

Kidnapped Amazonians, Severed Breasts, and Witches: Renaissance Perceptions of the Destructive Nature of the Freakish Female in Spenser's *The Bower of Bliss* and Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen*

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Social stratification operates via the vehicle of gender norms and the deviation from or nonconformity to these cultural expectations. Those people who cannot or refuse to conform to social norms are often the subject of spectacle, observed by society as outsiders in a metaphorical freak show. The societal attitudes of Renaissance England toward gender are permeated with a pervasive fear of feminine sexuality and the destructive impact that such “vehement passions” were believed to have upon men. This anxiety of gender nonconformity is especially prominent in the portrayal and perception of “foreign” women—females voluntarily transcending the roles of domesticity placed upon them or women deriving from cultures in which the ideals of femininity are noticeably different than those of Renaissance England. William Shakespeare and other authors within this time write from this bias when creating their own female characters, positioning these characters

Abstract

Freak shows are physical and metaphorical, demonstrating a cultural perception of what and who is privileged. In Renaissance England, Shakespeare and Spenser both write of deviant women and perpetuate the stereotypes of foreign women, creating literary “freak shows” in their works *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *The Bower of Bliss*. Whether these characters are Amazonian women disinterested in heterosexual romance or promiscuous witches, they are set as spectacle in the confines of their respective texts.

as commodities which readers may observe from outside of the text, as one stares at creatures in an exhibit. In Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen* and Edmund Spenser's *The Bower of Bliss*, two very different women—Emilia and Acrasia—emerge from a similar cultural anxiety concerning the inevitable carnality of female sexuality. Although both women approach their femininity in very different ways, their identities are shaped within the literary arena of spectacle within Spenser's and Shakespeare's texts (indicative of the universal Renaissance English biases against nonconforming women), and both lead to the downfall of the male ideal of temperance.

To write of something is to arrest it and place it on display so that it may be witnessed by readers. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* was a work channeling the essence of misogyny. One particular section of Spenser's epic poem, titled *The Bower of Bliss*, praises the chastity and holiness of the familiar in the form of Una, symbolic of the English Queen Elizabeth, while depicting the downfall of the wicked other embodied by Acrasia. Spenser's work is a form of the human zoo to show the binary of gender and cultural norms. Both the Queen and Acrasia are female leaders over their own respective kingdoms with the same perceived potential for weakness in comparison to a male, as indicated by their genitalia that, in the Early Modern period, would have been thought of as being internalized (and incomplete) penises. Their differences lie in their adherence or lack thereof to standards of idealized femininity. Elizabeth, the "virgin queen," is loved and becomes an effective ruler *in spite of* her identity as a woman; it is only by *not* openly utilizing that which marks her as female that she can effectively transcend the vices of carnality and excessive emotion that are thought to be characteristic of womankind. Acrasia represents the fulfilled fears of men concerning female sexuality in nearly every aspect. Spenser's poem views her through the male lens, identifying her socially unexpected qualities as one would label an animal in a zoo: mutant, sorceress, lustful. She is a witch who lures noblemen into her bower with her beauty and her spells.

When Sir Guyon, representative of male power and spiritual temperance, first comes across the enchantress, he sees her,

half-sleeping, on a bed of roses, clad in a veil of silk and silver,
all round were many fair ladies and boys singing sweetly. Not far
off was her last victim, a gallant-looking youth, over whom she

had cast an evil spell. His brave sword and armour hung idly on a tree, and he lay sunk in a heavy slumber, forgetful of all the noble deeds in which he had once delighted. (Spenser 163)

Acrasia claims men, taking physical and emotional control over them in a way that deviates from the expected female role of sexual submissiveness. Her identity as a sexually-active woman, living in her mysterious kingdom, labels her as dangerous and foreign in the eyes of Renaissance English society. She distracts noblemen from their spiritual and physical valor by initiating sex and adopting the masculine role of penetrating them, so to speak, with her temptation. Her victims are emasculated to the point where they become nearly feminine themselves, mutated by Acrasia's influence. They are compared to boys who have been stripped of their cultural markers of masculine significance, made into sleeping exhibitions to be passively acted upon by Acrasia. What separates men from women and from other lower life forms, what makes men perhaps more human than their female counterparts, is their abstinence from the animalistic lusts of sexuality. In Acrasia's bower are wild creatures which "are really men whom the enchantress has thus transformed. Now they are turned into these hideous figures, in accordance with their bad and ugly minds" (Spenser 165). They are viewed by Sir Guyon in the artificial habitat of the golden bower, living among the metallic fruit trees as zoo animals removed from their natural landscape, and are incorporated into Spenser's framework of nesting scenes of human bizarreness.

Such a society is in direct opposition to the patriarchal culture of Renaissance England and threatens the male privilege inherent in Spenser's setting. In Acrasia's land, feminine deviant power and sexual autonomy engender masculine inferiority and lead to Acrasia's delusion of her own capacity to lead. With the common concepts of a woman whose very emotional and physical wellbeing is at risk due to her deviant behavior, Guyon is completely justified in capturing Acrasia, "bound with adamant chains, for nothing else would keep her safe" (Spenser 165). This final act of caging Acrasia is to make her and her bower into a menagerie. She is a freak of nature, an anomalous woman to serve as an entertainment and a warning to all who look upon her: *See here what is different than us and know that her chains are the consequences of deviation.*

Within Shakespeare's time, a foreign woman like Emilia is something

of a paradox within the eyes of a masculine society; she is to be lusted after and to be won, to be appropriated into the traditional female domestic role in English society. Yet she is also to be feared. Such a woman is something to be captured and brought back to England, a prize token of the cultural other. The act of writing of such foreignness is, on Shakespeare's part, an active attempt to profit from the cultural fascination of exoticness by placing an Amazonian character on display for playgoers. Shakespeare's play *Two Noble Kinsmen* utilizes legends of gendered conquest with its introductory account of Hippolyta, an Amazonian woman, entering in a wedding processional with Athens' king Theseus. This very perception is, in and of itself, influenced by the misogynistic attitudes of the Renaissance period in that it paints Hippolyta, a woman, as the passive recipient of the marital desire of Theseus, a man. This introduction to the play *Two Noble Kinsmen* neglects to mention that, in mythology, Hippolyta is a ruler who is abducted with her sister and brought back to Athens. This act of male conquest against a female-dominated kingdom would perhaps have been approved of at this time, as it brings masculine order to the perceived chaos of a matriarchy. Such opposition of "exotic" feminine power is not an unfamiliar topic in Renaissance literature.

The act of introducing *Two Noble Kinsmen* with a wedding officiated by the god of marriage indicates a profound sense of female commodification. The portrayal of a divine figure watching over the upcoming nuptials of Hippolyta and Theseus implies that this marriage is not only acceptable, but that it and the non-consensual way in which Hippolyta is "won" as a bride are the prototypes of ideal matrimony. If Hippolyta is a symbol of the other, Theseus is the tamer who brings this powerful woman to heel and flaunts her physical variation in his court as a sign of status. She is made into a sideshow to demonstrate Theseus's power to shape a foreign woman with English ideals. This idea harkens back to the perceived danger that foreign women have in their independence; without male guidance and without conforming to the appropriate English ideals of feminine domesticity, women like Hippolyta are bringing themselves toward further danger of spiritual and physical debasement. Theseus, like Sir Guyon, is not a male conqueror but is a rescuer who is helping Hippolyta by holding power over her and thus by putting her "in her proper place." Despite the apparent conformity of Hippolyta and her sister Emilia to English

ideals of femininity, there is always a mistrust of their adherence to such standards because the very nature of women, especially those women from cultures that do not adhere to male-dominated gender roles, is perceived as dangerously carnal. There is the underlying fear that these mighty women, made to perform docility before the court like trained animals performing tricks, will turn upon their captors and destroy them with their feminine debasement.

Whether from willful choice or from an existence centered around emotionality, even the most well-intentioned woman's sexuality has the potential to destroy men, tempting them into the dregs of carnality. This ideology stems from the belief that such women operate in opposition to men, that they are incomplete or lesser forms of men and thus, by their very presence alone, can emasculate their partners. In Renaissance England, Biblically-sanctioned gendered behavior was expected in society and in the family unit: women were to keep house and care for children; men were to engage in community discourse. After all, "[i]n classical thought, folly is frequently associated with a feminized sexuality that is savage and transgressive. Christianity reinforces the connections between folly, sexuality and woman in the Fall myth" (Chakravarti 81). To tip these scales with non-normative behaviors is to commit an abomination against God's natural order of husbands lording over their wives, thus adopting the mantle of freakishness by threatening the social institutions that depended largely on Christianity and the assumption that men pass economic and political power to their sons. These norms are unmet by women such as the Amazonians, who are raised within matriarchal government and military systems. Amazonian women are free from the constraints of the patriarchal women who adapt to misogynistic standards, yet Emilia and Hippolyta are expected to naturally assimilate to this "traditional order."

According to Paromita Chakravarti, "[t]he dichotomies of passion and reason, nature and culture, formlessness and form inflect the male-female binary" in that they perpetuate the "stereotypes of irrational, instinctual and unstable women and rational, civil and balanced men" (80-81). Contemporary notions about friendship rose from Renaissance Humanism, cementing friendship between two men as the most important social relationship, "superseding all other possible human associations, including those connected with family, courtship, romance, marriage,

sexuality, service, fellowship, and politics” but threatened by “the unruliness of heteroerotic desires” (MacFaul 222). Women hindered the perceived perfection of male bonding, especially since Renaissance England was a patriarchal society. Autonomous women were criticized as attempting to erode these social norms with the indicative traits of the freakish female other: hyper-sexuality and hyper-emotionality. Physically, English women were expected to fulfill the role of Mother and Wife. Symbolic of these responsibilities are the breasts—objects of maternal care in the form of nursing and sexual gratification for men. Amazonian women were dually freakified as other; not only did they transcend the cultural gender norms that prevented Renaissance English women from having equal opportunities with their male counterparts, but they also looked physically different than English women. While the breasts were a blazon of the idealized wife and mother, the Amazonian warrior woman may have had darker skin and cut off her right breast to offer her better control of her bow and arrow (Foreman). Physically and culturally, the Amazonian woman as a character evokes intrigue and fear—an image of freakishness for a strictly patriarchal society.

Emilia is brought to Theseus’ court in the freakshow wedding processional of supposedly-tame Amazonian women, yet she does not conform to the English standard of privileging male-to-male friendships. In fact, she goes so far as to state, “true love ‘tween maid and maid may be more in sex dividual” (1.3.81-82). This line expresses gender nonconformity on multiple levels; not only does it outright state that women have the same capacity to form bonds that are equally, if not more, meaningful than the friendships held by men, but it also expresses the potential support of lesbian relationships over heterosexual romance. Emilia is an image of otherness, involved in everything that is dangerous and unusual to Englishmen: physical power in warfare and politics as an Amazonian princess and a lesbian identity deviating from expected female heterosexual submissiveness. She, as a character, is freakified upon the stage—she is written as a foil of Englishwomen to entertain an English audience, yet she is not even performed by a woman since most Renaissance theaters did not hire actresses.

Emilia’s identity within *Two Noble Kinsmen* threatens traditional male privilege in that it implies that men are not needed to form romantic

relationships or friendships, and in fact the presence of men might hinder women from having rewarding friendships and sexual interactions with other women. Emilia expresses a female sexual and emotional independence that questions the advantage of exclusively male friendships, viewing these homogendered masculine connections as being as freakish to her as her Amazonian identity is to Athens (a setting upon which are imposed the cultural norms of Shakespeare's England). As Emilia questions the power of male friendships, her very presence as a woman serves to break apart the quintessential relationship between Arcite and Palamon by invoking sexual desire in these two companions.

According to Kathryn Schwartz, “[a]ccounts of generation define woman as matter, man as spirit” (148). This gendered notion of existence is prevalent in the Renaissance in which women were seen as emotional beings that evoke sentimental fragility and sexual desire in men, while men themselves are perceived as being more spiritual beings—the likes of which could be gravely distracted from such a higher frame of being by the carnality of female nature. This fear comes to life in the text of *Two Noble Kinsmen* when Arcite and Palamon first fall in love with Emilia. Upon seeing her, Palamon exclaims, “Never till now was I in prison, Arcite... Might not a man well lose himself and love her?” (2.2.133-156). Arcite responds likewise by saying, “Now I feel my shackles” (2.2.157). In falling in love with Emilia, the men are confined to the chains of sexual desire that indicate feminine existence rather than enjoying their own mutual friendship. They have become toys for female pleasure and control, taking on the instability of sexual desire that society deems grotesque in men. The men shed the pure aspirations that established them as belonging within a chaste and patriarchal society, delving into the animalistic desires of carnality that were previously freakish to the young men. Although Emilia has no direct control over how these men perceive her, her very nature as a foreign female leads the men's friendship and the characters themselves toward their doom. Her innate bizarreness destroys Palamon and Arcite's friendship, establishing Emilia as a force of freakishness that corrupts what is normal.

With their shared attraction toward Emilia comes Palamon and Arcite's distraction from their plans of happiness, their thoughts that they would live their lives together. While they are in prison, they find comfort in one another's presence—Arcite tells his friend, “Whilst Palamon is with

me, let me perish if I think this is our prison” (2.2.61-62)—but their freedom for male-to-male unity is shattered by their lust for Emilia. Their feelings for her threaten their chaste masculine identity (similar to Acrasia’s victims). Emilia’s presence is foreign and changes the atmosphere of stability around her. Before they encounter Emilia, Palamon and Arcite agree that there is no record of any two humans who have loved each other as much as they do (2.2.113-114), yet after they have both fallen in love with her, Palamon tells Arcite, “You shall not love at all” (2.2.168). Due to the influence of Emilia, a nonconforming female who ignites the flame of earthly desire in the two noblemen, these characters immediately redefine their definitions of “love” from their prototypical standard of male friendship to mere physical attraction. This change in Palamon and Arcite’s perception indicates a Renaissance fear that women and the sexual desire that they incite have the power to cause men to alter or even lose their self-identity; women, especially those like Emilia who are open or nonconforming in their sexuality and gender expression, are not normal. Even putting such women on display as a testament of foreignness—as Emilia is when she is brought to Athens—can evoke the darkness of chaos in those who see her, releasing the inner freakishness of men who are otherwise held in balance by male friendships and chastity.

Initially, the two prisoners of war revel in their captivity, thinking that it will increase their ability to keep themselves pure of the outside world. Of their captivity, Arcite states, “Let’s think this prison holy sanctuary, to keep us from corruption of worse men” (2.2.72-73). The irony of this is that it is *female* corruption that breaks down their friendships and their desire for chastity. Arcite and Palamon’s adoration of Emilia is expressed as a form of idol worship, something unholy, even in their first expressions of love for the woman: “Behold and wonder! By heaven, she is a goddess!” (2.2.132). Sexual desire toward females is portrayed as being artificial in nature: a distraction from true worship and from the true happiness that can traditionally be found exclusively in male-to-male friendships, a sensation leading to the decimation of male values. The truly frightening quality of Emilia’s unusual identity is not that she is a symbol of what is different and otherworldly, but that she encourages a breakdown of social cohesion. She is a freak, but those who love her swiftly devolve into freaks themselves. The death of Arcite and Palamon’s friendship foreshadows the physical death

of Arcite, pointing toward the fulfillment of the fear that foreign women and their deviation from standards of domesticity engender the ultimate destruction of masculine identity.

Emilia is a double outsider. Within this play, there are levels of oddity: Emilia's perception of the exclusivity of male-to-male friendships, the Athenians' interest in and fear of the Amazonian women's status as symbols of alternative gender norms, and the English audience's observation of the play and their perception of Emilia's nonconformity as portrayed by a male actor. Even though she, unlike Acrasia, never actively endeavors to seduce men, her very existence as a female has this result. Her presence goes so far as to result in the accidental death of Arcite and, with it, the death of his potential to complete more noble activities and to reproduce in his lifetime, two standards that would have marked the life of a successful and fulfilled gentleman in Renaissance England and thus would have perpetuated the social norms of the day. The freakishness of her open femininity, in its lack of domesticity, forces her outside of the male-dominated society in which she has been placed; furthermore, her status as a foreigner isolates her within Athenian culture. The audience watching the play understands Emilia as a caricature of otherness, further emphasized by an actor performing her role. Emilia is thus perhaps predestined to hold a semi-villainous role from the very start of *Two Noble Kinsmen*. She is, in spite of herself, a force of chaos in the lives of men. Her life as an autonomous being identifies her as being a commodity to represent the novelty of the exotic Amazonian culture, yet due to her status as a foreign woman, she remains inherently dangerous to the ideals of the masculine society in which she is now forced to reside.

Emilia and Acrasia are two characters, written within the metaphorical freak shows of their texts, which are born from the fears of Renaissance society toward female independence and sexuality. The very concept of such feminine autonomy is a freakish concept in the masculinity of Spenser's and Shakespeare's England. These women are foils for idealized conformity and are written to be observed as freaks by readers. Emilia and Acrasia exist in opposition to the male privilege upon which much of the cultural infrastructure of the country is built. In the examples of Emilia and Acrasia, the reader is exposed to two females who question and/or threaten male power. The lives of these two characters, despite their very

different actions (Acrasia is intentional in her seduction of men, and Emilia has no control over Palamon and Arcite's perception of her), serve to lead toward the same result of the inevitable destruction of male temperance, embodying the freakishness of deviation and catalyzing the inner sinful lust that is the freak within all humans. This demonstrates the cultural fear that foreign women, as individuals who don't conform to traditional femininity, are destructive figures whose very nature undermines social masculine values. In their role as representatives of physical and cultural difference, these women have little to no ability to change this identity.

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