

Heidi Niedfeldt
Theater History
Final – Heidi’s Theater Season
October 3, 2011

The Wonders of Women

While looking at the semester and viewing the plays that we have read, I have become quite interested in the roles that women have been placed into. It seems that many of the plays we covered give women different characteristics. Playwrights used the characters they created in different ways and to emphasize different points or issues within the plays. The perceived role of women within the plays is not the same throughout. Women carry many different roles, and it is important to honor and respect the roles that women have within society. While this may seem like a feminist topic, I’m not trying to make it that way. The season I have created is called, “The Wonders of Women: Learning Lessons from Powerful Roles.” The point is that all women are and should be viewed differently, and their roles become significant in any storyline. There is no “set” role for women, but women are given powerful parts to play.

By looking at an array of different plays, one can see how many different roles there are for women to take. Within this season, the plays that will appear are “Snow in Midsummer” by Guan Hanqing, “Hamlet” by William Shakespeare, “Tartuffe” by Moliere, “Trifles” by Susan Glaspell, “Death of a Salesman” by Arthur Miller, and “Pygmalion” by George Bernard Shaw. I have put them in this specific order to try and mix the tragedies and comedies. There are more sad and solemn plays in this season, but I feel like “Tartuffe” and “Pygmalion” really helps bring in more comedic aspects. I placed “Pygmalion” at the end for audience members to leave the season with some laughs and to make them wonder if Eliza and Professor Higgins really do end up together. It leaves the season with a bit of a mystery.

Within the first play of the season, “Snow in Midsummer,” Guan Hanqing uses Dou E as

an example of a fighter. Men can fight for a cause, but women are also fighters in what they believe in and in the things and people they love. Dou E fights to save her adoptive mother in court. She takes the blame for the murder that took place, even when it wasn't either of the women's faults. Dou E loves Mrs. Cai. Dou E says, "How could I let you be beaten, mother? How could I save you except by dying myself?" ("Volume 1", 452) Dou E is a fighter and self-sacrificer. This character teaches women to fight in what they believe in and to stand up for those they love. Women shouldn't be afraid about showing how strong they can be. Women have strengths.

Within "Hamlet," Shakespeare shows how much of a problem Hamlet has when dealing with women. With his own mother, Hamlet believes women are callous beings, because it seems like she shows no remorse for her husband's death. He shows his feelings by saying, "Mother, you have my father much offended" ("Volume 1", 787). Hamlet also thinks Ophelia is corrupt and works against him. Hamlet says to Ophelia, "God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance" ("Volume 1", 773). Ophelia is actually a character filled with goodness, but Hamlet is blinded by anger and rage because of the murder of his father. In this play, women are portrayed as being people who cannot be trusted, but Ophelia and Gertrude are actually wholesome creatures who are innocent from any crimes. Hamlet attacks the innocent. The women seem to be victims within the play. This play shows us that women are not free from committing sins, but they can be misjudged. Although Ophelia and Gertrude do not know what Hamlet is going through and eventually die in the play, they die because of Hamlet's own issues. These characters teach women to be upfront about their feelings and stay true to themselves.

In "Tartuffe," Moliere gives audience members the impression that women do not have to

be soft-spoken. Within the play, Tartuffe is supposed to be a holy man, but many of the characters know he is not. The characters Dorine and Elmire share their opinions about the man and try to persuade Orgon into believing Tartuffe isn't someone he should trust. Dorine says, "How can a man who looks as wise as you be such a fool" ("Volume 1", 1251). A maid shouldn't speak like this to her employer, but Dorine does, because he needs to know the truth. Orgon's wife, Elmire, also becomes part of a plan to show how wicked Tartuffe really is by showing how easy it is to seduce him, and Orgon can't believe what he sees. He says, "I swear that is the most abominable man!" ("Volume 1", 1279) Moliere teaches us that women have a right to be outspoken. They have a right to tell what they know, to share their opinions, and show how smart they are.

For this production, I would change the setting of "Tartuffe" so that it is in a more contemporary setting. I feel as if the characters are sassy enough and comedic enough to place the characters in present day. The servant Dorine would be great to have as a modern-day servant and friend to Mariane, and Tartuffe could end up being a very naughty priest. It would work for my season, because it would be a good transition. While the play still has the rhyme scheme included, the contemporary feel would make it more relatable and comfortable for the audience to enjoy, especially after watching a Shakespeare play that is set in the actual time period it was written in.

Susan Glaspell wrote "Trifles" to show the problem that was happening with society at the time. She wanted people to realize that women and men needed to be treated as equals. In "Trifles" the women are viewed as having major roles within the home. Men do not think women have any major problems other than problems with housework, and the men are even critical of the actions women do. The county attorney says, "Dirty towels! Not much of a

housekeeper, would you say, ladies?" ("Volume 2", 478) This shows how men even judge the women in their own "professions." Although we do not know how the trial turns out and if Minnie is convicted of the murder, we do see that women stand up for their friends. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters tries to help Minnie by hiding the evidence they find. Glaspell teaches us that women can keep secrets and can form strong friendships. Women share a bond with each other.

In "Death of a Salesman," Linda Loman is a wife who is patient, loyal, and submissive. While her husband Willy is desperate to become successful and get a good job, Linda stays by his side and tries to be a form of strength for the family ("Volume 2", 758). Willy says, "You're my foundation and my support, Linda" ("Volume 2", 763). Although Willy commits suicide by the end of the play, Linda was loyal to her husband. It is not her fault he gave up in the end, and she doesn't understand why he killed himself. She says, "I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy" ("Volume 2", 824). This play would fit well with the season, because it shows how much a woman can love a man. Women are very lovable creatures, and they want to show others how caring they can be.

In "Pygmalion," George Bernard Shaw brings up the problems of class, gender roles, and power ("Volume 2", 404). In this play, Henry Higgins is a professor of phonetics. He takes on a bet to work with a Cockney flower girl and to pass her off as a duchess. The main female character, Eliza Doolittle, is somewhat seen as property in this play, because her father gives her away to Professor Higgins for money. Eliza's father says, "Well, what's a five pound note to you? And what's Eliza to me?" ("Volume 2", 429) This shows that women are subordinate to men, but once Eliza is changed into a proper lady, she stands up for herself. She becomes an independent woman. This play teaches us that women can be confident with themselves, and they do not have to rely on men if they don't want to. Women want to be treated with respect.

Eliza says to Professor Higgins, “I want a little kindness. I know I’m a common ignorant girl, and you a book-learned gentleman; but I’m not dirt under your feet” (“Volume 2”, 460). Women know how they want to be treated, and they don’t have to put up with being treated poorly.

With these plays, we can see that women are very important in learning the issues and aspects of our society. A person should consider watching this season to learn the many different characteristics and roles women can take on the stage and in life. There are many different roles women can play, and the women all become powerful in their own way. Just like in life, no two women are going to be the same, and these plays definitely show us that. The variety of characteristics women can have are shown throughout these plays, and they teach audience members so many important things about life.

Works Cited

- Puchner, Martin, J. Ellen Gainor, and Stanton B. Garner, Jr. *The Norton Anthology of Drama: Volume 1: Antiquity Through The Eighteenth Century*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009. Print.
- Puchner, Martin, J. Ellen Gainor, and Stanton B. Garner, Jr. *The Norton Anthology of Drama: Volume 2: The Nineteenth Century to the Present*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009. Print.