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Visual Culture

Ms. Wright

November 6, 2015

How Placement on a Pedestal Camouflages the Patriarchal Agenda

A recurring theme in the history of man is a man's need to be the most powerful, especially over women. Even in complimenting women, men exercise patriarchal dominancy. In the style of female fragmentation of the blazon, male characters objectifying women by praising their aesthetics seek to capture any power gap set by a powerful female character. By breaking the woman down into pieces of the whole, she is concurrently raised onto a pedestal as an object of adoration and torn down to an inferior individual.

In *The Rape of Lucrece*, Lucrece stands victim to the praises of her husband Collatine. Tarquin's lust for Lucrece originates from Collatine's accounts of her beauty, which defines her fate. Collatine describes Lucrece with the blazon, illustrating parts of her whole and transforming her to an inhuman object of affection. He describes her face saying, "Within whose face Beauty and Virtue strived / ... When Virtue bragged, Beauty would blush for shame," (Shakespeare, 52 & 54) her eyes "like two marigolds had sheathed their light, / And canopied in darkness sweetly lay," (Shakespeare, 397-8) and her hair "like golden threads." (Shakespeare, 400) Collatine uses the form of the blazon as an art of praise to his wife to describe to others his good fortune of his wife's beauty. Coming from a place of love and adoration, he seeks not to bring her misfortune but rather believes he does her a service by building up her status and worth. However, when he speaks such lines as, "Her azure veins, her alabaster skin, / Her coral lips, her snow-white dimpled chin," (Shakespeare, 419-20) Collatine dismantles her humanity and placing her on a

pedestal of praise as merely an object rather than a living being. This dismemberment opens the door for Tarquin to seek to conquer Lucrece because he hears from Collatine that Lucrece is singularly an object of high worth to possess and win. Collatine placing Lucrece on a pedestal puts her on display for any man to seek to enjoy her perfection as well. Shakespeare writes, “Now thinks he that her husband’s shallow tongue, / The niggard prodigal that praised her so, / In that high task hath done her beauty wrong.” (Shakespeare, 78-80) Tarquin proclaims in these lines Collatine’s short-comings in describing Lucrece’s beauty. Concurrently, he admonishes his praise of Lucrece and indicates the hubris beneath the praise of his wife’s beauty. Collatine’s prideful boasting, or “heraldry,” of her beauty as his own “treasure” (Shakespeare, 280) converts his wife to a possession, an object exposed before the eyes of other men. When transformed to an object of adoration on display by Collatine, even her marital status cannot protect her from the dangerous eyes of other suitors, and this determines her fate.

Collatine’s remarks on his wife’s beauty invite Tarquin to view her as an object and a prize. Seeing Lucrece in the night, Tarquin states, “Desire my pilot is, beauty my prize; / Then who fears sinking where such treasure lies?” (Shakespeare, 279-80) As noted, Tarquin’s view of Lucrece is that of her as a “prize” and “treasure” rather than as another’s wife. Consequently, Tarquin sees no foul in plotting to rape Lucrece because she is not a human being but rather an object of lust and admiration. No longer a respectable, whole human being, she has a solidified fate without humanity or respectability. In Collatine’s well-intended praise and pride of his wife’s beauty, he invites the solidification of her terrible fate and damnation. Raising a woman onto a pedestal takes the power to determine her fate away from her. In this case, the two men determine Lucrece’s destiny because she is merely a deconstructed object being worshipped for her aesthetics, and an inhuman object has no control over its future and fate. In *Diana Described*:

Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme, Nancy Vickers forms her argument around examples where men have used the blazon to enforce power over otherwise more powerful women. Vickers explains, “Desire directed in vain at a forbidden, distant goddess is soon sublimated desire that spends itself in a song. That song is... the celebration and the violation of that goddess: it would re-produce her vulnerability... to a (male) reader who will... become yet another Actaeon.” (Vickers, 274) In other words, desire of a woman and praise of her perfections is not only a “celebration” her but a “violation” of that woman. In celebration, Collatine takes pride in the beauty of Lucrece. In violation, Collatine lends, or “re-produces,” his wife to Tarquin, lending her form to another man. Respectively, Shakespeare reproduces “Petrarch’s particularizing mode of figuring that body, the product of a male-viewer/female-object exchange” (Vickers, 277) through the Collatine/Lucrece relation. If this over-praise of the female form follows with every man and no individual can bring the object down from the pedestal, the female’s fate will remain as terribly set the men can devise.

In the film *The Philadelphia Story*, the main character Tracey Lord struggles to pick the perfect man among adoring suitors. One common factor among all three men is the implication of Tracey as a goddess or a statue. These connections illustrate her as flawless and someone to be worshipped, as well as inhuman, cold, and emotionless. Her reputation preceding her, Tracey finds difficulty finding love among such adoration. The three suitors who praise her so include her fiancé, her ex-husband, and the reporter sent to cover the story of the wedding for a gossip magazine. The reporter and fiancé pine for her affection by praising her beauty, believing that glorification will win her love. However, Tracey detests such remarks because she recognizes the dehumanization done unto her by such statements. By placing her on a pedestal, both the reporter and her fiancé take away her dignity and power as an individual. Her husband-to-be George

Kittredge remarks, "You're like some marvelous, distant, well, queen, I guess. ..There's a kind of beautiful purity about you, Tracy, like, like a statue...It's what I first worshipped you for from afar." (*The Philadelphia Story*) Though meant as a compliment and a remark of his love for her, Tracey wishes he did not see her as a "queen" or "statue" but rather as a normal person. She responds pleadingly, "I don't want to be worshipped. I want to be loved." (*The Philadelphia Story*) This dialogue proves that sentiments of worship meant to display love will actually damage the woman described. Regard of Tracey as such a goddess leads her to the predicament of the film, the multiple suitors vying for her love.

Introduced to a household where Tracey Lord is worshipped so, the reporter Macaulay Connor views her in the same respect. Being introduced to her as a golden goddess, Connor develops an affection for the bride-to-be and attempts to win her love from Kittredge on the night before the wedding. The reporter expresses to her sentiments of awe and worship intertwined with perspective of her as a human being. When Tracey asks if she seems made of bronze, Macaulay responds saying, "No, you're made out of flesh and blood... You're the golden girl, Tracey. Full of life and warmth and delight." (*The Philadelphia Story*) In this same response, he refers to her as "flesh and blood" as well as "the golden girl." Though he refutes her being made of bronze, he does not falter to make her out as made of gold. Gold may not attribute her to a statue as would bronze, but any metal cannot make up a human being, as she wishes to be seen. However, with his description of her as "flesh and blood" and "full of life," Macaulay Connor symbolizes a temptation to separate from George Kittredge, the man who entirely illustrates Tracey as a statue or goddess. Tracey seemingly finds the love she seeks, someone who sees her as an equal individual and human being worthy of respect. Despite this, Connor proves the incorrect choice,

as she later decides, because he initially and continually places her on a pedestal with her described perfection.

With these two suitors, Kittredge and Connor, seeing Tracey Lord as inhuman and an object of worship, neither can win her love, despite their greatest efforts. In Vickers' *Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme*, speaking of encounter of a man and woman of similar status, she writes, "Perceiving that image is... prohibited: such a transgression violates proscription imposed on powerless humans in their relation to powerful divinities. Similarly, such a transgression violates proscriptions imposed upon powerless men... in relation to powerful women." (Vickers, 273) When the woman stands as the divine, such as a goddess, the man must close and surpass the power inequality. In *The Philadelphia Story*, Kittredge and Connor, noticing the divinity of the "goddess" Tracey Lord, seek to overcome her power through glorification of her female beauty. Deconstructed from a female human being to a female form, their objectification rests their only tool to win over the object of their affection. To win the prize, they must prove more powerful than the "goddess." Both men place Tracey on a pedestal to prove their power and masculinity while facing such a strong, female individual.

The third suitor in the film, Tracey Lord's first husband C.K. Dexter Haven proves the only man to see past her built-up perfection and brings her down from the pedestal. He indeed describes her repeatedly as a goddess; however, he makes these statements in irony. At resolution, Tracey realizes that among the jokes and frank remarks in their conversations, Dexter stands as the only man who treats her as a human being rather than a goddess. He only refers to her as a goddess as a joke, never seriously; thus, Dexter never places Tracey on a pedestal. He treats her as an equal and a true human being rather than an object of adoration. Unfortunately for the character of Lucrece in Shakespeare's poem, no third suitor stands as an option. Her

husband purely sets her on a pedestal, forming her as inhuman perfection to be yearned for by other men. Tarquin reacts to her husband's illustration and further damages her fate. After the action of both Collatine and Tarquin, Lucrece remains with a devastated reputation and no third party to perform restoration. Tracey Lord, after ruining her reputation after a night with the reporter and losing her engagement, is rescued by C.K. Dexter Haven, who saves her reputation by replacing the groom on the wedding day. Having no third suitor after having her image inflated by her husband Collatine and her reputation and fate demolished by Tarquin, Lucrece has no final option and is driven to take her life. The inclusion or exclusion of the third suitor defines the story as a comedy or tragedy, literally a life and death difference.

Bridging between Renaissance tragedy and classic Hollywood romantic comedy, the dangers of patriarchy on female power and fate have persisted through all ages of civilization. Inherent in distinct and diverse cultures, male assertion of dominance has determined the fates of their female counterparts historically. To counter this persistence of ancient patriarchy, women must not accept belittling by men through fragmenting compliments on their appearance. The objectification of female beauty in the style of the blazon fragments a woman from a whole, powerful controller of her own destiny to a dependent follower behind conquering men. Countering patriarchal domination includes rejection of the blazon and assertion of female power behind her own destiny.

Works Cited

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