

She-monster in a Male-dominated World

~An Analysis of the Female Status in Moliere's *The Misanthrope*~

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Abstract

Restoration and Eighteenth-century English and French society are well known for its sexual liberty. Sexual-hunting games are spread from the throne, aristocracy, to the commoner. However, in the patriarchy society, male Chauvinism hinders women to pursue for the same liberty. Freud's theory of "castration" explains the male anxiety of feminine power. Female status is always under bullying and obsession of the public opinion. This analysis intends to introduce a particular female character who tries to compete with fops to convert traditional female status in Moliere's *The Misanthrope*. Through the power struggle between the heroine, Celimene, and the fops, it exposes the difficulties a female libertine will encounter in the male-dominating society. William Wycherley's rake-hero in *The Country Wife* provides a comparison for Moliere's female-rake. In the male-dominating society, female libertine with power of writing and sexual charms is considered she-monster and is threatened to be castrated by man.

Keywords: female libertine, Restoration comedy, castration, chauvinism, female status,
she-monster

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Conventional society is a patriarchal world dominated by men. Men own all kinds of privileges, such as education, economic power, and civil rights. Women do not have those advantages. Even when a rich heiress marries to a man, all her money has to be transferred to her husband. “[A] wife [is] both personally and legally subject to her husband. Any property the wife brought to the marriage [become] his.”¹ Harold Weber once argued women’s status through their economic power. He pointed out that, “[m]ost women were psychologically and intellectually unprepared to exercise meaningful control over the money they theoretically possessed, and all such control ended upon marriage, when women lost both their legal and their economic independence.”² The main function of the female in a patriarchal society is merely to be the object of men’s sexual necessity and the mothers of children. When the male are enjoying in the games of sexual-pleasure seeking, the female are asked to keep their virtue and honor carefully, and to be chaste. This sexual double standard has existed in the patriarchal society for a long time, including the period of Restoration and eighteenth century; this sexual double standard could not be abolished in the notorious bawdy societies of England and France³. “Even at the licentious court of Charles II, where both men and women indulged in the generous sexual freedoms initiated by that ‘merry monarch’ who ‘loves fucking much,’ the double standard of sexual morality put women at a distinct disadvantage.”⁴ This fashion of sexual-pleasure seeking and the prejudice toward female libertine can be perceived in most playwrights’ comedies at that time, such as Moliere’s *The Misanthrope*,⁵ William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife*,⁶ George Etherege’s *The Man of Mode*,⁷ William Congreve’s *The Way of the World*⁸ and so on. Looking for sexual-pleasure and playing the games of courtship become the fashion of fops at that time. However, while men openly utter their desire and their love-seeking pleasure, women are prevented from speaking out their sexual needs. Women are forced to stay in the

¹ Jon Lance Bacon. “Wives, Widows, and Writings in Restoration Comedy,” *Studies in English Literature* 31 (1991): 430.

² Harold Weber. *The Restoration Rake-hero: Transformation in Sexual Understanding in Seventeenth Century England*. (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1986) 146.

³ The discussion of the social background is based on Jacqueline Pearson, *The Prostituted Muse: Images of Women & Women Dramatists 1624-1737* (New York: St. Martin, 1988) 70-74.

⁴ Weber 147.

⁵ The version of Moliere’s *The Misanthrope* is translated by Richard Wilbur and selected in *Types of Drama: Plays and Essays*, eds. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burton (Boston: Scott, 1989) 305-30.

⁶ William Wycherley, *The Country Wife, The Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, ed. Scott McMillin. (New York: Norton & Company, 1973) 3-78.

⁷ George Etherege, *The Man of Mode, The Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Comedy*, ed. Scott McMillin. (New York: Norton & Company, 1973) 79-152.

⁸ William Congreve, *The Way of the World, The Comedies of William Congreve*, ed. Eric S. Rump (London: Penguin, 1985) 317-410.

passive position while men are the active ones. This analysis intends to introduce a particular female character who tries to compete with fops to convert traditional female status. The heroine is Celimene in Moliere's *The Misanthrope*. The stratagem she maneuvers to deceive men, the obstacles she encounters in the society and the consequence she has to take under the struggles between herself and men will be discussed in this study.

Before the introduction of the female libertine, the prejudice about women should be defined first. This prejudice has been existed in men's mind for long, that is, the male chauvinism. Even in the licentious era, male chauvinism becomes more magnified. This chauvinism comes from the sense of fear. It seems to be that because men are afraid that women's power and ability might be stronger than men's, men try to ignore women's capability or even to deprive women of their power and ability. The deprivation is corresponding to Freud's idea of "castration." Freud once discussed female development in his paper, "Female Sexuality,"⁹ that "[t]he sexual life of the woman is regularly split up into two phases, the first of which is of a masculine character, whilst only the second is specifically feminine"(255). According to Freud, both the male and the female possess the masculine part and the feminine one. Since they undergo their puberty, they will also undergo through different phases, and the boys become men with masculine character while the girls become women with feminine traits. However, sometimes, the girls' characteristic will turn out to be too masculine-like; thus, as Freud suggested, "castration" which for men is a kind of destruction can be a help for women to create femininity (257). Once women who act contrary to other conventional women and who want to change their position from passive to active, they will be regarded as she-monsters or she-witches because they are different from others. Moreover, their ambitions are not only unacceptable, but also frightening to conventional society. Men try to extinguish or punish those passive women, or, in other words, men try to castrate the women's masculinity. Hence, the female status is always under bullying and obsession of the patriarchal society. For example, the idea of castration can be seen in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*. Female are treated as if they have been "castrated." Therefore, in order to enter this female group to get close to them, Mr. Horner pretended to be "castrated" to be one of them: "Now, may I have, by the reputation of a eunuch, the privileges of one; an be seen in a lady's chamber in a morning as early as her husband; kiss virgins before their parents or lovers; and may be, in short, the *passe partout* of the town" (Wycherley, Act I scene I).

Both the sexual double standard and the suppression of women are clearly shown in the antithetic treatments between the playboy, Mr. Horner, in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and the playgirl, Celimene, in Moliere's *The Misanthrope*. Both characters are representative characters of the sensual world. They are the hunter and the huntress in the games of sexual-pleasure seeking, and both are hunting for lovers. As mentioned in the beginning,

⁹ Sigmund Freud: *Collected Papers Vol. 5* Ed. James Strachey. (New York: Basic Books, 1959) 252-272.

Restoration comedies clearly reflect the fashion of sensual society, and a society manipulated by men. Thus, in most Restoration comedies, women are mere the physical objects of and sexual rewards for men's courtship (Pearson, 42). In those sexual- hunting games, men set various traps to catch their preys, beautiful women. For example, in *The Country Wife*, Mr. Horner pretends to be impotent in order to get intimacy with most women without being suspected by their husbands (Act I scene I). Here, the sexual double standard is obviously exposed, that is, women are asked to keep away from other men in order to keep honor, virtue and chastity, but men needn't obey this custom. Women cannot get too close to men; otherwise, their virtue might be ruined. Men are not asked to be chaste and virtuous. Men can always enjoy their games of sexual-pleasure seeking. Besides, men's dominating power is maintained by society. Husbands totally manipulate their wives. Because Mr. Horner disguises as a eunuch, he can keep close relationship with some women above their husbands' suspicions. In Mr. Horner's mind, this pretense for him is only a weapon in this hunting; "if I can but abuse the husbands, I'll soon disabuse the wives" (Act I scene I). The rake's intention of pleasure-seeking is revealed. That's why those women can be allowed by their husbands to have contact with Mr. Horner. So, Sir Jasper Fidget said to Mr. Horner,

Mr. Horner, your servant; I should be glad to see you at my house. Pray come and dine with me, and play at cards with my wife after dinner; you are fit for women at that game yet, ha, ha!—[Aside.] 'Tis as much a husband's prudence to provide innocent diversion for a wife as to hinder her unlawful pleasures, and he had better employ her than let her employ herself. (Act I scene I)

Conventional women are required to be passive, delicate, tender and helpless, that is, they have to assert their feminine character, and which means they have been "castrated." They have to live under the obligation of obeying their fathers or their husbands. They are not allowed to have their own social lives if they do not have their fathers or husbands' permissions. Even, the only men who can get the permission from those women's husbands to get in touch with those wives have to be their kind, just like Mr. Horner. Mr. Horner has to disguise himself as a castrated man to cast away his masculine character. Since Mr. Horner confesses himself as impotent, he is definitely one of the female group members. For women, their social lives and even their group members have to be chosen by their fathers or husbands. There are no such women who can really enjoy the so-called "sexual liberties." As Weber remarked, "Even though libertine attitudes depended on assumptions that would seem to promise acceptance of female sexuality, women remained unable to enjoy the sexual liberties taken for granted by men. Women after the Restoration, even among the most debauched section of the population, occupy a world of strict sexual limitations" (148).

When the hunter, Mr. Horner, tries to "sneak" into the female "flock" to hunt for his preys, the huntress, Celimene also tries to wield her power in the sexual-pleasure hunting games among the male "flock." Since Celimene is a woman, her lover-hunting conduct

makes her become a “social butterfly,” or even worse, a “she-monster,” and be abandoned by her admirers in the end of the play. Celimene is just like the “sea-monster,” Sirens, whom Odysseus encountered on his home-returning voyage. According to Greek mythology, Sirens are sea-witches or sea-monsters living on an island and use their marvelous voices and songs to enchant sailors passing by the island. Their voices can make those sailors forget everything; and once those sailors are lured into Sirens’ island, their results are death.¹⁰ Celimene’s character in *The Misanthrope* is created as the sea-monster, but she is a “she”-monster. She is always staying in her house at Paris and using her enchantment to fascinate every man. Most beautiful women are considered brainless, but Celimene is beautiful, charming, clever and educated. She knows how to please men and how to manipulate them. The weapon of Sirens is their marvelous voices, and the weapon of Celimene is her “Billet-doux,” love-letters. (Act IV scene III, Line 62) In this play, she writes love-letters to her admirers, such as, Alceste, Clitandre, Oronte, and Acaste, and they are charmed by her words and seduced by her. She manipulates those gentlemen in her “tender notes.” She uses her power of writing to flatter and flirt with someone by chiding others’ faults. For example, she wrote to Clitandre about Viscount that “Our big bumbling friend the Viscount, whose name stand first in your compliant, is hardly a man to my taste; and ever since the day I watched him spend three-quarters of an hour spitting into a well, so as to make circles in the water, I have been unable to think highly of him” (Act V scene IV, Line 33-39); and about Marquess she wrote “As for the little Marquess, who sat squeezing my hand for such a long while yesterday, I find him in all respects the most trifling creature alive; and the only things of value about him are his cape and his sword” (Act V scene IV, Line 41-45). Those gentlemen, like those sailors who lose themselves to Sirens’ voices, lose to Celimene’s beauty and her love-letters. As the result, they also commit self-destruction, that is, they are broken-hearted because none of them can really win her heart. Celimene is like the sea-witch; once men come into contact with her, they cannot get rid of her power (charm). Surly, this female manipulator, the she-monster, cannot be acceptable in a male-dominated society. For example, in one of her notes, she wrote, “How absurd you are to *condemn my lightheartedness in society, and to accuse me of being happiest in the company of others.* Nothing could be more unjust . . .” (Act V scene IV, Line 23-28) These lines obviously disclose that Celimene’s social status is under the pressure of public opinion. These gentlemen not only condemn about her active in the society, but they also accuse her casual skillful power of writing, such as Acaste said, “The lady is so free with pen and ink” (Act V scene IV, Line 20). This idea of women’s power stirs up male anxiety. “The association of women with writings in Restoration comedy betrays a contemporary anxiety regarding feminine self-assertion”; Jon Lance Bacon once manifested “male anxiety” in Restoration comedies by taking Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* as an example, “If women are books, that

¹⁰ J. E. Zimmerman, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*. (Taipei: Bookman, 1988) 243-44.

is, they are books which may write themselves. The form taken by male anxiety, in terms of dramatic action, depends on the legal status of the female characters. To the extent that they lack legal power, women exert personal power as texts which demand and often defeat male exegesis" (427). Celimene learns to write means that she owns legal power. She turns out to be a monster in the male-dominated society. Since a monster's doom is to be executed or extinguished, Celimene is doomed to be punished.

Besides being censured for the abuse of her writing skills, Celimene is also condemned for being overactive in the society. In an ordinary patriarchal society, men always look for women just like the female character, Eliante, in *The Misanthrope*. Eliante is the stereotype of a conventional woman. She is honest, tender and waiting for Alceste to choose her as his love-mate. Philinte also comments that Eliante is the one a man should choose by saying to Alceste: [Eliante has a] honest heart, which cares for you alone, / Would harmonize far better than your own" (Act I scene I, Line 245-46). Men will want the sort of women whom they can control and manipulate, but they will not need any she-monsters to manipulate themselves. However, Moliere did create such an unconventional woman, a so-called she-monster. In *The Misanthrope* readers encounter a different woman, Celimene. The appearance of Eliante is an obvious contrast to Celimene. Celimene is not any conventional passive and helpless woman; she is a clever, beautiful and sociable huntress in those games of lover-hunting. Celimene is not like other conventional women who are forbidden to have their social life, and she does not allow herself to be controlled by man. When Celimene was blamed for "lightheartedness in society" and "being happiest in the company of others," she would not endure to be restricted. (Act V scene IV, Line 23) For Celimene, there is "Nothing could be more unjust;" and she order him to "come to [her] instantly and beg pardon for saying such a thing," or "[she] shall never forgive [him] as long as [she] live. . ." (Act V scene IV, Line 23-28) Celimene clearly declares that although she was condemned to be too active in the society, she would not endure to be restricted. Celimene is not like Eliante who is waiting for her hunter; she sets her own traps to lure her preys. She has thoroughly subverted the conventional female status. She changes her status from a passive woman into an active heroine. She is the one who chooses, not the one who is chosen. Her dominating position is shown from the relationship between her and her admirers. Celimene has overturned the conventional male-female relationship. For example, the relationship between Alceste and Eliante is conventional. Eliante represents the passive female position. She is fond of Alceste, but she has to wait for the male character's choice. Eliante confesses to one of her friends that "if . . . [Alceste] meets with a rebuff—If Celimene should grant some rival's suit—I'd gladly play the role of substitute" (Act IV Scene I, Line 65-8). Alceste is the dominator in their relationship. However, Celimene alters the relationship between her and her admirers. Celimene is the active one who chooses her lovers instead of waiting for men to pick her up. So, Celimene is the manipulator in the love game. None of the male characters can control her. Even, the hero, Alceste who cannot endure Celimene to have so

many admirers has to beg her to send them away: “What! Shall we never be alone at all? You’re always ready to receive a call, / And you can’t bear, for ten ticks of the clock, / Nor to keep open house for all who knock”(Act II scene III Line 1-4). However, Celimene does not care about his demand. Those men’s request of asking Celimene to make her decision to choose one of them in the second act shows that Celimene is the one who owns power. She can decide whether to do or not to do, and she refuses to make any choices. She would never change herself for others’ sakes. Those gentlemen cannot do anything except follow her arrangement. Alceste himself also admits that, “I’m weak; for all her falsity, / That woman knows the art of pleasing me, / And though I never cease complaining of her, / I swear I cannot manage not to love her. / Her charm outweighs her faults” (Act I scene I, Line 229-233). He said that he is “deluded” and “blind”(Act III scene I, Line 51). He is infatuated with Celimene’s magic power: “Yes, yes, I went insane the day I fell / A victim to your black and fatal spell, / Thinking to meet with some sincerity / Among the treacherous charms that beckoned me”(Act IV scene III, Line 41-44). She is like the Sirens who know how to use the enchantment to bewitch men. She is the good example of a self-confident liberal woman who decides her own life, and enjoys her games in a sensual world. While most women are afraid to be trapped in men’s hunting games, and to be ruined by losing their chastity and honor, Celimene is having fun in men’s courtship and the love-hunting games.

Celimene’s conduct is certain kind of heresy in a traditional society, and she is the she-monster among women. In this play, Celimene creates her own society, her own kingdom. Celimene does not want to be a sexual tool or reward of men’s world of courtship; on the contrary, men become the pawns of her courtship games. Celimene in *The Misanthrope* changes this male-dominating society into a female autonomous society. Instead of men, she is the one who enjoys in the sexual-hunting game to be surrounded by men. She is the one who possesses the dominating power; she lures men by her sexual attraction and pleases them by her “billet-doux.” However, this over-turned female position terrifies most traditional men. Therefore, Celimene gains her ill reputation, and she is told that “There was no tendency to praise / Your light behavior and your dashing ways. / The quantity of gentlemen you see / And your by now notorious coquetry / Were both so vehemently criticized / By everyone, . . .” (Act III Scene V, Line 11-16) Men, in the patriarchal society, such as the one in *The Country wife*, are used to be the dominators who control women and the situations of sexual-hunting games. The ideal women that most men want are women like Eliante. They want some passive and chaste women who can be controlled by them. They do not want some active women to manipulate them. Thus, the result of Celimene in the end of the play is predicable. She is doomed to be punished because she lives in a male-dominating world. Her two weapons, writing skills and sexual charms, will be disarmed. As Moliere said through his character, Pinchwife, in *The Country Wife*, wives and the ability of writings cannot be safe unless they are stored “in the Closets under Lock and Key.” (Act V Scene II) Women control the power of writing challenges

male authority. Therefore, this ability shall be “castrate.” In *The Misanthrope*, once gentlemen found out that Celimene used “Billet-doux” to cheat them, they turned their back on her. They disintegrated Celimene’s power. Identically, the hero, Alceste also tries to purify Celimene’s falsity. When he praises her that “Her charm outweighs her faults,” he clearly expresses his thought: “I can but aim to cleanse her spirit in my love’s pure flame” (Act I Scene I, Line 233-234). Celimene also protests against Alceste “You show your love by castigating me” (Act II Scene I, Line 80). Celimene is such an unconventional female character; in the eyes of modern critics, she is a liberal feminist in eighteenth century, but in the eyes of people in the eighteenth century, she is a monster. Both Celimene and Mr. Horner live happily in the sensual world; however, the sexual double standard in the patriarchal society cannot accept a woman like her. When Mr. Horner’s disguise of a eunuch is exposed, he is not punished or abandoned. His secret lovers, such as Margery Pinchwife, Lady Fidget and Mrs. Squeamish, are soon torn away from him by their husbands. For Mr. Horner, it just means that his scheme is failed and he has to scheme another trap to catch his preys. However, when Celimene is found out that she writes different love-letters to different admirers, and she cheats all of them, her pleasure-hunting game is over. There is no more hunting game for her because she is abandoned and detested by everyone. And even Alceste casts her away: “I detest you now. I could excuse / Everything else, but since you thus refuse / To love me wholly, as a wife should do, / And see the world in me, as I in you, / Go! I reject you hand, and disenthral / My heart from your enchantment, once for all” (Act V Scene VII, Line 47-52). The different treatments of Celimene and Mr. Horner are quite unfair. It is exactly an evidence of male chauvinism, and sexual double standard. Additionally, the happy ending of the ideal conventional woman, Eliante, makes an extreme contrast to Celimene’s punishment. It seems to make an example of Celimene that a woman has to behave well and properly if she intends to possess a good life. A good life for a woman means to marry a good husband and have children, that is, her female functions are fulfilled. Eliante, an honest, passive and tender woman, gets her reward by marrying Philinte, a man who loves her deeply. Celimene, on the contrary, is punished and abandoned by men because she tries to alter her female status. Her deed of trying to manipulate men in a male –dominating society makes her grotesquely like a monster. Thus, men’s treatment of a monster is either to kill her or to keep away from her. In the mythology of Sirens, sailors may put some wax on their ears to prevent from hearing Sirens’ voices or they may choose to sail by another way. In *The Misanthrope*, men decide to abandon Celimene as their punishment for her.

Conventional female qualities are virtue, chastity, and passivity, and the males’ are regarded as the manipulator of women and the society. Men can be liberal and libidinous as Mr. Horner, but women cannot be active and powerful like Celimene. Even though sexual-pleasure seeking is the fashion for the time of Restoration and eighteenth century, it is just a privilege for the male. If a woman who choose to be different and to imitate men, she

will simply be regarded as a she-monster. As Freud observed, women with masculine character will be castrated. Female libertines' result will just be the same as Celimene's, that is, self-destruction. The female character, Celimene, in *The Misanthrope* conveys a strong male prejudice, that is neither a monster nor a female manipulator can be accepted by or be survived in the male-dominating society.

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男權世界中的女妖

~分析莫里哀的厭世人劇中的女性地位~

郭惠萍

<摘要>

復辟時期與十八世紀的英國與法國社會一向以其性自由開放聞名，愛情遊戲蔓延自王室、貴族到平民百姓。然而，在父權社會底下，男性沙文主義阻礙女性去追求同等自由。佛洛伊得的閹割焦慮解釋了男性對女權的恐懼。女性的地位一直處於被動與受壓抑。本篇分析將介紹劇作家莫里哀的厭世人一劇中特別的女主角，在傳統社會中她試著與男性對抗來改變自己的社會地位卻將在男性極權的社會中遭遇困難。另一位劇作家威廉衛屈利的流氓英雄也將與莫里哀的女主角作一比較。在傳統由男性掌握的社會下擁有能力的女權份子將被視為女妖，也將面臨被消滅的命運。