield authority through Varchi’s acceptance of her exterior self, the
sexually provocative courtesan.

Through the conflicts faced by her skillfully crafted literary persona in the Dialogue,
d’Aragona constructed a window from which readers can glimpse the intricacies of life as a
“cortegiana honesta.” By using her personal conflict to create a literary persona that was both
powerful, yet appropriately submissive, d’Aragona was able to write an intellectually
provocative treatise that was, at the same time, socially subversive. Tullia created a literary
world in the Dialogue on the Infinity of Love in which she could examine her own conflicts and
reveal her astute understanding of Renaissance society. D’Aragona’s ability to write such an

\[^{31}\text{Ibid, 75}\]
\[^{32}\text{Ibid, 104}\]
impressive analytical work seals her place in history as one of the greatest intellectuals to emerge from the Renaissance.

Works Consulted


American Beauty: Engulfed By Roses and Memories

American Beauty tells the story of Lester Burnham, a husband and father, in the forty-third and final year of his life. From the beginning of the film, Lester familiarizes the audience with the cloud of unhappiness that has been settled over his household for the last twenty years. As the camera looks down onto his wife making small-talk, Lester’s superimposed voice insists “she used to be happy. We used to be happy.” Sometime between his teenage years and forties, Lester fell into a “coma” of a life, which he comes to realize he hates. The characters of Carolyn (Lester’s wife), the Colonel (Lester’s neighbor), and Buddy Kane (Carolyn’s business adversary) adhere to long-established social roles, which Erving Goffman labels “fronts” in his book, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Lester might say that those three characters are content in their comas, or perhaps just in them too deeply to notice any discontent. By contrast, Lester, Ricky (the Colonel’s son), and Jane (Lester’s daughter) seem to break that mold of conformity, realizing much of what C. R. Rogers recommends to achieve an identity of one’s own in his book, On Becoming a Person. Lester’s progression away from his societal role, towards a more self-satisfying lifestyle and the events just before his death lend strong support to Rogers’ theory.

Goffman’s theory states that in order to function in society and achieve an identity, one must adhere to the expectations that society has formed for one’s social role. For example, a
businessperson must dress how society would expect a businessperson to dress and conduct him/herself accordingly. At a business dinner when Carolyn tries to look as normal and professional as possible, she asks Lester, “do me a favor, act happy tonight,” which is consistent behavior for her character’s persona. According to Goffman: “If a performance is to come off, the witnesses by and large must be able to believe that the performers are sincere” (71). Projecting this image of normalcy helps her to fit into the social niche that goes along with her profession, which Goffman insists is a necessity. Although she is obviously aware of the unhappiness within the family, she does not give it any more thought than how to conceal it. Goffman would argue that Carolyn is making progress here by striving to maintain the image of her happy family, which reflects well on her for all of the guests to witness: “In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is the truer self, the self we would like to be” (19). This philosophy is nearly identical to Buddy Kane’s, Carolyn’s business rival, as Kane explains: “In order to be successful, one must project an image of success at all times.” Having drunk a bit, she admits to his face “I am in complete awe of you.” Buddy Kane, “The Real Estate King,” is not only Carolyn’s rival, but also her idol. This establishes her as a personification of Goffman’s theory, as she immediately adopts Kane’s philosophy, articulating it several times throughout the remainder of the film.

Lester rejects Goffman’s notion of identity and starts to search for his own through introspection, an important part of Rogers’ advice for finding one’s true self (172). Pondering the cause of his unhappiness, Lester introspects: “I have lost something. I’m not exactly sure what it is, but I know I didn’t always feel this... sedated,” Lester’s voice asserts and quickly follows with “But you know what? It’s never too late to get it back.” While reluctantly attending
a cheerleading performance by his daughter, the seed of Lester’s anagnorisis is planted, the rose. Angela, a friend of his daughter, captures Lester’s attention. She holds his gaze for the entire routine, though she no longer follows the choreography of the cheer; she instead plays out a fantasy in Lester’s mind. At the end of his private show, she opens her sweatshirt seductively, allowing a flood of rose petals to flow toward him. The metaphorical significance of unzipping her sweatshirt was not merely to produce a sexual response in Lester, but rather to expose all that she represents, in the form of roses: attractiveness, youth, young love, lust, and joyful carelessness—the teenage years. Lester is dumbfounded. For a brief moment, he sees what he has lost. He must get closer to her in order to make contact with what she has that he has lost—a youthful spirit. He must have her. Rogers would say that Lester is “[taking] over the self-direction of his own life and behavior” to achieve what is in his own best interest (171). Lester can now be recognized as the personification of Rogers’ theory. As personifications of Goffman’s and Rogers’ theories, respectively, the actions of Carolyn and Lester make apparent the dichotomy between the two theories throughout the movie. This dichotomy witnessed between Carolyn and Lester (and therefore between Goffman and Rogers) is echoed in a second and third set of characters to be discussed later.

More evidence supporting Lester’s mirroring of Rogers’ theory arises when Lester announces he has quit his job, and Carolyn criticizes him for not upholding his social role and responsibilities. One of Carolyn’s expectations for Lester is that he maintains a job, regardless of his disdain for it. Goffman would likewise denounce Lester’s refusal to conform to a social front and insist that he is headed in the wrong direction, while Rogers explains his refusal as part of a regular, easily recognizable phenomenon:
Clients define their goal, their purpose, by discovering, in the freedom and safety of an understanding relationship, some of the directions they do not wish to move. They prefer not to hide themselves and their feelings from themselves, or even from some significant others. They do not wish to be what they ‘ought’ to be, whether it is defined positively or negatively. They do not wish to mould themselves and their behavior into a form which would be merely pleasing to others. They do not, in other words, choose to be anything which is artificial, anything which is imposed, anything which is defined from without. (170)

Lester’s actions are consistent with Rogers’ observations of people who are creating their own self. Therefore, Lester is in the process of doing just that.

Daydreams of Angela and the roses continue to enchant Lester, as he moves farther away from Goffman’s ideal “truer self.” By this time, the seed of Lester’s anagnorisis mentioned earlier, the roses, have fully blossomed. One of his later daydreams involves kissing Angela, after which he finds a rose petal inside his mouth. The rose petal in his mouth is metaphor for a transfer of some of Angela’s youthful essence to him. By making physical contact with her, he somehow inherits a part of her greatness. This interaction with Angela suggests two things. First, it suggests that the lost element in his life is everything that Angela’s character embodies in her youthfulness, her sexuality, and her attractiveness. And second, it suggests that in order to regain that for himself, he must maximize his physical contact with Angela by getting as close as humanly possible to her – through sex. Two of Jane’s friends play a significant role in the novel. Angela is one and Ricky Fitz is the other.

Two of Jane’s friends help Lester to pursue Rogers’ theory. The first is Angela. The second is Ricky Fitz, the Colonel’s son. Ricky seems to have the ability to see beauty in what
others would discard as ugliness – for example, a littered shopping bag floating in the wind. He brings a camcorder along with him wherever he goes, as if he always wants to be prepared to capture a scene of fleeting beauty at a moment’s notice. “Video’s a poor excuse, I know. But it helps me remember... I need to remember.” Ricky’s awareness of beauty in the natural world is reminiscent of Hesse’s *Demian*, in which the main character, Emil Sinclair, gains knowledge of himself spending time appreciating nature. Ricky’s appreciation for nature and (uncommon) beauty helps us to interpret the violent end of the movie, and Angela’s presence helps Lester to realize (at least part of) his own identity.

Although Rogers’ theory allows for a large amount of freedom for Lester, he truly starts to define himself when he starts limiting that freedom by his own accord. Interestingly, at the same time as Lester starts limiting himself, the second dichotomy alluded to earlier becomes apparent. During an argument when Angela calls both Ricky and Jane “freaks” asserts “well, at least I’m not ugly.” Ricky defends himself and Jane, “Yes, you are. And you’re boring. And you’re totally ordinary. And you know it.” She storms off downstairs, sobbing. Lester, surprised to find her in such a state, seizes the opportunity to accomplish his goal of becoming one with her. Angela consents, but just as he removes her clothes, she admits that she is a virgin. After a brief moment of shock, Lester chooses not to go through with it, despite her willingness and even encouragement. The significance of this moment is twofold. First, Lester realizes deflowering a pure, virgin girl of his daughter’s age is not something that he wants as part of his character, and he seems perfectly content with his decision. This is compatible with Rogers’ theory of one moving away from what one is not, from earlier. Lester is not somebody without compassion for the vulnerable—Angela, in this instance. For the first time since Lester quit his job to enjoy his absolute freedom, Lester has a limit—a self-imposed limit. He is molding an
identity for himself. The second significant aspect of the moment is that it reveals that Angela has been lying all along about her active sex life and liberal habits. She has been assuming a front for the entire movie, and when contrasted to Jane, once again the characters are representative of Goffman and Rogers’ theories, respectively.

The movie ends with Lester lying in a pool of blood on the kitchen table, having been shot in the head. Goffman would argue that his failure to adapt himself to a socially acceptable front is what led to his demise. Lester’s nonconformity misled the Colonel into presuming that he was a homosexual man. As soon as the Colonel steps outside of his role as the tough, straight, military man, and tries to kiss Lester, his front has been compromised. Goffman explains why stepping outside of one’s role for even a moment is critically dangerous: “Whether his acquisition of the role was primarily motivated by a desire to perform the given task or by a desire to maintain the corresponding front, the actor will find that he has to do both” (27-8). In order for the Colonel to continue with his mask, he would need to both “perform” and “maintain” it. Since he could not maintain his role with Lester’s new knowledge, the Colonel had to kill Lester. This way, the Colonel’s role, his social identity, remains uncompromised. In addition, once the Colonel steps outside of his front, the third dichotomy shows itself, between the Colonel and his front and Ricky and his uniqueness, again each representing Goffman and Rogers, respectively.

Rogers would not interpret Lester’s death as symbolically as Goffman would. He would argue that by the time of his death, Lester had not only already chosen his path of nonconformity and had begun to truly establish an identity, but also that he was happy and content for the first time in a long time. This is supported by five pieces of evidence from the closing scenes of the film. First, after their incident, Angela asks Lester “how are you.” After a brief pause, with an
inquisitive look on his face, he replies “God, it’s been a long time since somebody asked me that . . . I’m great.” Lester is happy for the very first time in the movie. He is content with the path he has chosen and the identity he is starting to form for himself. Second, evidence of Lester forming his own identity is most strongly apparent when he sets a limit on himself, choosing not to deflower Angela. Third, Lester is smiling, while looking at a picture of his family, his loved ones. Forth, the only word spoken in the entire bloody kitchen scene is Ricky’s “wow,” apparently captivated, intrigued, and overwhelmed by the sight of Lester. His curious observation of Lester’s face and the “wow” suggest that Ricky thought the sight to be an extraordinarily beautiful one. Ricky is only captivated by spectacles of natural beauty, and therefore because he was captivated by the sight of Lester, one can conclude that Lester was a sight of brilliant natural beauty. If he had been a part of the discontented world, Ricky would have said so, just as he said to Angela earlier. A principle of Rogers’ theory is “a receptivity to persons and to nature” (165-6). Fifth, when Lester gently places the picture of his family down onto the table, behind it rests a fresh, brilliantly red bouquet of roses. The two most significant aspects of his life, his family and “the lost something,” were symbolically merged when the picture was placed onto the table with the roses. From the content look on Lester’s face, one can conclude that it was a peaceful, definitive merger, further satisfying Lester in a moment of reflection.

Goffman’s theory of social fronts suggests that Lester’s death was a direct result of his refusal to adhere to what he “ought to be,” a front (Rogers 168). Rogers’ theory of (re)creating oneself as an individual with his own identity suggests that Lester was in fact in the process of doing so, as his actions throughout the film were consistent with those which Rogers observed and predicted in his clients. Not only is Rogers’ theory profoundly supported by evidence up to
the last scene in the film, but also it cannot be overlooked how Lester, Jane, and Ricky (personifying Rogers’ theory) ended up together in the kitchen, surrounded by natural beauty observed by Ricky, whereas Carolyn, the Colonel, and Angela (personifying Goffman’s theory) each ended up bloody, crying, or alone.

Works Cited


My Body & I: The Physical Self in Atwood’s Poetry

Throughout her poetry, Margaret Atwood uses imagery of the body to represent and facilitate the speaker’s notion of self-awareness. Therefore, an arm, a heart, or a face becomes a window into a person’s state of mind, personality, and stage in life. Thus, the speaker becomes more in touch with who he/she is, how he/she has evolved, and what he/she may become. To achieve this self-awareness, Atwood subtly draws a connection between self and the physical body. This connection creates the concept of a physical self in Atwood’s poetry. Through the physical self, Atwood’s speakers examine their bodies to find truths about themselves as gendered, emotional and spiritual people who experience oppression and success as they mature and finally realize their mortality.

There is an implicit link between people’s experience of biology and their self-awareness through the self and the body. Some of Atwood’s speakers grapple with this concept directly and on a very basic level in their search for self-awareness. For instance, the speaker in “Shapechangers in Winter” reminds, “Every cell / in our bodies has renewed itself / so many times since then, there’s / not much left, my love, / of the originals” (*Morning in the Burned House* 123). Because of the dynamic nature of body, the self must constantly redefine itself. In “You Begin,” the speaker starts, explaining: “You begin this way: / this is your hand” (*Selected*
Poems II 54). The last three lines of the poem are “It begins, it has an end, / this is what you will / come back to, this is your hand” (lines 33-35). Thus, the speaker uses the hand as a metaphor for the body, which then serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of life and how the body changes in each of life’s phases. Through the biology of aging, the speaker uses the body to understand the nature of life and its phases, which contributes to her sense of self-awareness.

The physical self is the medium for self-awareness; speakers reflect on their lives through their bodies. For instance, in Atwood’s “Miss July Grows Older,” Miss July draws this connection between the body and the self: “When I was all body I was lazy. / I had an easy life, and was not grateful” (Morning in the Burned House 23). This quotation illustrates how the speaker assumes the position of “I,” her self, in connection with her body; thus, when her body was young, she had the emotional traits of youth: laziness and unappreciativeness. Through her understanding of her youthful body in comparison to her aging one, Miss July is able to reflect on her former self. This reflection then allows Miss July to evaluate her current self and how she will evolve in the future. Often, such reflection begins with the speaker evaluating the appearance of the his/her body.

Atwood’s speakers claim their physical selves through sight and, thus, come to recognize their bodies as their “selves.” This recognition of the physical self through sight harkens to Lacan’s description of the “mirror stage as an identification” (Écrits: A Selection 2), in which the individual discerns what his/her body looks like and can then distinguish his/her own body from the bodies of others. Discerning one’s physical boundaries is the foundation for defining the physical self. In “The Pronunciation of Flesh: A Feminist Reading of Margaret Atwood’s Poetry,” Barbara Blakely illustrates the formation of self through sight:
Using [his] own eye as instrument of capture, he seizes [her] power of reflection and constitutes her as mirror in his self-construction:

Fall into me,

It will be your own

Mouth you hit, firm and glassy,

Your own eyes you find you

Are up against closed closed (38).

Thus, it is the point at which “you hit” your own reflected features that you discern your physical self—the meeting of self and body.

Once the individual has established ownership of the physical self, he/she can begin to analyze him/herself through the physical manifestations of experiences. Thus, Helen of Troy chooses to dance for money, rather than “Get[ting] some self-respect / and a day job…And minimum wage, and varicose veins” (Morning in the Burned House 33). Helen of Troy chooses to avoid the oppression of being paid minimum wage and having to “[stand] in one place for eight hours / behind a glass counter” (lines 7-9). The physical manifestation of this oppression is the varicose veins in the legs. Thus, the body provides concrete evidence of an experience’s effect on an individual. In “The Woman Makes Peace with Her Faulty Heart,” the woman speaks to her flawed heart, reflecting on her life. In the poem, the speaker blames her heart for its condition, stating, “It wasn’t your crippled rhythm / I could not forgive…but the things you hid: / …that stack of faces, gray / and folded, you claimed / we’d both forgotten” (Selected Poems II 38). Atwood’s word choice is efficiently dense: “stack of faces, gray / folded” condenses the idea of her memories of all the people that she has lost, whether through distance, disagreement, or death. While this woman unfairly blames her diseased heart for keeping
emotions and experiences bottled up inside, she connects the physical symptoms of her arrhythmia with her own choices and emotions. The “crippled rhythm” denotes her physical self, the way in which she experiences the world and lives her life.

The concept of scarring, particularly of battle scars, has powerful connotations of the body as a record of experiences. In his “Metamorphosis and Survival,” George Woodcock posits that Atwood uses Odysseus as an example of a great hero who embodies “the very struggle to sustain his true self against the assaults of experience” (125). Despite his efforts, his body becomes a template, exhibiting the scars accrued in his struggle against change. To demonstrate this paradox, he cites Atwood’s “You Are Happy:”

Your flawed body, sickle

Scars on the chest, moonmarks, the botched knee…

Your body, broken and put together
Not perfectly, marred…

Your body that includes everything
you have done, you have had done
to you goes beyond it. (125)

The artful diction in this example—“sickle / Scars,” “moonmarks,” “marred”—illustrates how the individual can draw his identity from the body and its markings. Odysseus sees himself as a warrior in relation to the obstacles that he has overcome and that have taken their toll on his body.
Without this crucial connection of the mental and the physical, full self-awareness would be impossible. To accomplish this, the individual must assert ownership, claiming oneself through the body. For, to claim herself, she must be aware of all the elements that comprise a person. In “The Woman Who Could Not Live with Her Faulty Heart,” the speaker concludes, “One night I will say to it: / Heart, be still, / and it will” (Selected Poems II 6). Thus, this speaker illustrates not only ownership of her body, but power over it as well; she claims she can instruct it to behave a certain way and even control her death. For the speaker, “I,” claims her heart, “it,” as a possession; the heart, “it,” in this instance is a synecdoche for the body as a whole. Yet, the fragmented representation of the body as one of its component parts has serious consequences for Atwood’s female speakers.

The female speakers in Atwood’s poetry recount a special, phenomenological experience of the body singular to women. For as Simone De Beauvoir analyzes, drawing from Merleau-Ponty’s Phénoménologie de la perception, “Woman, like man is her body; but her body is something other than herself” (The Second Sex 29). Society often objectifies women through their bodies, as the old war veteran objectifies his female nurse in “A Man Looks.” As the nurse bends over, he “thinks rump, / and then thinks: pear on a plate, / and, on the underside, two apples” (Morning in the Burned House 37). The man views this woman not as a whole person, but as fragmented objects. This objectification creates a dichotomy in the female experience; a woman’s own definition of her self is in constant conflict with society’s fragmented definition of her through specific aspects of female anatomy, such as the “rump.” Speakers like Helen of Troy capture this fractured, feminine self-awareness. Helen of Troy is a particularly clear example, as she analyzes her work as a dancer, for which she is, “naked as a meat sandwich…Exploited” (Morning in the Burned House 33). This description of her body
intimates the speaker’s vulnerability as a woman. Later, she illustrates the conflict between the female body and the female self, stating, “The rest of them [men] would like to…Wall me up alive / in my own body” (lines 67, 71-72). Thus, the speaker comes to a realization of the way she is viewed in society and its effects on her as a person.

An important way that some of Atwood’s speakers reach self-awareness is through the interaction of the speaker’s self and an “other.” For one can clearly define oneself from the other that is alien; one’s own borders become more evident. As Hegel portends, “self-consciousness is the reflection out of the being of the world of sense and perception, and is essentially the return from otherness” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 105). The ultimate interaction between the self and an other is consummation. Yet, for Atwood’s speakers, this interaction can actually have a deteriorating effect on the physical self. Blakely explains:

Consummation is death:

Your mouth is nothingness
Where it touches me I vanish … (42).

Perhaps, the mouth here symbolizes the body’s ability to consume and ingest. Since, as Hegel states, “self-consciousness is *Desire* [emphasis in original].” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 109) the inevitable conflict of self/other relations is grounded in the individual’s desire and ability to destruct the other. For as one of Atwood’s speakers explains, “All bread must be broken / so it can be shared” (qtd. in Blakely 49). The speaker, then, only becomes aware of this conflict by experiencing it through the physical self. Thus, it is not Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” that constructs the speaker’s self-awareness, but Simone Weil’s “I can therefore I am.” (qtd. in [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/simoneweil147148.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/s/simoneweil147148.html)).
Yet, despite the conflict of destruction and desire between the self and the other, consummation can contribute to the speaker’s self-awareness in another important way. Through sexual intersubjectivity, the self becomes aware of the sacredness of the body and its ability to procreate, further constructing the notion of the physical self. Blakely points to one of Atwood’s poems,

Lift these ashes
Into your mouth, your blood;
To know what you devour
Is to consecrate it,
almost… (qtd. in “Pronunciation of Flesh” 49).

Thus, again, Atwood links the concept of sexual interaction to the desire to “devour” and “consume” through the image of the mouth. “To know what you devour,” to know the other, is to consecrate it through the sacred act of consummation. Atwood’s speakers understand the power of the physical self through their “wishes to retain faith in creation through flesh and touch” (Blakely 41). For the sacredness of sexual intersubjectivity is the ability to create new flesh, another life. Perhaps, conception is the pinnacle of self-understanding, because it fulfills the ultimate expression of self in which each individual contributes his/her own genetic material to create another person. Yet, this desire for consecration and consummation of the other changes as the speakers approach the next phase of their lives.

As the body ages, the speaker shifts his/her desire from the will to know and devour the other, to the desire to know and understand his/her self. For some speakers, such as Miss July, the physical change of aging causes discomfort, because her changed mouth reminds her of her
lost youth: “You think your mouth is the size it was. / You pretend not to care” (Morning in the Burned House 21). This use of the mouth harkens to the link to sexual intersubjectivity and fertility. The mouth is no longer the shape it was; perhaps the speaker is no longer fertile, which bothers her. Consequently, the speaker tries to come to terms with her changing desires and capabilities. In “Daguerreotype Taken in Old Age,” the speaker states, “I know I change / have changed / / but whose is this vapid face / pitted and vast, rotund,” (Selected Poems 106). Thus, another emotional consequence of the aging body is a shock, even disgust. An interesting dichotomy occurs at this stage in life, at the same time that the individual comes to understand the physical self, the individual’s own body becomes somewhat alien to him or her. The reason for this disassociation with the body is the realization of one’s mortality; for one must come to terms with the fact that he/she cannot exist within his/her body forever, just as one is coming to understand his/her self.

The decay and death of the body bring about an awareness of the transience of human existence. The speaker in “The Death of the Other Children” realizes, “The body dies / little by little / the body buries itself / joins itself / to the loosened mind” (Selected Poems 103). This speaker still thinks of herself and her peers, “the Other Children,” as youthful, but the body is a constant contradiction. Thus, for the speaker, death is not a sudden and unconscious act, but a gradual process involving the mind; it is the disintegration of the physical self. The speaker then questions, out of disbelief, “Did I spend all those years / building up this edifice / my composite / self, this crumbling hovel?”(lines 11-14). This disbelief illustrates a question that haunts the individual close to death. If the individual believes that his/her spirit will live on after the body, then he/she questions how he/she will be able to recognize and experience “self” without the
connection to the visual, concrete body. This concept of the disembodied self after death causes an alarming sense of alienation within the “self” for Atwood’s speakers.

The realization of mortality occurs not only when the speaker him/herself is dying; it can arise from watching another person age and die. For instance, in “Keep,” the speaker states, “I know that you will die / before I do. / Already your skin tastes faintly / of the acid that is eating through you” (*Selected Poems* II 100). As she experiences an “other’s” decay, the speaker then evaluates her physical self frankly: “I’m falling into the flesh, / into the sadness of the body / that cannot give up its habits, / habits of the hands and skin” (lines 15-18). As in “You Begin,” the hand here symbolizes the evolving body. However, at this stage of life, the speaker begins to see the hand, the body, as an accustomed habit, which he/she must soon give up. As protest against inevitable death, the speaker evaluates her future physical self after her loved one passes on, “I will be one of those old women / with good bones and stringy necks / who will not let go of anything” (lines 19-21). The description of the physicality of “good bones” and a “stringy neck” symbolize the self’s attempt to make the body a fortress against loss.

It seems that Atwood’s speakers live a cyclical life, the goal of which is to achieve an understanding of what one is, what one has been, and what one will become. As the youth matures, he/she first becomes aware of the connection between the body and the self. From then on, the individual experiences and analyzes life through this concept of the physical self, forming his/her own concept of “I.” Thus, Atwood depicts individuals who have a true appreciation and understanding of their bodies, even to the point of decay. As one speaker gently noted, “I am being / eaten away by light” (*Selected Poems* 106). Through powerful imagery of the body, Atwood creates self-aware speakers and induces her readers to become more self-aware themselves.
Annotated Bibliography


   This is one of Atwood’s latest anthologies, consisting of forty-five poems. I found many of these helpful in finding evidence to prove my thesis. Among the poems I’ve used so far are “Miss July Grows Older,” “Helen of Troy Does Counter Dancing,” “Shapechangers in Winter,” and “Morning in the Burned House.”


   This anthology is a selection of works from several of her earlier anthologies. The poems I’ve found pertinent so far are “The Deaths of the Other Children,” “Girl and Horse, 1928,” and “A Soul Geologically.”


   This is another anthology of poems selected from several of her other anthologies. Among these poems have found “The Woman Who Could Not Live With Her Faulty Heart,” “The Woman Makes Peace With Her Faulty Heart,” “A Women’s Issue.” And “Flying Inside Your Own Body.”


   Blakely’s essay was particularly helpful in explaining intersubjectivity.


   Woodcock’s essay was crucial in defining how scarring develops the concept of the physical self in Atwood’s speakers.


   The Second Sex helped me to define the special phenomenological experience that Atwood’s female speakers describe.

Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage” helped me to explain the speaker’s recognition of the body as connected to the I/self – the basis of the crucial concept of the physical self.


Hegel’s definition of self-consciousness helped me to expound upon the nature of the speaker’s desire and self-consciousness, in relation to the “other.”


This source gave me a brief biography of Atwood for some background information.


This is the source for the Weil quotation used to explain speakers’ self-awareness.
The Golden Bull’s Head Lyre (IM 8694) and Its Cultural Context

When Sir Leonard Woolley excavated the site that has come to be known as the Royal Cemetery at Ur, he discovered both an incredible amount of human remains, as evidenced by the presence of more than a thousand graves, and remarkable amount of lavish and beautiful artifacts (Roaf 92). “The most impressive material remains of instruments are those found in the royal graves at Ur . . . the eight lyres and two harps had been made of wood, but only the decorative overlaid and inlaid materials were preserved, the wood having decomposed” (Kilmer 2601). One of these few lyres was the Golden Bull’s Head Lyre, created in 2400 B.C. (Lost 1). The musical instruments found in the Royal Cemetery of Ur have allowed archaeologists to learn a great deal about music and culture in ancient Mesopotamia. In addition, the fact that the Great Bull’s Head Lyre was found in the area Sir Leonard Woolley had dubbed the “Great Death Pit” gives it even more significance when it comes to comprehending death and human sacrifice in ancient Mesopotamia, especially the mysterious deaths at the Royal Cemetery of Ur (Reade 93).

The Golden Bull’s Head Lyre showcases both incredible artisanship and high-quality materials. The gold sheets used to fashion the bull’s head make the bull’s beard seem to flow as if it were caught in a breeze. Gold bands, orange carnelian stones, and shell inlays further decorate the lyre. Other aspects of the piece command the viewer’s attention as well; gold is
used to outline and illustrate the four registers on the section of the frame found underneath the bull’s head. The rest of the frame is decorated with red, blue, and white triangles. Specifically, the section of the frame above the bull’s head alternates a painted pattern of white triangles with a red background and white triangles with a bright blue background. A similar shade of blue is used to color the bull’s eyes, which create a look on the bull’s face that seems to warn viewers to keep their distance. From the feelings in the expression on the bull’s face, to his bright eyes, to the illusion of movement in the beard, to the sharply contrasting colors used to accentuate the frame, the Golden Bull’s Head Lyre is a striking and impressive piece.

In 1922, Sir Leonard Woolley was excavating at the modern-day site of Muqayyar, the location of the ancient city of Ur, when he began to find pieces of gold jewelry studded with lapis lazuli, a deep blue stone with gold inclusions, and carnelian. Although at that time Woolley had no idea how old the objects were, he returned to the site four years later to investigate further (Reade 93). It was then that he truly found what has now become known as the Royal Cemetery of Ur. By dating the clay sealings recovered from the site, Woolley was able conclude that the earliest graves were from the Early Dynastic IIIA period - approximately 2550 B.C. to 2400 B.C. (Pollock 289). Dating the graves was a difficult task; new graves had been constructed over older ones until 2100 B.C., and, in many cases, the later graves had disturbed the earlier ones. In the end, Woolley deduced that there were 660 burials belonging to the Early Dynastic Royal Cemetery. Of these 660, sixteen stood out from all the others. These were the royal tombs (Zettler 22).

Distinguishable by their opulent pieces of art, peculiar structures, and the clear evidence of ritual sacrifice, Woolley assumed that these graves belonged to the deceased kings and queens of Ur. The Golden Bull’s Head Lyre was located in the tomb known as the Great Death Pit
because of the large number of retainers found there and the fact that the tomb chamber itself had been destroyed (Zettler 24). Six men and sixty-eight women were willing victims to sacrifice in this death pit; no evidence has been found to show that they were murdered or killed in a violent manner (Gopnik 2003). It is important to note the specific location of the lyre in the Great Death Pit; it was one of four lyres located next to the bodies of what appeared to be the four female musicians who would have used them. We do not know what actually caused the human sacrifice at Ur, but we can be certain it involved music in some way (Roaf 86).

Several theories have attempted to explain the widespread death at Ur; indeed it is the only such example of human sacrifice in the entire history of Mesopotamia (Gopnik 2003). Through examination of these theories, one can also trace the culture of the ancient Near East and the importance of music in this culture. One explanation for the human sacrifice at Ur is that the kings and queens of Ur were “divine rulers” and that the many remains in their tombs are remains of the retinue that would serve them in the afterlife (Zettler 25-28). Music would have been an important part of the courts of the nobility while they were living: “the lyre became the main instrument of priests and musicians in holy places, courts, and elite military orchestras” (Braun 77). Therefore, the prestige of the music of the lyre would surely have been something the rulers wanted to take with them to the afterlife.

Another possible explanation for the inclusion of retainers in the burials of the kings and queens is that they wished to show the surrounding world that they were firmly in control of their land and their subjects. In the third millennium B.C., Ur was located in an ideal trade position close to the banks of the Euphrates River. It was the center of one of the city-states of Sumer. In addition, the construction of a highly effective irrigation system allowed the city to have surplus crops every year. These qualities ensured Ur’s position as the trading center of the region.
Many of the beautiful objects found in the Royal Cemetery could not have been constructed without the fruits of the trade that included many precious materials such as the lapis lazuli that is seen in another lyre found in the Royal Cemetery (de Schauensee 2).

All of this economic activity and wealth “necessitated a highly structured government and fostered a stratified social structure and craft specialization” (de Schauensee 2). In this kind of a society, it would have been vital for the rulers of Ur to show to their own people that they were firmly in control. In order to preserve economic prosperity, government decisions had to be respected. Additionally, it would have been important to show Ur’s strength to the rulers of other regions. A show of power would create respect and perhaps even a bit of fear, emotions that would ensure that Ur was not cheated during its trade with other areas (Zettler 29).

Yet another potential explanation for human sacrifice at Ur is that the bodies found in the royal tombs were kings and queens who had participated in the acting out of sacred marriage rites between Dumuzi and Inanna (Zettler 29). People in ancient Mesopotamia believed that the destruction of fertile soil that occurred during the late spring and summer symbolized the exile of the god of fertility to the netherworld. Then, in the winter and early spring, the god of fertility was reborn. He was called Dumuzi, which literally means “the healthy child.” In order to ensure Dumuzi’s return to the living world, the people held ceremonies in which lamentations were recited (Hallo 1874). The goddess Inanna was believed to participate in these rituals, some believed through her marriage to Dumuzi (Zettler 29). Perhaps what occurred in the royal tombs of Ur was a ceremony to guarantee the fertility of the soil, and the lyres provided music as a background to the lamentations; in contrast, perhaps it was a symbolic wedding ceremony and the lyres provided joyful music. Either explanation would tie in with the fact that “It seems likely the women, whose bodies mostly lay [in the Great Death Pit] in four rows occupying half
the pit, had been singing to the music when they died” (Reade 120). If what occurred at the royal tombs of Ur was a ceremony to assure fertility in Ur, it is fitting that the majority of the lyres found in the Royal Cemetery were decorated with bull’s heads. It is believed that, in the ancient Near East, the bovine was considered a symbol of fertility (Hesse 443).

A final theory that attempts to explain the human sacrifice at Ur points to the fact that during this time period, “kings may have been powerful enough to accumulate great wealth during their reigns, but kingship as an institution was not sufficiently strong and regularized to maintain itself” (Zettler 29). Archaeologists believe that the building of palaces began during the later Early Dynastic Period. This new trend suggests that, in contrast to the so-called “temple elites” that had previously ruled, secular elites were then becoming dominant. Because there were no religious convictions to bind people to the leadership and cause a smooth succession to the throne, it has been proposed that human sacrifice attempted to create such a ritual. Music is an integral part of many rituals, and it has been from the days of ancient ceremonies held to ward off evil and ensure the blessings of the gods to modern-day services at churches, synagogues, and other places of worship (Roaf 74). Therefore, the lyres would have played an important role in the establishment of a ritual to cement the powers of the new rulers. The destruction of humans, animals, and artifacts upon the death of the king and queen would have caused the survivors to respect the new rulers, and, thus, a smooth succession would have been ensured (Gopnik 2003).

While most experts agree that the likely cause of the human sacrifice that occurred in the Royal Cemetery of Ur is actually a combination of the abovementioned hypotheses, there are several explanations that seem extremely plausible. It cannot be a coincidence that the majority of the lyres found at Ur were decorated with bull’s heads and that these lyres are the most
impressive ever discovered by Near Eastern archaeologists. The lyres themselves, as well as their adornment with bull’s heads, must both be significant. Given this, the next logical conclusion that can be reached is that the human sacrifice at the Royal Cemetery likely involved a ceremony to ensure the fertility of the earth in the fields surrounding Ur. However, at the same time as the human sacrifice may have been attempting to guarantee fertility, the large magnitude of the sacrifice likely was also attempting to display the strength of both Ur as a region and the strength of Ur’s rulers.

While much remains unknown about the Golden Bull’s Head Lyre, such as who made it or ordered it to be made, we can nevertheless discern that it was an important object in ancient Mesopotamia. The human sacrifice that occurred in the Royal Cemetery of Ur was an attempt to communicate or accomplish something powerful. By examining the various potential motives for the sacrifice, we are able to trace the role that music may have played in the occurrence. The fact that so many lyres and so few other types of musical instruments were found may indicate that the lyres themselves were important to whatever happened in the tombs. Use of this information may lead us closer to the real explanation for the ritualistic death. Whatever the reason, the presence of the lyres in the royal tombs encourages a study of the role the lyre played in living society—and in death.
Bibliography


“It Doesn’t Matter What You Meant”

Walking down College Avenue one evening with a group of my friends and some new acquaintances, I heard someone behind me say, “That guy is such a faggot.” Trying hard to overcome my nauseous feeling, I considered that he might just be ignorant of the word’s effects or it might have just slipped out because of habit. After all, I did not know him very well. Taking a deep breath, I turned around and said, “Please don’t use that word. It offends me.” He rolled his eyes, let out a string of four letter words, and replied, “It’s so stupid that people get offended by that. It’s just a word.” But is it “just” a word? This view ignores the historical legacy of different words or symbols and implies that anyone who claims to be offended by them is, as Blum put it, “hypersensitive” (45). I find this line of thinking to be faulty. Whether for homophobic, sexist, or racist slurs, I assert that people are morally responsible for using offensive jokes, symbols, and actions, even if their ideology is not racist/homophobic/sexist or if they do not see their actions as offensive.

Because of the history of racism in America, certain objects, words, and symbols have offensive underlying meanings. “The historical legacy effect,” Blum explains, “operates by way of the identity of the target group, insofar as that identity is bound up with the memory of oppression” (44). Obvious examples of this effect are symbols like the Confederate flag, the
swastika, and the word “nigger” (Blum 16). Spike Lee, in his film *Bamboozled*, explored the implications of minstrel shows where the actors dress in “black face.” The use of black stage makeup itself might not be racially offensive if it were not for the history of “black face,” used to invoke mental pictures of the “happy, slow-witted, agreeable slave” (Blum 44). Just the same, the word “nigger” *would* be (as my friend argued about the word “faggot”) “just a word” if it were not for the legacy of white supremacy and black oppression that is inseparably bound up with the meaning of this word. This undisputable history moves it beyond the classification of “just a word” to an insult, threat, or derogatory term.

But what if the user does not view the joke/symbol/word as being offensive? Does ignorance absolve the user from moral responsibility? I argue that it does not. Blum explains, “In general, people beyond a certain age should recognize what is racist” (18). He also points out, though, that using a racially offensive word or symbol does not necessarily mean that the user is racist (17). A person may be ignorant of the personal effects of derogatory words or symbols and therefore not as sensitive as someone who knows the damage firsthand. This goes back to the concept of “privilege,” the idea that people are born with varying degrees of unearned advantages. In “white privilege” ignorance is one of the key parts (Blum 72-73). For example, Toi Derricotte, a black professor, described her frustration with the insensitivity and ignorance of her white cab driver after he made racially offensive remarks: “I didn't want to feel responsible for forgiving him, for being a “different” black person, for continuing to educate or not educate, or any of it. I didn’t want to be responsible for white people” (175). Regardless of the intentions of the cab driver, Derricotte was obviously upset by his actions and by her feeling of obligation to forgive and educate him. This specific instance gives way to a more general truth: Lack of knowledge on the part of the perpetrator does not change the fact that a statement
itself is still racist (Blum 17). Therefore, claiming ignorance or denying that a word or symbol is offensive is not a valid excuse.

Regardless of whether or not the user’s personal ideology is racist or if the person claims that the words/symbols are not offensive, she or he is still morally responsible for the damage caused by the use of these words. Because of the “historical legacy effect,” (Blum’s phrase) words like “nigger” and “spic” are not “just words” and should not reasonably be seen as such. As author Jane Lazarre warned, “It doesn’t matter what you meant when you are moving against a tide of history and social reality far more important than one white person’s mistake. A white American either accepts the weight of this history or relinquishes the respect and possibility of authentic connection to Black Americans” (32).

Works Cited
In the Name of the Father:

Considering Religious Motivation in Cultural Encounters

In many discussions of the early European colonization of the Americas, the conquistadors are condemned for trying to impose their beliefs and ways of life on the native peoples they encountered. In reality, espousing this view of the conquistadors blinds the observer to an important element of European culture at the time of these explorations. In order to judge this situation properly, we must attempt to understand the cultural and religious forces that drove the actions of these explorers. It is my assertion that the best we can hope to do is examine all the available information and make consistent, fair-minded decisions that do not unjustly burden anyone with the guilt of a situation that we cannot fully understand. It is my claim that many modern judgments of the conquistadors are flawed because they ignore a very relevant part of European culture and do not remain consistent with the judgment that native practices are excusable as an integral part of their culture. There are too many parallels between the conquistadors and the natives to condemn one group while praising the other.

Certainly, the native peoples of the Americas had some customs that present-day Americans would consider unacceptable, but we defend these practices as integral parts of their culture. We excuse such practices as cannibalism, human sacrifice, and slavery on the grounds...
of cultural relativism while upbraiding the conquistadors for their judgment and destruction of these native customs. We shun European absolutism as an incorrect approach to other peoples and their religious beliefs, but in making these judgments we are actually employing a form of absolutism.¹

If we are to remain consistent in our judgment of this situation, it is necessary to consider each culture’s religious beliefs as equally valid forces in their actions. Bernal Diaz gives numerous accounts of the proselytizing efforts of the conquistadors. They would enter a town and demand that the people throw down their idols, give up human sacrifice and sodomy, and erect shrines to the Virgin Mary. The usual response of the natives was grief and anger. They were happy to incorporate other religious icons into their faith, but the thought of rejecting their own idols and rituals was unfathomable (Diaz 61-2, 121-3). These accounts evoke sympathy for native cultures that were open to new ideas while attempting to preserve their own culture against a powerful, assimilating force. In modern cultures, where relativism is so often prized, the natives are viewed as victims of a hostile, absolutist takeover.

But we must also keep in mind the cultural backgrounds from which the conquistador’s motivations arose. At the time of the conquests, the Catholic church reigned supreme in Spain. It was God’s One True Church, and anyone who was not a Christian needed to be converted. The Reconquista had recently driven most Jews and Muslims out of Spain, and the Inquisition was in the process of converting or eliminating all heretics that remained. A major motivation in the European exploration of America was the conversion of new souls to Christ, and at least some of the conquistadors saw the spread of the Catholic faith as a serious responsibility of all Christians. Regardless of their personal beliefs, these men were under intense political pressure to demonstrate that they were bringing new souls to Christ.
In addition to desiring conversions, many conquistadors were fearful of the native idols. They viewed the native gods not as cultural artifacts but as real enemies who could cause harm to Christians and negatively affect the actions of those who worshipped them. Cortes, in a conversation with the Aztec Emperor Montezuma, describes these idols as “not gods, but evil things, the proper name for which is devils” (Diaz 237). To our modern sensibilities, this seems utterly ridiculous, but, to the conquistadors, it was often taken as fact. Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible have numerous references to the evils of idols and calls to destroy them.²

There is no valid reason to assume that the Europeans were any less convinced of their beliefs than the natives—whether or not these beliefs appear rational to us. In all likelihood, the Spanish were as fervent in their belief in Catholicism as the natives were in the power of idols.

Whether you call it superstition, faith, or delusion—belief in the supernatural can be a driving force in human action. In many cases, Christianity today does not much resemble that of fifteenth century Europe, and our judgment of the conquistadors must account for this fact. In modern America, religion is socially acceptable only if it does not attempt to assert its supremacy. We live by the maxim, have your religion; just do not try to make it mine. But it is anachronistic to apply this social sentiment to past cultures. In fact, our modern view of religion is about as far from the radical Christianity of the conquistadors as possible while still retaining the same name. A foundational doctrine of early Christianity was a call for the faithful to spread God’s word to those who did not believe.

In many respects, we do both cultures a disservice by assuming that the natives were more convinced of their faiths than the conquistadors were of theirs. By doing so, we assume that the native people were somehow more primitive and impressionable than their conquerors. While some of the cultures encountered by the conquistadors were much less technologically
developed than their European contemporaries, it would be pure folly not to acknowledge the complex social, political, and religious structure of Aztec society. A people with complete irrigation systems, a fully established political hierarchy, advanced educational systems, and astounding architectural feats cannot be classified as primitive. There is no reason to believe that their religious beliefs, though polytheistic, were any less complex and valid than those of the conquistadors.

Taking into account both sets of religious motivations, we are not free to condemn Cortes for trying to destroy the native idols in the name of his God if we simultaneously defend human sacrifice as a religious practice integral to native culture. If we attempt to make a moral judgment with this new view that both sides were religiously (or at least culturally) motivated, we are left to choose between a culture that kills people for human sacrifice and one that destroys other’s religious icons. This choice is distinctly different than the choice between a society that is accepting of other gods and one that insists that only their god is valid.

Cultural relativism is often twisted to defend an assumption of Western guilt such as the one seen in the case of the conquistadors. Romantic notions take over and we ask, what is right with them that is wrong with us? This type of thinking is not relativism but reverse absolutism, which assumes that other cultures are superior because they are different. Such a view is just as faulty as assuming our culture is superior to others. To make matters worse, we tend to equate European cultures of all time periods with our modern western culture. Our question becomes, what’s right with them [the American natives] that’s wrong with us [conquistadors]? We not only employ reverse absolutism, but also overlook the distinct differences between our culture and those past cultures we are evaluating. This view of culture can lead to faulty, one-sided conclusions about cultural encounters.
The question of who was right and who was wrong in this situation is certainly not a simple one. For example, the methods used by many conquistadors to accomplish their goal are certainly not beyond reproach; and there are many factors beyond religion that must be addressed before a conclusion can be drawn on the morality of a people’s actions in any situation. In this paper, I have attempted to show that the process of making such judgments must be handled carefully in order to arrive at consistent conclusions. If we do not take the time to understand the motivations of the conquistadors and the natives, we are at the risk of passing inconsistent, biased judgments. An assertion that the conquistadors should have been more relativistic and accepting of others is in itself an absolutist stance on the amount of relativism people must employ; such an assertion fails to acknowledge important cultural elements, causing us to be guilty of the same absolutist, culturally insensitive errors in judgment as those we are condemning.

Notes

1 I am referring to relativism and absolutism as they are commonly understood in modern anthropology. Cultural relativism refers to a view of other cultures that respects differences between cultures and does not assert the supremacy of one culture over another. Absolutism is the opposite view, stating that one culture is better than another.

2 For examples, see King James Version 1 Kings 15:12; Psalms 106:37-40; Acts 15:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:16.

Works Cited