

A Feminist Perspective for “Ind Aff” and Oleanna.

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Though I have page and line numbers, I don't know the editions I got them from. Sorry for that. I've developed an interesting angle on “Ind Aff” and Oleanna nonetheless.

The protagonists in “Ind Aff” and Oleanna struggle against men with power who wish to control them, in both pieces the archetype being the mid-forties college professor who offers academic favoritism. After the narrator of “Ind Aff” leaves her teacher, he “[does] his best to have [her] thesis refused” out of spite (Weldon 158), and in the same way, John of Oleanna offers an A grade “if you come back and meet with me,” saying “I like you” and that “we won't tell anybody” (Manet 1380). Both abuse their power to manipulate women, and seeing that these are contemporary writings (1988 and 1992), they address the remaining, insidious counter to women's rights, which is bias and coercion by people in positions of authority.

Both Carol and the unnamed narrator of “Ind Aff” connect themselves to a larger social movement; for Carol, it is for the rights of women and students, and for Peter's companion, it is the ills of patriotism as applied to their romantic relationship, “inordinate affection” being the very title. The latter compares herself to Gavrilo Princip, assassin of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, an event that may be linked to the start of World War I. She concludes that her relationship with her professor was “as silly and sad as Princip . . . with his feverish mind . . . and his inordinate affection for his country . . . firing — one, two three shots,” as though he would have “come to his senses,” like she did about her love for her professor, if he would have reflected longer (Weldon 158). This is a mental coming-of-age on her part, just as Carol sees

that John “[loves] the power” (Manet 1388) and “[believes] in nothing at all” (1393), undermining her fellow students, whom she states “overcame prejudices . . . and endured humiliations I pray that you and those you love will never encounter. (Pause) To gain admittance here” (1394). For this all to be so that John can “play the Patriarch in [his] class. To grant this. To deny that” (1388) is unbearable to her.

The two pieces are uplifting, in that the women have an awakening in which they reject the power of their professors, but at the same time are depressing for the loss that goes with growth. The lady in Sarajevo decides that “in a world . . . full of young men, unslaughtered,” she should not be with “this man with thinning hair,” particularly after noticing that she “had become used to his complaining” and continued to say “I love you” as a reflex rather than her feelings (Weldon 155, 157). In ending the relationship, she loses his good graces in “supervising [her] thesis” for classical history (153). More importantly, just earlier she “adored him” and “loved to be seen with him” (155), so what she loses more is the ideal of a “professor-student romance” (154) to guide and direct her.

Carol visits John's office with the ideal of being taught something important which she does not know, but is shocked to find that her professor takes no stake in the subject, saying that “it's just a course, it's just a book” (Manet 1375), as if he views higher education as mere busywork. He goes on to say that “the tests, you see, which you encounter, in school, in college, in life, were designed, in the most part, for idiots. By idiots,” that they are “nonsense” (1379). When she challenges him later, he brushes it off by saying “I understand. You're hurt. You're angry. Yes. I think your anger is betraying you” (1388). Here, he is assuming her complaints have no rational bias, but just stem from blinding emotions and a taste for vengeance. This condescending attitude represents a systemic treatment of women as inferior to men, as though they lack logic and are driven only by instinct. John confirms his chauvinistic leanings: when

Carol directly addresses it by asking, “You think I am a frightened, repressed, confused, I don't know, abandoned young thing of some doubtful sexuality, who wants, power and revenge. (Pause) Don't you?,” he answers, “Yes, I do” (1394). This same mindset has justified centuries of subjugation by men, in voting, marriage, government, property rights, and the workforce, and the women's movement is what Carol acts on when she announces, “I speak, yes, not for myself. But for the group; for those who suffer what I suffer” (1393). She comes in thinking that John's lessons have merit and the problem is “I'm stupid. And I'll never learn” (1375), but learns that he “[says] that higher education is a joke” and “[treats] it as such” (1388), which unfortunately disillusioned her belief in the academic system (1375).

Both Peter and John are patronizing toward women; Peter says that his student has “a good mind but not a first-class mind” (Weldon 153), and John responds to Carol's questions as though he is consoling a crying child: “Sshhhhh . . . let it go. (Pause) Just let it go. (Pause) Just let it go. It's all right” (Mamet 1383). In the same vein of disrespect, John uses gender biased language, calling the tenure committee “Good Men and True” despite it being men and women (1388), and philosophizing, “but if he does not learn . . . then why is he in college?” (1383) when referring to the generic student.

Despite John and Peter being older and having more life experience, in the end they both degenerate into emotional responses and immaturity, while their students become more wise and strong. Peter's student realizes the superficiality in her infatuation, but conversely recalls that her teacher “was spiteful, as it happened, and did his best to have my thesis refused,” yet she appeals and wins (Weldon 158). This appears to be his desperate attempt to regain the father-like authority he had as the object of her affection and supervisor of her thesis. And while Carol realizes that John is “vile” and “exploitative” (Mamet 1388), going on to champion the women and students that he oppresses (1393), he resorts to holding her down to keep her from leaving

(1390). When she corrects his language and challenges him on the behavior, the best he can do is to beat her, call her a “vicious little bitch,” and prepare to smash a chair over her head (1398).

Score one for the women.

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