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Assignment 2

The Lady's Dressing Room
By Jonathan Swift 1732

Five Hours, (and who can do it less in?)
By haughty *Celia* spent in Dressing;
The Goddess from her Chamber issues,
Arrayed in Lace, Brocades and Tissues.
Strephon, who found the Room was void, [5]
And *Betty* otherwise employed;
Stole in, and took a strict Survey, Of all the Litter as it lay;
Whereof, to make the Matter clear,
An Inventory follows here. [10]
And first a dirty Smock appeared,
Beneath the Arm-pits well besmeared.
Strephon, the Rogue, displayed it wide,
And turned it round on every Side.
On such a Point few Words are best, [15]
And *Strephon* bids us guess the rest;
But swears how damnably the Men lie,
In calling *Celia* sweet and cleanly.
Now listen while he next produces,
The various Combs for various Uses, [20]
Filled up with Dirt so closely fixed,
No Brush could force a way betwixt.
A Paste of Composition rare,
Sweat, Dandruff, Powder, *Lead* and Hair;
A Forehead Cloth with Oil upon't [25]
To smooth the Wrinkles on her *Front*;
Here *Allum Flower* to stop the Steams,
Exhaled from sour unsavoury Streams,
There Night-gloves made of *Tripsy's* Hide,
Bequeathed by *Tripsy* when she died, [30]
With Puppy Water, Beauty's Help
Distilled from *Tripsy's* darling *Whelp*;
Here *Gallypots* and Vials placed,
Some filled with washes, some with Paste,
Some with *Pomatum*, Paints and Slops, [35]
And Ointments good for scabby Chops.
Hard by a filthy Basin stands,
Fouled with the Scouring of her Hands;

The Basin takes whatever comes
 The Scrapings of her Teeth and Gums, [40]
 A nasty Compound of all Hues,
 For here she spits, and here she spews.
 But oh! it turned poor *Strephon's* Bowels,
 When he beheld and smelt the Towels,
 Begummed, bemattered, and beslimed [45]
 With Dirt, and Sweat, and Ear-Wax grimed.
 No Object *Strephon's* Eye escapes,
 Here Petticoats in [frowzy](#) Heaps;
 Nor be the Handkerchiefs forgot
 All varnished o'er with Snuff and Snot. [50]
 The Stockings, why should I expose,
 Stained with the Marks of stinking Toes;
 Or greasy [Coifs and Pinders](#) reeking,
 Which *Celia* slept at least a Week in?
 A Pair of Tweezers next he found [55]
 To pluck her Brows in Arches round,
 Or Hairs that sink the Forehead low,
 Or on her Chin like Bristles grow.
 The Virtues we must not let pass,
 Of *Celia's* magnifying [Glass](#). [60]
 When frighted *Strephon* cast his Eye on't
 It showed the Visage of a Giant.
 A Glass that can to Sight disclose,
 The smallest Worm in *Celia's* Nose,
 And faithfully direct her Nail [65]
 To squeeze it out from Head to Tail;
 For catch it nicely by the Head,
 It must come out alive or dead.
 Why *Strephon* will you tell the rest?
 And must you needs describe the Chest? [70]
 That careless Wench! no Creature warn her
 To move it out from yonder Corner;
 But leave it standing full in Sight
 For you to exercise your Spite.
 In vain, the Workman showed his Wit [75]
 With Rings and Hinges counterfeit
 To make it seem in this Disguise,
 A Cabinet to vulgar Eyes;
 For *Strephon* ventured to look in,
 Resolved to go thro' thick and thin; [80]
 He lifts the Lid, there needs no more,
 He smelt it all the Time before.
 As from within [Pandora's Box](#),
 When *Epimetheus* op'd the Locks,

A sudden universal Crew [85]
 Of humane Evils upwards flew;
 He still was comforted to find
 That *Hope* at last remained behind;
 So *Strephon* lifting up the Lid,
 To view what in the Chest was hid. [90]
 The Vapours flew from out the Vent,
 But *Strephon* cautious never meant
 The Bottom of the Pan to grope,
 And fowl his Hands in Search of *Hope*.
 O never may such vile [Machine](#) [95]
 Be once in *Celia's* Chamber seen!
 O may she better learn to keep
 "Those [Secrets of the hoary deep!](#)"

As [Mutton](#) Cutlets, Prime of Meat,
 Which tho' with Art you salt and beat, [100]
 As Laws of Cookery require,
 And toast them at the clearest Fire;
 If from adown the hopeful Chops
 The Fat upon a Cinder drops,
 To stinking Smoke it turns the Flame [105]
 Pois'ning the Flesh from whence it came;
 And up exhales a greasy Stench,
 For which you curse the careless Wench;
 So Things, which must not be expressed,
 When plumped into the reeking Chest; [110]
 Send up an excremental Smell
 To taint the Parts from whence they fell.
 The Petticoats and Gown perfume,
 Which waft a Stink round every Room.

Thus finishing his grand Survey, [115]
 Disgusted *Strephon* stole away
 Repeating in his amorous Fits,
 Oh! *Celia, Celia, Celia* shits!

But Vengeance, Goddess never sleeping
 Soon punished *Strephon* for his Peeping; [120]
 His foul Imagination links
 Each Dame he sees with all her Stinks:
 And, if unsav'ry Odours fly,
 Conceives a Lady standing by:
 All Women his Description fits, [125]
 And both *Idea's* jump like Wits:
 By vicious Fancy coupled fast,
 And still appearing in Contrast.
 I pity wretched *Strephon* blind
 To all the Charms of Female Kind; [130]

Should I the Queen of Love refuse,
 Because she rose from stinking Ooze?
 To him that looks behind the Scene,
[Satira's but some pocky Quean.](#)
 When *Celia* in her Glory shows, [135]
 If *Strephon* would but stop his Nose;
 (Who now so impiously blasphemes
 Her Ointments, Daubs, and Paints and Creams,
 Her Washes, Slops, and every Clout,
 With which he makes so foul a Rout;) [140]
 He soon would learn to think like me,
 And bless his ravished Sight to see
 Such Order from Confusion sprung,
 Such gaudy Tulips raised from Dung.

Notes

The names *Strephon* and *Celia* come from classical pastoral poetry or romance.

Betty is the generic name for a maidservant.

24. *Lead* was used as a cosmetic to whiten the face.

Front, "forehead."

Allum flower, or powdered alum, is used as an antiperspirant.

29. *Tripsy*, a typical name of a lapdog.

Whelp, "puppy."

Gallypots, "jars."

35. *Pomatum*, "ointment for the hair."

37. *Hard*, "near."

48. *Frowzy*, "messy."

53. *Coifs and Pinders*, "night caps."

60. *Glass*, "mirror."

83. *Pandora's Box*: From Greek mythology, this refers to the box that Zeus gave to Pandora. She was told not to open it, but she gave in to curiosity; as she opened it, all the miseries and evils of the world flew out—except one, hope—and that's why we have suffering in the world. She is an Eve figure in Greek mythology. Epimetheus (84) was her husband, created by Zeus. Epimetheus was warned never to accept a gift from the gods, but he did—the box that Pandora opened.

95. *Machine*, "Any complicated piece of workmanship" (Johnson).

"Those Secrets of the hoary deep": See *Paradise Lost*, 2.890-91: "Before their eyes in sudden view appear/The secrets of the hoary Deep."

Mutton: Meat from an older, mature sheep. Very rich in flavor, this is less tender and delicate than lamb. 134. *Satira*, the heroine of *The Rival Queens* by Nathaniel Lee; *quean*, "A worthless woman, generally a strumpet" (Johnson). *Pocky* suggests either smallpox or a venereal disease.

Analysis

“The Lady’s Dressing Room” by Jonathan Swift can be well analyzed by focusing on the first twenty-five lines of the poem. The initial prominent features that are observed in the poem are the rhyme scheme and the meter. The rhyming couplets of this poem in combination with the iambic tetrameter (4 feet) creates the movement to which the reader progresses through the narrative and scene of Celia’s dressing room. These features begin the tone and mood of amusement.

In addition, the first line of the poem, “Five Hours, (and who can do it in less in?)” initializes the satire in the poem. The parentheses confine the language and the question as to whether taking five hour to get ready is ridiculous or not, highlighting the question’s importance in establishing this poem as a satire. What Swift is satirizing is debateable: there is the question of whether Swift is satirizing society’s perception on women or whether it is satirizing women themselves. Swift further indicates the poem to be a satire in his choice of names, Celia and Strephon, which are commonly used in pastoral poetry. This contrast in using names that are familiar to a different genre, into a text that discusses filth and gender, complicates the notion of the pastoral life which is often creates idealized scenarios over something much more realistic which Swift chooses to do instead.

The most prominent feature of this poem is the choice of words. The “And” that begins the third stanza is used to throw the reader into the middle of this scene. Strephon places himself in this scene on purpose but discovers the mess by accident, as does the reader. The word choice also makes it difficult to decide who the narrator believes is being dishonest, Strephon or Celia. The narrator calls Strephon “A Rogue,” referring to the fact that he is being dishonest, while Celia has also been doing the same by concealing her filth. The narrator also uses contradictory

language. The narrator states that “Strephon bids us guess the rest” while continuing on discussing what else appears in this scene and tells the reader to “listen while he next produces, / The various combs.” The narrator is proving to be unreliable but may also be suggesting that the scene is too grotesque to look at, yet is also much too alluring to look away from.

A major theme of the poem surrounds the perception of gender and gender roles. The narrator chooses to use specific words to describe Celia and her filth. For example, the narrator uses the phrase “paste of composition” to describe the contents of Celia’s brush. Using this phrase, the narrator is also inferring that women are made up of this rare combination of “Sweat, Dandruff, Powder, Lead, and Hair.” The narrator is indicating that this is what they believe makes up the ingredients of women. It is important to look at the language used to describe Celia to analyze how gender is being described in the poem. She is perceived by society and other men to be “sweet and cleanly,” but there is no indication about what exactly about Celia this is describing, therefore it could simply be describing her looks. However, Strephon seems to think it describes her looks and her personality as well, contrasting what others say about her to her room.

Additional Resources

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=7XFkAAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA251>

This online resource provides some insight into Swift's life. It tells of an anecdote that Swift encountered a prostitute whom he refused to pay because he was impotent and decided to write a poem about the woman. It is an interesting perspective to provide on the poem.

<https://www.bl.uk/georgian-britain/articles/health-hygiene-and-the-rise-of-mother-gin-in-the-18th-century>

This link provides background information on hygiene in the 18th century. This provides context to the poem and the ways in which Celia lived were not that outrageous when we look at history.

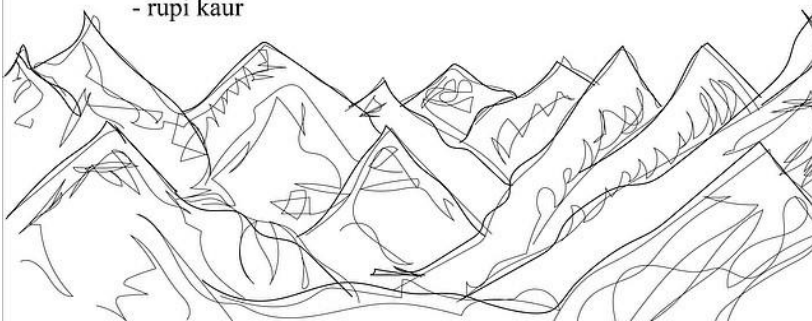
The Reasons that Induced Dr. S. to Write a Poem Call'd the Lady's Dressing - Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

This poem would be a good resource to look at the reactions to Swift's poem. In looking at gender, this poem would also be helpful to see how other poets, especially women, viewed this poem and had more insight into Swift himself.

Additional Poems

i want to apologize to all the women
 i have called pretty.
 before i've called them intelligent or brave.
 i am sorry i made it sound as though
 something as simple as what you're born with
 is the most you have to be proud of
 when your spirit has crushed mountains
 from now on i will say things like, *you are resilient*
 or, *you are extraordinary*.
 not because i don't think you're pretty.
 but because you are so much more than that

- rupi kaur



A woman is not a potted plant
her roots bound
to the confines
of her house

a woman is not
a potted plant
her leaves trimmed
to the contours
of her sex

a woman is not
a potted plant
her branches
espalièred
against the fences
of her race
her country
her mother
her man
her trained blossom
turning this way
and
that
to follow
the sun
of whoever feeds
and waters
her

a woman
is wilderness
unbounded
holding the future
between each breath
walking the earth
only because
she is free
and not creeper vine
or tree

Nor even honeysuckle
or bee.

Alice Walker