

## Female Responses to the Gender Gap

A 1930's ad for a Lysol product includes a photo of a young woman on the lap of her husband; below the photo, in her testimonial, she declares, "Oh, the joy of finding Tom's love and close companionship once more!" Another ad, for cigarettes, shows a beautiful young woman, eyes heavy with mascara, who stares seductively and longingly in the face of a handsome young man as he smokes a cigarette. Beneath the photo is the caption, "Blow in her face and she'll follow you anywhere" (Ads from the 1930's). A 1970's ad for another Lysol product is a snapshot of three men lounging in front of a television, engulfed in a cloud of cigarette smoke. Meanwhile, the woman standing to the side of the room, sprays Lysol to show its power to control odors (1972 Lysol Disinfectant Ad). These ads, run at about the same time the following poems were published, provide a clear commentary on the roles of women, i.e., what is expected of them, as well as the existence of a different expectation for men. Interestingly, these two roles – that of seductress and that of house maid – and the double standard for men are precisely the issues confronted by the female speakers in "A Certain Lady" by Dorothy Parker and "Paper Matches" by Paulette Jiles. These poets present speakers in different contexts, both of whom disdain their prescribed roles, but because of differences in age and maturity, they perceive and react to their assigned roles very distinctly. Both speakers rebel, but the more experienced one controls the situation in order to achieve vengeance, whereas the younger one is controlled by external pressures and left to suffer internal rage. The poems converge again, ultimately, because the speakers' rebellion is never made known to the men in either situation; thus, the status quo is left unaltered.

In "A Certain Lady," the speaker is a mature woman who is in a physical relationship

in which she is emotionally unfulfilled. Throughout the poem, she speaks to her lover and addresses him as “my love” (23). She paints her mouth for him, traces his brows “with tutored finger-tips,” and drinks in his adoring words while gazing at him “rapturous-eyed” (2-5). Her actions and expressions are seductive but full of pretense. The tilting of her head (1) indicates a feigning of interest in what he says, just as marveling with “rapturous” eyes (6) conveys feigning adoration. At the same time, he “rehearses” his “list of loves” (5) to her, as if on a stage, pretending. Even the alliteration in “list of loves” seems to cheapen his words – as if he’s reading from a script or something more meaningless, like a laundry list. He is also engaged in pretense, but she is aware of his façade, or her heart would not have died a “thousand little deaths” (8). He, however, is blind to her pretense, and she knows it. He laughs at her laughs, unaware of the deaths of her heart (7-8), and as she says about him, “. . . you believe . . . that I am gay as morning, light as snow” (9-10). Furthermore, she says about herself, “. . . so well I know my part” and “all the straining things within my heart you’ll never know” (9, 11-2). She may be hurt by his insincerity, but she seems to gain some satisfaction from also being insincere, a theme which continues throughout the poem.

Dorothy Parker’s speaker knows her role as a female in an intimate relationship – to be seductive and adoring – and accepts it, at least as far as her lover knows. Even so, she recognizes her own free will and perceives herself as in control of the relationship. She says “I can smile . . .” (1), “I can laugh . . .” (6, 13), “I can kiss . . .” (22), and she chooses, not only to keep him satisfied in the relationship throughout this first stanza but to devise a plan of reaction which will unfold throughout the second stanza.

In “Paper Matches,” the speaker is much younger, less experienced, and more naïve than in “A Certain Lady.” This speaker is a girl, noted in line 8 by “being small.” The context is not that of intimate moments shared by lovers, as in “A Certain Lady,” this context is that of a family in which the speaker is accompanied by aunts and uncles, gathered in two separate areas (1, 3-4), unlike “A Certain Lady” in which the lovers are together. The events in “Paper Matches” seem to transpire between meals, as dishes are being done in line 1, and supper is being served in line 14. The females gather inside the house to wash dishes (1, 3), while the men are outside on the lawn, spraying each other with water from the “garden

hose” (2-4). The word “while” in line 1 as well as the speaker’s question, “Why are we in here . . . and they are out there” (3, 4) convey a clear contrast between the groups and their assigned roles. The females are concerned with obligation, while the males are engaged in folly. The women, however, don’t seem to be aware of the free will which is apparent to the speaker in “A Certain Lady.” These ladies don’t recognize their ability to decline the chore or to ask the men to do it. Accordingly, there is no use of the word *can* here – as was the case in “A Certain Lady.” This seems to imply that these women lack a conscious choice or are so entrenched in their role that they don’t realize there is a choice. This is a vivid contrast to the female lover who, even in 1937, clearly recognizes her choice to comply or rebel.

In “Paper Matches,” only the young girl seems to identify a contrast between the gender groups and the possibility of doing differently. She is the only one who speaks up and questions their being in the kitchen (3-4). Neither “Aunt Hetty, the shrivelled-up one” (6) nor any of the other aunts questions the disparity of roles – the unfairness of women working inside while men play outside. The men, like the male in “A Certain Lady,” seem to be oblivious too, never thinking that they could help out or questioning their contrasting roles.

When the young niece questions her aunts, who, because they are older (6), should be wiser, she gets none of the experienced input or cunning ideas that would seem to come from the speaker in “A Certain Lady.” Even in the first stanza of Dorothy Parker’s poem, it is obvious that the female lover is fully aware of what she “can” do for him (1, 6) but acts as she does as a means of retaliation against the norm – emphasized by the repeated lines “You’ll never know” (12, 24). But Aunt Hetty is the one who “doesn’t know” in “Paper Matches.” “That’s the way it is,” (5) she says, not embracing any move toward change or retaliation. Perhaps she is too tired and old to fight the gender gap, or perhaps she just doesn’t have a logical answer for her niece, but certainly, she doesn’t perceive herself or women, in general, to be in control of this choice. If she thought they had any option or control, she would suggest that her niece go outside and take part in the fun, as Dorothy Parker’s speaker takes part in the game her lover plays within their relationship.

In “A Certain Lady,” the double standard comes into focus, in the second stanza, as

he tells her of his “fresh adventurings – of ladies delicately indiscreet, of lingering hands, and gently whispered things” and “sagas of” his “late delights” (14-6, 18). In addition to pleasing him with her looks, laughs, and movements, she is also to accept his many affairs, i.e., “adventurings” (14). He is, at least from his viewpoint, entitled to these affairs, or he would not be telling her of them. While he tells her of his indiscretions, he is pleased with her – that she listens – and wants her to remain “marveling, gay, and true” (19). This is clearly a double standard; he can openly search for “novelty” and “stray” (21), but she is expected to be “true” (19). Note, here, that she says, “And when . . . you stray” (21); thus, his infidelity is a given. It is not a matter of *if* but *when*. This would, to most, be blatant disrespect and disregard for the partner. Because these violations are of trust in intimacy – where one is most vulnerable – these violations seem more hurtful than the disregard for equality which occurs in “Paper Matches.” The expectations of this male lover seem to be more than any grown woman could tolerate, no matter how well she knows her part or how long she has been playing his game (9). It is, then, no surprise that, at some point, though kissing him “blithely” as he is about to undertake another adventure (14, 22), she begins her own adventuring (23). If it is permissible for him to have affairs, so it is for her. She uses the free will and control she embraces throughout the poem, absent in “Paper Matches”, in order to balance the double standard, and maintains that control by keeping her actions secret (24).

Interestingly, in centuries prior to “A Certain Lady,” during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, women commonly cheated on their husbands and lovers, a practice referred to as cuckolding. This was a way in which women made men appear as fools. In literary works such as Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, male characters are tortured with the idea of being cuckolded (cheated on) in the future or ridiculed for having been cuckolded in the past. By cuckolding her lover, the speaker in “A Certain Lady” rebels against the norm of society in the 1930’s and gets “the last laugh” – a sort of revenge. Unlike we will see in “Paper Matches,” this speaker, though outwardly maintaining her role, finally takes action and rebels against it.

Although the young speaker in “Paper Matches” experiences a less hurtful grade of inequality, it is to her inexperienced and uncalloused mind, a great violation indeed – the

unequal expectations of domesticity of women over men. She fully perceives the injustice of the double standard, noted by her question in lines 3-4, and she also sees that women lack, or have not accepted, the power to address it. This is indicated by her extreme anger – “the rages that small animals have, being small, being animal” (7, 8). She is furious! Being animal and being small brings to mind a sense of helplessness in the face of danger or perhaps in being cornered – under the control of another (7-8). Her lack of control is further highlighted when the young girl, in passive voice, says, “Written on me was a message” (9), and the message written is “At Your Service” (10). In other words, someone else has done this to her – stamped her with this mark of servitude. The poet uses a simile here, “like a book of paper matches” (10-1) to indicate how powerless and insignificant the speaker is – no more capable or important than a mere book of complimentary bar matches (11).

“At Your Service” (10) is an ideology that seems to be ingrained in or stamped on females as a gender. Perhaps, in the speaker’s case, it was stamped on her by her aunts who are unaware, telling her this is just the way things are (5), or perhaps, because she is female, she was born into the world with the message printed on her forehead, or maybe even on her soul. This printed message, this simile, is a contrast to Jiles’ metaphor of the paper match and the speaker’s anger at being violated and controlled. The message on the book of matches is one of compliance, but matches are volatile and strong; they can ignite! This certainly isn’t the “cool” and calculated response of Dorothy Parker’s experienced speaker who only allows her lover to think she is “At His Service,” in order to maintain control and achieve vengeance.

Ultimately, the young speaker conforms to expectation, but internally, she rails against it. In line 13, she emerges from the kitchen bringing supper. While she doesn’t retaliate in a physical way, through external action, she is “on fire” (14). The day’s realization in the kitchen has caused her to ignite. The flame of a struck match stands for her anger, and when she comes bearing dinner (13), her head is on fire (14); without doubt, she is angry! She is angry not just because of what she has to do and how she has to act, but she is angry that all females have to do so. She says, “One by one we were taken out and struck” (11-12). This line can be interpreted in a couple of ways, but none is positive. For example, females,

like matches in a book, are used by others – one by one until there is no more fire in them – until they are burned out – something which happens rather quickly. Or these lines may refer to being “struck” in a more literal sense. That is, in being pushed into unfair roles, females are abused, physically or emotionally. Nevertheless, “we come bearing supper, our heads on fire” (13-14); despite the unequal treatment, women (we) continue to do as expected and continue to be angry in response. The anger remains, in our heads (14), as it does for the young speaker here. Her physical reaction to the gender gap is one of conformity, but her mental reaction is one of rebellion, whereas the more experienced speaker in these poems remains calm, pretending to accept her role in order to physically act in opposition to it.

The more mature speaker in “A Certain Lady” fulfills her relational obligation through sweet pretense, and this is emphasized by the form of the poem – lines of iambic pentameter with alternating rhyme. This creates a structured, rhythmic feel to the poem, lending to its being read aloud or to being performed, and that is essentially what the speaker is doing here – performing to please her lover. This idea of performance and pretense is enhanced by instances of alliteration as in “tutored finger –tips” (4), “list of loves” (5), “deaths my heart has died” (8), “laugh and listen” (13), and “sing me sagas” (18), as well as the assonance of “eyes of nights” in line 20. These sounds are seductive and easily carried on a whisper, giving the poem a singsong, floating quality. The one violation of iambic pentameter in the poem comes in the repeated line “You’ll never know” (12 & 24). Since these lines refer precisely to that which she won’t tell him, in any kind of performance, these lines would be spoken as an aside – certainly not spoken to the lover, making sense that they break the pattern of iambic pentameter.

The fact that the speaker in “Paper Matches” is much younger – that she is “small” and “animal” (8) – makes it no surprise that the poem is written in free verse instead of tightly structured as in the more mature “A Certain Lady.” The language of “Paper Matches” is straightforward and the word choice uncomplicated. The speaker’s lack of linguistic and life experience and her shock over just discovering gender assignments make it logical that there is no rhyme, standard meter, or stress pattern, especially in the midst of her anger. The word choice and line structure is very much like prose. For example, she says, “That’s the

way it is, said Aunt Hetty, the shrivelled-up one” (5, 6). Although two lines of verse here, it could easily be one line of prose elsewhere. This enhances the feeling of everyday speech in the poem and avoids constraining the young speaker to the more difficult and mature practices of structure, i.e., meter, stress, and rhyme, that would convey poise and maturity beyond her years. For example, “. . . with eager lips” and “. . . tutored finger-tips” is beyond the linguistic and emotional capability of most youth. “Paper Matches” is comprised of 14 lines, making it a sonnet, but these lines are not divided into stanzas as in an Italian or Shakespearean Sonnet. In addition, the poet allows the speaker to begin to employ alliteration as in the repetition of [w] as in “washed dishes while” (1), and “why are we” (3), as well [ð] as in “they are out there” (4). In these ways, the speaker is “coming into her own,” much in the same way that she is becoming aware of the gender gap.

In two very different forms and ways, two very different speakers respond to the disparity of gender roles. Both rebel – one in calm deed and the other in angry thought – but when both poems end, the men involved remain ignorant of the females’ deeds or thoughts. Concerning the larger societal context, the question that persists, then, is whether their rebellion, whatever the form, does anything to bridge the gap or eliminate the double standard. Does it accomplish anything toward changing popular views about gender roles? Also, given the nearly four decades between the publication of these poems, wouldn’t one expect more progress to have transpired – for there to be less of a chasm in the expectations toward each sex? And if there weren’t many changes during those four decades, what about the last four decades since 1973? The ads in any commercial segment in 2013, include a beautiful woman who woos a male audience to buy a product and, in the next commercial, a responsible female homemaker who shows female viewers how to properly care for their homes. Are we as progressive as we think?

## Works Cited

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