MALE DISADVANTAGE IN ART AND LIFE

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Abstract

Because it draws parallels between art and life and exposes the relevance of both to the lived experience of males, a text-to-world analysis is an excellent teaching-and-learning tool for men's rights activists. This paper undertakes a text-to-world analysis of two plays and a film (Seneca's Phaedra, August Strindberg's The Father, and Sam Wood's Casanova Brown), offering fresh insights into the consequences for men when people overvalue female sexuality and unquestioningly believe all women, dramatizing the disturbing experience for men of female-perpetrated domestic abuse, and exploring the frustrating limitations of fathers' rights.

Keywords: advocacy, discrimination, literary criticism, gender studies, men and boys

The Men's Rights Movement has produced some excellent and informative content: *The Legal Subjection of Men* by Ernest Belfort Bax and *The Red Pill* by Cassie Jaye are among the best-known works that have raised awareness of the problems facing boys and men in Western society. Advocates for male issues should also apply a male-positive critical framework to preexisting texts because doing so provides additional opportunities for promoting an awareness of male issues and balances those now-pervasive schools of thought that are unconcerned with men's experience. A text-to-world analysis, which encourages readers to see connections between fictional and real events (Kardash, 2004), is a useful literary-criticism teaching-and-learning tool for this purpose as it allows men's rights activist to highlight and discuss real examples of the issues. The two plays and a film examined in this paper provide useful insights into contemporary issues that impact males: Seneca's *Phaedra* shows what happens when people overvalue female sexuality and unquestioningly believe what women say; August Strindberg's *The Father* unveils disturbing realities of female-perpetrated domestic abuse; and Sam Wood's *Casanova Brown* offers a frank assessment of fathers' limited familial rights.

Phaedra

Seneca's *Phaedra* is a cautionary tale for those who would believe all women. After her husband, Theseus, goes on an adventure to help his friend bed the goddess of the underworld, the queen is left alone with his son, Hippolytus. She and her nurse conspire to seduce the prince, but he's disgusted by her incestuous desires. With Phaedra's secret revealed and her marriage and reputation threatened, she and her nurse spread a rumor that Hippolytus tried to rape her. The king returns a little later. On his return Theseus hears this rumor; he becomes furious, and prays for the gods to kill his son. Guilt-ridden by her part in her stepson's death, Phaedra confesses the truth before killing herself.

This is a two-thousand-year-old play about a false rape accusation. Its mere existence suggests the phenomenon was well-known. But Seneca was in a better position than most to understand how a woman's word could upend a man's life because Messalina, third wife of Emperor Nero, had him tried for sexual impropriety with Princess Julia Lavilla, resulting in his banishment to Corsica. He returned after the emperor's fourth wife, Agrippina, recalled him so he could tutor her son. Seneca was one of many well-known victims of female perfidy throughout history.

Emmet Till, an African-American teenager was murdered following an accusation of sexual impropriety by Carolyn Bryant, a Caucasian woman. People believed her rather than the teenager; Bryant admitted decades later that she lied about the boy's lecherousness (Weller, 2017). Harvey Weinstein's case offers a more complicated but no less compelling example of how believing all women can adversely impact men's ability to present their position. He was accused of sexually exploiting actresses, and the court found him guilty despite no evidence and even "evidence to the contrary," by the affectionate message sent to him by some of the allegedly traumatized women. His lawyer, Donna Rotunno, pointed out men's lack of power in a society where believing women is the default, calling the situation "dangerous and scary" (Sky News, 2020).

The Father

Strindberg's play is an examination of an abusive relationship, including its potential causes and its adverse consequences for the victims. Captain Adolf Lassen, the protagonists of the play, wants his daughter, Bertha, to live in town and become a teacher. His wife, Laura, wants the girl to stay home and become a painter. Captain Lassen learns his wife has been conspiring against him. She has intercepted his letters to booksellers, so he couldn't do his research, and she has convinced his friends and family he's insane. In addition, she has cast doubt on whether or not his daughter is biologically his. These stressors contribute to the stroke Lassen suffers. This bleak portrayal of marriage perhaps comes from August Strindberg's childhood. He once described his mother as "the official accuser" because she often used his father as a tool to punish the children, when she wasn't being violent herself (Meyer, 1986). This dynamic worsened when his mother died and his father remarried. Strindberg believed his stepmother turned his father against him in spite of his academic success. Tellingly, Strindberg also described the role of father as thankless and secondary to the mother. Besides that, Strindberg and his wife may have struggled with one of the main problems Adolf and Laura have: coverture, an English common law that came with some hefty drawbacks for both sexes. For men, it meant taking full responsibility for their wives, even requiring them to bear debts the woman incurred or the crimes she committed (Fisher, 2015).

Those experiences of abuse and subjection explain the constant images of men who placate women. To wit, Pastor Jonas goes home earlier than he wants because his wife will be angry if he's late. Adolf admits he's afraid of Laura due to her terrible fits, and he believes the women of his home will raise Bertha their way, instead of his way, if he doesn't send her off. Then there's Nöjd, a cavalryman, who defies the captain's orders to subdue the nurse, Margaret, with the justification that there's "something special" about women that prevents men from harming them. That something is gynocentrism: the tendency to prioritize females. An ABC News segment from the early 2000s, where their camera operator secretly recorded bystander's reactions first, to a man accosting a woman, then to a woman accosting a man, also confirmed this gynocentrism (Yorke, 2019). The results were unsurprising, though sickening nonetheless, particularly the off-duty policeman who didn't intervene and used chivalry to excuse his inaction. The experiment was replicated as part of the #ViolenceIsViolence campaign by The Mankind Initiative (2014). This behavior has traditionally been justified by women's reproductive role: because only females can gestate and birth children, and it takes nearly a year to do that, they are more integral to the continuation of humanity. Even so, the harmful effects to men deserve recognition and amelioration.

But there are other, subtler impediments to male wellness depicted here. Laura's defamatory statements about her husband's mental health – which become fact due to her machinations – are a representation of relational aggression. It's a form of abuse that targets the victim's relationships and social standing and is often difficult to detect because of its indirectness. Laura's actions represent something more sinister though. To understand the severity, a psychoanalytic approach is necessary. Canadian psychologist, Robert Hare, identified twenty characteristics indicative of psychopathy. Laura exhibits nine (Skeem et al, 2011):

- Early behavioral problems: Her brother says she would lie still as a corpse when she was a child, until people gave her what she wanted.
- Shallow affect: Laura can cry on command, as shown when she meets Dr. Östermark and tries to convince him of her husband's alleged mental-health problems.
- Grandiose sense of self-worth: She claims she's never been able to look at a man without feeling stronger than him.

- Pathological lying: Dr. Östermark catches her fibbing twice. She claimed her husband used a microscope to study planets, and when he confronts her about it, she tells him she never said that. He counters both falsehoods by revealing he took notes of their conversations.
- Conning/Manipulativeness: Laura spread rumors about her husband being mentally ill until most of his fellow soldiers believe it.
- Parasitic Lifestyle: Laura's been a housewife for twenty years and she plans to live off Adolf's pension once she has him institutionalized.
- Failure to accept responsibility for own action: Laura tells her husband his downfall is his own fault despite her abuse contributing to it.
- Lack of remorse or guilt: Laura swears she feels innocent of wrongdoing even if her actions make her culpable.
- Criminal versatility: By the play's end, Laura is guilty of parental neglect; mail fraud; and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

The true cause of Adolf's destruction is paternity fraud. A woman's ability to be certain of her parentage, while the father cannot, is a fundamental power imbalance between the sexes (although physical resemblance to the father can mitigates this) even with the advent of DNA testing. The existence of television programs like *Lauren Lake's Paternity Court* or the paternity testing segments on *The Maury Show* can attest to that (Armour, 2013). Part of the reason why this issue continues to be so prevalent, causing emotional and financial harm to men and children alike, is because government officials, through varying levels of indifference or malice, allow it to occur (Smith, 2014).

Finally, female-perpetrated child abuse adversely impacts several characters in the play. Adolf may have endangered Bertha, but Laura is the most culpable for her suffering. Not only does her own daughter say she is inattentive, but her psychological torment of her husband spurs his traumatizing actions. Moreover, Laura allows her emotionally abusive mother live in the home, and the spiritualist crone forces her granddaughter to participate in seances and write down what the ghosts say. One evening Bertha unconsciously remembers a poem and records it; her grandmother recognizes it and considers it proof that Bertha's been deceiving her. Thinking

her grandmother wants to hurt her, Bertha runs away, screaming for help and when her father asks why she never told him about this, she says her grandmother told her not to, lest the spirits take revenge. The sequel (*The Comrades*), shows that Bertha, under the influence of her mother, has a lower quality of life and character than she might have had if she followed her father. She makes poor health decisions like smoking, has a combative view of relationships, equating marriage with slavery, and is crueler than in the original play, in that she tries to undermine her own husband. Laura being the ultimate cause of her family's destruction and her daughter's growth into a maladjusted adult is grounded in statistical reality. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018), mothers are majority of child abusers. Additionally, Bertha's dysfunctional behavior following the loss of her father accurately reflects the increased risk of socio-emotional problems among children in fatherless homes (McLanahan, Tach and Schneider, 2013).

Casanova Brown

The film champions fathers' rights and openly condemns the legal and social limitations imposed on men and their relationships with their children. Literature professor Casanova Brown learns days before his wedding that his ex-wife, Isabel Drury, has given birth. He travels to a maternity hospital in Chicago to make sure, and finds a daughter whom Isabel plans to give up for adoption. With no legal recourse, Cass disguises himself as a doctor and kidnaps his daughter, taking her to a nearby motel. Isabel eventually locates him and they reconcile, agreeing to raise their daughter jointly. (The almost-entirely positive depiction of fathers in the film can possibly be attributed to the fact that the screenwriter, Nunnally Johnson, already had two daughters prior to working on this movie.) Had he been able to maintain regular contact with the mother, he would have undergone sympathetic biological changes after they got pregnant (Smith, 2009), and he would have recognized the profound and instinctive love he had for the girls. It's not the same with Cass and Isabel, as they were separated from conception until birth, but his unconditional love is there. He bombards the head of the hospital, Dr. Zerneke, with questions about his newborn, monitors the infant's growth hourly, dons a medical uniform when he makes contact with her, and gathers a stack of parenting books for advice – especially concerning baby formula.

The other fathers are just as invested in their children as the protagonist. Cass meets a waiting room full of expectant dads, and when a nurse comes in, nearly every man in the room jumps to his feet. Soon after, Cass visits the nursery and sees a bunch of new dads standing there, looking through the glass, and smiling, cooing, or gushing at their babies. Besides them, there's Mr. Drury. As a parent, he handles Isabel's marriage more rationally than her mother, who basis her approval (and most life decisions) on astrology. And while he says "mother knows best," he still gives her a wide-eyed look when she decides to consult "the stars." On top of that, he's there for all the major events (the birth of her first child, the investigation of his granddaughter's abduction, and the confrontation with his ex-son-in-law) while Isabel's mother is busy with "politics."

In addition to the emphasis on fatherly love, the movie explores the marginalization of fathers. When Cass first arrives at the hospital, he tries asking the nurses at the front desk for Dr. Zernerke but they keep telling him to ask a different staff member. After questioning all of them without getting any help, an expectant father comes around and says, "This is a maternity hospital, brother. If they had nine watches, they wouldn't tell a father what time it was. You might as well do what she says." The other expectant fathers he sits with are also the only people in the hospital who care to ask him about his personal circumstances (is it his firstborn, how long has he been married, etc.) Later, when Cass learns about the adoption plans and questions the negation of his rights, Dr. Zernerke just tells him the whole situation is legal. Unfortunately, she's right. The Tender Years Doctrine (an outgrowth of the Infants Act of 1839), has been used to justify giving mothers default custody (Bookspan, 1993). While Caroline Norton, the English social reformer who originated these policies, had the best intentions (i.e., protecting her right to see her children after her ex-husband denied her access), it nonetheless harmed father rights in England and America. It might have strengthened preexisting biases too, as author Philip Wylie condemned the U.S. for the uncritical adulation mothers ("momism") in his book, *Generation of Vipers* published in 1942, two years before this film's release.

The secondary status of fathers is something Cass is fully aware of. When he realizes that the hospital staff knows his location, he laments the upcoming separation between himself and his child. A woman assisting him asks how they could take his daughter away when he's the father. Her question prompts this speech: "A man's not capable of taking care of a child, not

according to the courts. He can build bridges, he can fly around the world, he can be president and run the whole United States, but taking care of a child's too much for him! For that you've got to be a woman. Any woman." Cass's ordeal parallels a real-life case. Peter Stanley was an unwed American father who wanted custody of his kids after their mother died, but higher powers disregarded his parental fitness, declared his children wards of the state, and appointed them other guardians. This led to the Stanley vs. Illinois case in 1972 (Justia, no date).

Themes & Characterization

Despite the significant cultural, temporal , and geographical differences among these texts and their creators, similarities can be found. Intersexual competition (i.e., battle of the sexes) forms a through-line between the works and the women are depicted as having the advantage socially and legally. This contradicts the accepted viewpoint that women live powerless lives in male-dominated systems, but corresponds with reliable sources that discuss gender. The Declaration of Sentiments, the document that legitimized the idea of Western women as oppressed, admitted that females were considered morally superior to males and used that as an argument for why women should be given a platform within the church (National Women's History Museum). Furthermore, research into peasant cultures finds that women hold considerable influence within the home and community (Rogers, 1975). That influence is reflected by the female-centered family dynamics depicted in the texts. Hippolytus never interacts with his father or younger half-brothers before he dies, and the latter two were born to his stepmother; Adolf lives with his wife, daughter, and mother-in-law, and his greatest confidant is his brother-in-law; Cass ends his engagement to his fiancée Madge, so he can remarry his ex-wife and raise their daughter together, which is what his ex-wife wanted from the beginning.

Another place female advantage can be seen is in their same-sex relationships. Phaedra convinces her nurse to help her entrap her stepson, despite the latter's initial disapproval, and when their plan fails, the nurse is the one who suggests falsely accusing Hippolytus of rape, all to protect her queen. Laura treats the family nurse, Margaret, so amicably that the older woman is unaware of her abuse towards her husband, and it's the reason why she helps with Laura's plan to incarcerate Adolf. Isabel lies to Dr. Zerneke about wanting to give her daughter up for adoption, thus wasting time and resources, yet the head of the hospital forgives the girl and

rationalizes her actions by saying nobody was hurt. The affinity these female characters have for each other corresponds with research showing women have more in-group bias than men do (Goodwin and Rudman, 2004).

Contrast that with the relationships between men. Theseus does not hesitate to have his own son killed on heresy, even when he knows Hippolytus has a reputation for disliking women. Similarly, Pastor Jonas forces Adolf to have his mother-in-law live in his home and passively enables his sister to abuse him. Lastly, Mr. Ferris ignores Cass's call for help and forces him to support his daughter and avoid the law by himself, with the implied reason being that he disapproves of Cass's upcoming marriage to his daughter. The stark differences relate to a different aspect of gender relations: that men have proven willing to support female-focused initiatives, even at their own expense. The quintessential example in real life is Harry T. Burn. With his favor, American women gained universal suffrage (Bomboy, 2019); they received the right to vote without obligation to the state (i.e., eligibility for conscription).

Academic Decay

Using male-affirmative approaches to reading texts will also help undermine the unfortunate racism evident in contemporary academic environments: institutions of higher learning have become openly bigoted against white men (Greer, 2017). A recent incident at the Society for Classical Studies offers a good example of the misandry and racism people feel comfortable expressing in public. At a panel titled "The Future of Classics," speakers like Sarah Bond and Dan-el Padilla Peralta lambasted their field; their screeds included defamatory statements about influential men in Classics, insistence that Caucasian males "surrender the privilege" of having their research published so ethnic and gender minorities could be represented more, and publicly humiliating an attendee who voiced her dissent. And as Ms. Bond felt it necessary to mention, the dissenter gave an all-male list of authors she considers foundational to Classics (SCS Annual Meeting, 2019). This sexism and racism might explain why the texts examined in my essay, which deal with discrimination and injustice experienced by white males, receive almost no scholarly or mainstream attention compared to those works, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that deal with men who are ethnic minorities. The texts I discuss have sufficient literary merit to warrant attention and encourage sympathy for their characters.

Conclusion

Whenever possible men's rights activists should model how one analyzes texts from a male-affirmative perspective. Not only would they be increasing the number of methods available for showcasing men's issues, but they would also be increasing the viewpoint diversity in literary criticism. Text-to-world connection is an effective critical approach because it illustrates how art relates to life – making both more relevant to the discussion of male experience.

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