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Elena Rudy  
*Denison University*

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# THE SEXUALITY OF POWER: DECONSTRUCTING THE SEXUAL ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN THROUGH THE SATIRES OF POPE AND ROCHESTER

ELENA RUDY '97

Salt-N-Pepa proclaim in their hit song "Ain't Nuthin' But a She Thing," "I can bring home the bacon, fry it in a pan. Never let you forget that you're a man." During other stanzas, they say that women work the same jobs but get half the recognition and half the pay that men do. These lines indicate that women, if they choose to, can do everything that, and even more than, a man can. The refrain even states, "It's a she thing and it's all in me, I can be anything that I wanna be." In these lines, Salt-N-Pepa reclaim women's identity and suggest that, in their own words, women should "fight for their right, stand up and be heard." But they fall into one societal trap when they suggest that women abide by the following precept: "Family's first before anybody else; Take care of them before I take care of self." They suggest with these lines that women naturally place family before anything else in their lives, unlike men who normally view family as secondary to their public lives. While some people may argue that this feeling is natural, I argue that the ideas of women as the caring sex and the giving sex are naturalized beliefs created centuries ago by men in power who feared female sexuality and the power women might gain through this sexuality.

Looking back through history, ideas concerning the differences between women's and men's sexuality have always existed. For example, men should be able to be sexually promiscuous, but women should not; men enjoy sex, women do not; husbands need more than one sexual partner, wives should be satisfied with only their husbands. These statements make it easy to see the inequality in gender roles and to laugh at these ideas as out-dated and no longer prevalent today. But these ideas have led to less conspicuous views of gender roles that have naturalized themselves into modern day American and European societies. As we look at more subversive ideas, we find it harder to deconstruct what nature dictates and what culture has naturalized into society so that we regard these cultural ideas as reality: mother's have a stronger bond to their children than fathers do—a woman will not leave her child, although a man will do it without a second thought; women want

the stability of a home and a husband, while men need to go out into the world and make money; a woman can be satisfied staying at home with the children, but a man cannot. While these statements may seem ludicrous to some people, others would wholeheartedly agree with them, especially if expressed in a different context, as Fay Weldon does in her satire *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. These "correct" gender roles result from what Michel Foucault calls the "regime of truth." This refers to the set of "truths" in a society that determine our beliefs and behaviors. The regime of truth directly results from Foucault's philosophy that truth equals power. In the regime of truth, whoever holds the power determines the truth. In his own words,

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (1144)

For many centuries in Europe and America, white, upperclass men have held the power, through money and wars, and therefore have created the truth. This truth tends to place women in submissive and powerless positions. While we like to think that as a culture we have progressed, exposed, and, for the most part, eliminated the inequality among genders, comparing Rochester's and Alexander Pope's 18th century satires with Fay Weldon's 1983 novel, against the backdrop of Foucault's truth and power scheme, reveals that we still make the mistake of equating cultural beliefs with natural instincts.

An evident gap in gender roles emerged in the 18th century. A

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good place to see this rising dichotomy between the genders is in sexual roles placed on men and women. In his satires *Verses for which he was Banished* and *Dr. Bendo's Bill*, Rochester presents different sexual practices for men and women. Men should glory in their sexual feats and try to gain as many partners as possible while women should have only one partner, whether that be her husband or her lover. A woman who has more than one lover is immoral and a societal miscreant.

The subjects of King Charles II, the English monarch during Rochester's time, praised him as macho and thought of him as quite an incredible man because of his many mistresses. Unlike today, the citizens did not have to discover the sexual escapades of their leaders; their leaders flaunted their lovers, and the people seemed to accept this behavior as the right of the king. Kings, at this point, were still regarded as divine beings, gaining their positions through direct relations with God. Thus, the people never really questioned a king's behavior. When reading Rochester's *Verses for which he was Banished*, therefore, we have to discover what exactly Rochester was criticizing about the king and why the king was so upset by this satire that he banished Rochester from court. While a modern day writer or audience would focus on the "immorality" of Charles' behavior, Rochester and his companions are not particularly appalled by the King's sexual promiscuity. In all actuality, Rochester could not condemn this behavior because he himself was known as one of the biggest scoundrels and sexual mongrels at court. He spent his time drinking and whoring. So looking closer at *Verses*, we see that Rochester is not scolding the King for his number of mistresses; he is instead making fun of Charles because of his lack of sexual performance and is criticizing the King for his addiction to sex. The King, of course, does not want his people to learn of his declining sexual prowess, especially since Rochester has directly linked that to his ability to run the Kingdom. Rochester writes, "Nor are his high desires above his strength,/His sceptre and his prick are of an equal length,/And she that plays with one may play with t'other,/And make him little wiser than his brother" (10-13). Rochester asserts that any woman who finds herself in the King's boudoir has the ability to gain power because Charles is such a slave to sex that "Whate'er religion or his laws say on't,/He'd break through all to come at any cunt" (18-19). This addiction to sex—this inability to control himself in the face of sexual desires—is not looked upon positively by his countrymen. Thus he does not want this view of himself to find its way into the general circulation of the

court. Nor does he want his peers to hear that he can no longer perform sexually: "Yet still his graceless bollocks hung an arse: Nothing could serve his disobedient tarse" (26-27).

This liberal view of sex and extramarital affairs, however, does not for the most part extend to women. While the English people do not condemn the King's mistresses, Rochester in *Dr. Bendo's Bill* does treat women differently when it comes to sexuality. It is true that he addresses a different class of women—instead of the ladies of the king and the aristocracy, he addresses middle class women and even common whores. But still one can tell the difference with which he treats sexuality in women, most notably by the fact that he mentions venereal diseases and then mainly attributes them to women. In his *Bill*, he explains, "... I assure you for great secrecy, as well as care, in diseases where it is requisite; whether venereal or others; as in some peculiar to women, the green-sickness, weaknesses, inflammations, or obstructions in the stomach, reins, liver, spleen, etcetera..." (121). Though not explicitly stating it, he seems to suggest that women are the carriers of sexually-transmitted diseases and that because of their promiscuous sexual behavior, these diseases persist. I doubt that he accepts sexual promiscuity in women as he does in men. A woman can be his mistress or the King's mistress. That he accepts. But she can be *only* his mistress. He would not want her to act like him and have other lovers.

We can see this at the end of his *Bill*, as well, when he states the purpose of women's beauty. He is justifying why he will perform some kind of seventeenth-century form of plastic surgery. Beauty is now, according to Rochester, created

for the better establishment of mutual love between man and woman; for when God had bestowed on man the power of strength and wisdom, and thereby rendered woman liable to the subjection of his absolute will, it seemed but requisite that she should be endowed likewise, in recompense, with some quality that might beget in him admiration of her, and so enforce his tenderness and love. (122)

While we can only hope that some of this was written in a sarcastic tone and that Rochester does not feel that men hold such a superior position over women, it would not be too hard to imagine that he really did feel this way. In the 18th century, women were considered the property of men and therefore created to bring men happiness, nothing more really. Thus, a woman should submit to



her man, whether this be to a husband or a lover. We can expand this to suggest that a woman should not promote her own sexual desires as a man might but that she should always remain faithful to her man.

This notion of female submissiveness resurfaces in Rochester's *A Ramble in St. James's Park*. The woman in question is slandered by the narrator for satisfying her sexual appetite with younger partners who, almost certainly, will perform better than he will in bed. While Rochester mainly criticizes the lack of appeal of his narrator, he also, and probably unknowingly, reveals the dichotomy in sexuality and gender roles: a woman who pursues sexual partners has a "depraved appetite" (l. 135) and is morally corrupt, while a man who pursues many partners acts within an acceptable role and is entitled to these pursuits.

Today this inequality among male and female sexual behavior continues to plague many societies, especially middle and upper class American society. It seems that, as a society, we almost expect men in high-power positions to have affairs and not to hide these affairs. If the men do choose to hide their affairs at first, they are still not denigrated when the affair is made public. They may even gain some kind of respect among their peers—their male peers that is. Take, for example, Fay Weldon's portrayal of male and female affairs in her satire *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. At the beginning of this work, Bobbo tells his wife, Ruth, about his sexual escapades with Mary Fisher. As Ruth states, when speaking of Bobbo's and Mary Fisher's sex life, "I know he does the same to her as he does to me, because he told me so. Bobbo believes in honesty" (12). And in the next paragraph, "'Be patient,' he says, 'I don't intend to leave you. It's just that I'm in love with her and at the moment must act accordingly'" (12). As a man, Bobbo feels he is entitled to his extramarital affairs; he does not even feel that he should pretend faithfulness to his wife. But when confronted with Mary Fisher's having an affair, he writhes in jealousy. Early in their affair, Bobbo wonders about her servant, Garcia: "Garcia was tall and fleshy and dark and young, and his fingers were long and sometimes Bobbo wondered where they strayed. Garcia was twenty-five and just the look on him sent Bobbo's mind at once to sexual speculation" (19). When confronted with Bobbo's jealousy, Mary Fisher just laughs and says that Garcia could be her son. This laugh serves to trigger a possessive response in Bobbo: "How pretty her laugh was and how easily it came. Bobbo wanted no one to hear it but himself. Yet how could he possibly be with her all the time? Cer-

tainly there was no other way of keeping her to himself and ensuring her fidelity but by being there" (19-20). By the middle of the novel, however, this is exactly what he does. He moves most of his business out to her home on the cliff so that he can watch over her and make sure she remains faithful. At the same time, ironically, he is carrying on an affair with a secretary in the city. He, of course, does not see the irony of this situation, though one hopes that the reader does.

But even if we may realize the irony of this situation, reversing the roles and making the woman the one having the affair would elicit more than a simple "Oh, what irony." A woman who has an affair often loses respect among her peers. If she occupies an executive or administrative position, people will speculate that she "slept her way to the top." If she has a family, people will discuss how horrible her husband and children must feel. We still seem to feel as Rochester did, that women exist for men. A sexually promiscuous woman, unlike a sexually promiscuous man, finds herself the target of people's contempt and disapproval because she has stepped outside her pre-ordained position, thereby challenging society's ingrained views of gender roles.

This inequality in sexual practices results from the regime of truth established by white upperclass males. They have the power, and therefore they have constructed a truth that keeps women from expressing themselves sexually. But in order to remain in control of the truth, they must keep the power; and, ironically, the one thing that seems to scare male writers and threaten the power structure most is women's sexuality. Rochester criticizes the King, as mentioned above, because the King is a slave to his sexual desires. In *A Ramble in St. James's Park*, Rochester, more vividly, degrades the narrator. This character is old and has been rejected by a prostitute. Rather than accept this rejection gracefully, however, the narrator allows the woman to gain power over him, though only through her sexuality. Rochester plays with typical gender stereotypes by making the man jealous and bent on revenge because his mistress has rejected him for other men. He also gives the narrator a pathos not usually associated with men:

But why am I, of all mankind,  
To so severe a fate designed?  
Ungrateful! Why this treachery  
To humble, fond, believing me?  
Who gave you privileges above  
The nice allowances of love? (105-110)

He goes on to say that he is her servant—a servant of "love" (125-133). Such words of devotion and dependence do not often come from the male voice; normally a woman speaks these words. Unfortunately, that we still describe Rochester's work as focusing on reversing gender roles comments on the persistence of gender inequality in our own society—we consider a woman the faithful one and the man the run around. Rochester detests such femininity in his narrator because the old man is giving a woman power over him. Granted it is power through sex, but still women getting power in any form will lead to a breakdown in the male regime of truth.

Pope too fears women's sexuality. In *An Epistle to a Lady*, he condemns women as "variegated tulips" (41), indicating that they have two faces—the pious wife and the cunning prostitute. He reduces all women to this double standard, saying that even though one may look like a pious woman, underneath she hides the sting of an untrustworthy, cunning witch. For example, he and Martha Blount (his friend and the adversarius in this satire) discuss a woman named Chloe. The portrait is one of a woman who does not readily divulge her feelings. To Pope she calculatingly destroys the male truth because she "has no heart" (160), though "She speaks, behaves, and acts just as she ought" (161). She shows no emotion:

So very reasonable, so unmoved,  
As never yet to love, or to be loved.  
She, while her lover pants upon her breast,  
Can mark the figures on an Indian chest.  
(165-168)

Her sexual coldness threatens the male power structure because she can use her sexuality to gain power over men. Once again, male writers reveal that female sexuality scares them.

At the end of his work also, Pope, playing the typical arrogant artist, suggests what he calls "The picture of an estimable woman, with the best of contrarities" (113n.). He says that women should not use cunning and sexuality to gain power; a better way to make their voice heard and to establish themselves in society is to act in accordance with their husband's wishes. He offers tame suggestions that really do not seem as if they would enhance women's power in any way:

She, who ne'er answers till a husband cools,  
Or, if she rules him, never shows she rules;  
Charms by accepting, by submitting sways,  
Yet has her humour most, when she obeys; (261-264)

While some may believe that Pope really felt these were ways for

women to become more powerful members of society, I believe he knows that his suggestions are tame and that women who follow his advice will remain forever in their husband's shadows. Looking at his relationship with Lady Mary Wortley Montague also suggests this. He loved, or at least was attracted to, Montague, but she dishonored him by criticizing his writing and his looks to all her upperclass friends in her satire *To the Imitator of the First Satire of the Second Book of Horace*. His sexual attraction to her gave her power over him that he most likely resented, but that nevertheless made him come to realize that women's sexuality equaled power. His writing shows a fear of women's sexuality, and this fear leads to his creation of a truth for women that involves submissiveness to their husbands and lovers.

The eighteenth-century regime of truth so vividly portrayed in Rochester's and Pope's satires condemning women's sexual desires while affirming the place of women in the home as silent wives and mothers has persisted over the past two centuries. But now instead of being a created role, we feel that *naturally* women are more closely connected to their children and their homes than men are. We believe that something innate and biological makes women want to stay home with their children, to nurture and care for them, while men do not have these, what we even call, "maternal instincts." Fay Weldon explores this created dichotomy in gender roles. Discussing this book with college-level women, many who would define themselves as feminists, revealed the extent to which these "natural" views of women and motherhood have ingrained themselves into our society. These women were shocked and disappointed in Ruth when she leaves her children (she leaves them in her husband's care after he leaves them and her for another woman). They felt that naturally a good mother would not leave her children. Unfortunately, they did not view Ruth's abandonment of her children as a positive step toward taking back her life. Rather, they viewed it as unnatural. But viewing Ruth's actions as an "unnatural" act is simply the result of cultural beliefs established centuries ago that we have naturalized into our belief system as the truth.

Twentieth-century authors are just now beginning to realize that these gender differences have no grounding in nature. A review in *Ms. magazine* entitled "Phyllis Burke: Exploding Myths of Male and Female" explains how Burke, a longtime feminist and lesbian, is just now coming to the "realization that gender roles have no true basis in the biological differences between women and men" (Golden 83). If we truly want to become equal members of society,



we must expose these cultural myths and work to destroy beliefs so naturalized into society that they are seen as truths. Not until we accomplish this can women truly "be anything that [they] wanna be."

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