

11-1-2013

Pornography Debate, Gaze and Spectatorship in Sarah Daniels's Masterpieces

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/textmatters>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lorek-Jezińska, Edyta. "Pornography Debate, Gaze and Spectatorship in Sarah Daniels's Masterpieces." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, no.3, 2020, pp. 154-170, doi:10.2478/textmat-2013-0032

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Humanities Journals at University of Lodz Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture by an authorized editor of University of Lodz Research Online. For more information, please contact agnieszka.kalowska@uni.lodz.pl.

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń

Pornography Debate, Gaze and
Spectatorship in Sarah Daniels's
Masterpieces

ABSTRACT

Masterpieces by Sarah Daniels has been described as a voice in the debate on pornography, expressing the anti-pornography position as opposed to the liberal feminist stance in this debate. Despite its ideological clarity reported by many reviewers and critics, the play has been commented upon as deficient or inadequate because of evoking conflicting interpretations and ambiguity. The paper argues that these deficiencies stem from the play's concern with the distribution of agency and passivity along gender lines as well as the influence of generic and essentialist notions of genders on the perception of social and individual power relations particularly in the domain of eroticism and sexuality. One of the key issues of the play is the question to what extent and in what ways human perception is conditioned by the place of the subject in relation to the agency/passivity dichotomy and his or her viewing/reading position in relation to erotic and pornographic material.

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s debate on pornography a new category—the one of human rights—was introduced by some anti-pornography feminists. The question appeared whether for the sake of erotic pleasure such rights can be suspended. The liberal response to that position was the defence of freedom of the media to produce and distribute the materials that are not censored or controlled in other ways by authorities. This option rejects the belief in the direct link between pornography and violence against women, focusing on the positive function of most of erotic and pornographic images. *Masterpieces* (1983) by Sarah Daniels has been described as “an important contribution,” taking in this debate the anti-pornography position (Aston, *An Introduction* 128) as opposed to the liberal feminist stance. Its direct political message is one of the reasons for Lizbeth Goodman’s inclusion of the play in the list of “exemplary British feminist plays and performance pieces” (227). Goodman praises the play for “urging social thought and action” and refutes the criticism of “prioritizing of feminist politics above ‘literary value,’” claiming that “this is hollow criticism that misses its mark” (227). Dimple Godiwala, noticing the play’s “dramaturgical failings,” quotes Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of “a minor literature” to defend the value of such imperfect works in creating common consciousness, a sense of community and unity of ideas, describing the play as “a working out of feminist ideology, principles and practice with a dramatically radical feminist finale” (149).

Despite its ideological clarity reported by many reviewers and critics, the play has been commented upon as deficient or inadequate in several respects, contributing to conflicting interpretations and ambiguity. Taking into consideration a variety of interpretations developed on the basis of the play, its supposedly clear message is far more complicated than it seems. According to Michelene Wandor, “the effect—shocking, because it is the opposite of what it appears to be—is that the case against pornography is never made within the means of the play” (217). Wandor even suggests that the final message of the play—if we analyse its dramatic structure—might be contrary to what one expects it to be, for example, that “if you take action against pornography you end up in prison” or “if you take up feminism, you could end up as irrational, and the murderer of random male victims” (217). However, these ambiguities and emergent messages operate in the play only if we accept that the play’s ideological statements should be received at face value. Even Tracy C. Davis, who also emphasizes the play’s ideological merits, saying that the play is “message-oriented—it attempts to prove an argument rhetorically,” contends that “it does this by fusing emotional responses to ideas that have been introduced but are not

necessarily answered within the fiction of the play” (152). Thus it is impossible to draw an analogy between ideological messages pronounced by or enacted by the characters in the play and the emergent interpretations, as the latter are a result of complex relationships between various elements in the play. What is, however, problematic in the play’s ambiguity is that it merges the categories of the erotic and the pornographic, particularly in the attitudes of female characters, who classify any reference to erotic images as objectifying and violent. To them erotic images of women inevitably lead to pornography and abuse. This approach is contrasted with the view held by some male characters and those involved in erotic and pornographic industries that erotically explicit materials are “marital aids which enrich people’s . . . romantic lives” or can have beneficial effects because “looking at pictures” can stimulate fantasies (Daniels 164).

GENERIC PERCEPTIONS OF GENDERS

In order to see the play as producing a clear message, one has to ignore a number of techniques and relationships developed in the play, such as anachrony, Brechtian alienation effects, distancing and above all the questions of agency and generic perception. What the play seems to problematize is the distribution of agency and passivity along gender lines as well as the influence of generic and essentialist notions of genders on the perception of social and individual power relations particularly in the domain of erotic and sexual behaviour. One of the key issues of the play is the question to what extent and in what ways human perception is conditioned by the place of the subject in relation to the agency/passivity dichotomy and his or her viewing/reading position, which in the case of erotic images to some extent defines the border between the erotic and the pornographic.

One of the reasons for which the exploration of these issues is possible is the play’s structure. The scenes explicit in their interpretations are interlaced with the situations supplying insufficient data, contrastive messages, interpretative fallacies and clearly subjective projections. It is possible to connect these elements into the general anti-pornographic feminist interpretation, even when taking into consideration the pro-pornography arguments delivered outside the play’s fictional framework. However, the disruptive elements are employed here to diffuse the play’s ideological clarity and unity. Therefore, what Daniels’s play ultimately criticizes is not pornography as such but the impact of essentialist and generic perception of genders on social and individual interactions, which might lead in extreme cases to crime and psychological disturbance. In this layer the play suggests an uneasy analogy between what is the primary target on the ideological level—that is pornography and misogyny—and prejudice against

and hatred towards men. These are emphasized in the two apexes in the play constituted by two murders—one recorded as a snuff movie and the other committed by the main character. The snuff movie registers a pornographically tinged scene of a sadistic murder of a woman (an actress) by a male assailant (a film director). The other scene is shown onstage and presents the main character, Rowena, pushing a strange man onto the railway track in front of an approaching train. Davis's comment about the analogy between the two scenes seems to support the significance of generic hatred in both murders:

By depicting what might be interpreted as the random, senseless, casual elimination of a man at the hands of a woman, Daniels shocks. . . . The shock registers because the slaughters are so similar: they are motivated by sexual loathing of a type, not an individual; they are witnessed; and they are truly arbitrary attacks by one sex upon the other. (144)

On the one hand, one can notice the subversive parallel between the two murders—the revenge of one sex on the other realized through individual acts of violence. However, the information about the snuff movie available in the play does not contain any reference to the generic hatred towards women experienced by the perpetrator of the crime. We do not even know whether the notion of hatred is applicable here as the murderer in the movie is depicted rather as the one focused on his own pleasure. The woman slaughtered in the movie is turned into an object, a doubly distanced tool to achieve satisfaction. Interestingly, the agent of the crime also turns himself into the object of gaze by filming his actions, as if his pleasure was based on scopophilia directed onto both the Other and the Same. Thus the idea of hatred of women attached to pornography is Rowena's interpretation of pornographic pictures she has been exposed to willingly. Her violence, devoid of sexual motivation, has been brought about by her generic misinterpretation or overinterpretation of individual pornographic and erotic images.¹

GENERIC IDENTIFICATION AND VICTIMIZATION

In confrontation with pornography, Rowena loses her own individual identity, turning into the generic type of a woman as a victim of sexual violence.

¹ Although later in the play Rowena makes a connection between misogynist jokes and snuff movies, it seems that hatred of women is more directly represented in the former. Misogynist jokes contain in their formula generic concepts whereas generic reception of pornography belongs to the sphere of interpretation and does not have to be activated in its reading.

In order to make this transition possible, she also has to translate all the male characters she meets into the generic type defined through their sexually abusive and violent nature. Although in several cases male characters are presented in the contexts clearly suggesting misogyny and sexual violence towards women, in many others there is no evidence whatsoever to imply Rowena's interpretation of her contacts with men as threatening in terms of violence or sexuality (e.g. in the case of Rowena's husband, the man walking accidentally towards her in the street late in the evening, and the man at the station).

The correspondence between the two murders referred to in the play produces another ambiguity. Despite her unquestionable agency in the act of killing a man, Rowena tends to be depicted as a victim of pornography and misogyny. Along with the anti-pornographic feminist position, the woman's identity is defined through victimization and danger. At the same time, anti-pornography feminism "fuels essentialist notions of male sexuality as inherently 'predatory'" (Heise 413). The correspondence indicated by Davis exposes the imbalance in the interpretation of male and female sexuality and nature. To a certain extent, the murderer in the snuff movie is a victim of his sexuality and under proper legal conditions is likely to meet a suitable punishment for his crime.² Legally, he would be eliminated and confined similarly to Rowena. However, the play's subjective layer seems to overlook this aspect of the film crime, at the same time presenting the psychiatrist's, the prosecutor's and the judge's comments on the cruelty of Rowena's deed as biased and sexist. While the generic hatred of women in the snuff movie is disputable, the act of pushing the man onto the railway track in front of the approaching train without a direct reason certainly shows a generic fear of and prejudice against men. The psychiatrist's and prosecutor's accusations are in fact founded on the same fallacy as Rowena's fear and anger targeted at men.

The generic hatred of men which Rowena develops throughout the play culminates in the scene of her allegedly random murder. Through anachrony the link between this event disclosed early in the text and the snuff movie is established directly towards the end of the play, postponed to create the play's climax. It is at this stage that we find out that she killed the man just after having seen the snuff movie and it is also the moment when the film is summarized by her to the policewoman and the audience/readers. It is crucial that the audience's knowledge of the film is filtered

² However, taking into consideration essentialist notions of male sexuality and biological determinism, implying men's limited control over their libido and sexual aggression, the man's legal responsibility might be doubted, similarly to other instances of sexual abuse in, for example, rape cases (Whatley 123–25).

through Rowena's subjective perspective—we never get to know how it is interpreted by other characters apart from a short explanation from the prosecutor defining a snuff movie as “a film or films made in the United States where, according to reliable reports, the participant is actually killed in front of the camera” (Daniels 227). To the prosecutor “watching a film cannot be construed as anything but an objective experience” (Daniels 227), and as such cannot explain Rowena's state of mind when committing the crime. However, the play gradually confronts us with the growing subjectivity of interpretations that Rowena formulates on the basis of her experiences, with the rising domination of generic conceptualizations. The prosecutor's comment on the objectivity of the experience seems to deny the possibility of various interpretations of the same event or subjective and different viewing positions in a spectator or viewer. In fact, both the prosecutor and the judge refuse to accept the connection between the experience of seeing the snuff movie and Rowena's crime, although the judge appears to be shocked by the idea of real murder being filmed. His ironic comments on Rowena's motivation, “You are not at liberty to avenge the pornography industry in this country. We have censorship laws for that” or “So, on seeing this film you thought you'd go out and kill a man?” (Daniels 227), paradoxically expose some of the mechanisms behind Rowena's behaviour, but also show the judge's inability to understand how the different position of women in respect of viewing and acting can lead to irrational and violent actions.

GAZE AND VIEWING POSITIONS

Although the readers or viewers of *Masterpieces* are not exposed to what exactly happens in Rowena's mind when watching the movie, the analysis of the processes involved in viewing the snuff film as described in the play according to Laura Mulvey's use of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of film images might show to us the available viewing positions and interpretations for Rowena as a viewer/spectator. If the woman displayed as a film image connotes the fear of castration, the destruction and mutilation of her body stands for liberation from that fear for the male assailant. The first strategy employed by the subject to avoid the castration complex, as Mulvey argues, is “preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object” (444). The man in the snuff movie literally investigates the woman's body, cuts into it, takes the insides out, punishes her with unbearable suffering and finally kills her. The act of cutting and sawing the body represents the symbolic re-enactment of castration on the body of the already castrated,

to deny any possibility of power or threat. Mulvey associates this voyeuristic strategy with sadism: “pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (444). Interestingly, the scene prior to the act of extreme violence features what Mulvey could describe as fetishistic scopophilia, which “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself” (444). Lying on the bed, the woman is transformed into a fetishist object, passive, yet self-sufficient, outside the narrative framework. For a moment she suspends the narrative, freezing it in the male gaze, deceptively innocuous. One of the crucial moments that trigger the transition from fetishistic scopophilia to sadistic voyeurism is the woman’s protest against her being filmed when she notices the camera. Her resistance to being turned into the object of gaze symbolically instigates in the man the other avenue of escape from the fear of castration.

The man by recording his actions projects himself as a different person—more idealized and powerful. His identity is filtered through the camera image—he enacts somebody else as if trying to live up to this projected image of himself. The look towards the camera might suggest a mixture of narcissistic and scopophilic relationships to the enacted image. The narcissistic reinforcement of identity, the arrival at some integrity of absolute power over the woman, is accompanied by the need to be looked at by others, to become the mirror image to the onlooker—possibly to himself—or the object of gaze. He is acting upon the body of the murdered woman but he is being acted upon by the camera at the same time. Despite this fetishistic aspect the man in the movie seems to confirm the general division between the woman as an object of gaze (scopophilia) and the man as the representation of the idealized and active ego (narcissism). When confronted with the psychoanalytic study of the castration complex, this dichotomy leads to the division between the woman as a passive but guilty object acted upon and punished by the man driven by his fear but possibly also hatred of women.

The general division between agency and objectification along gender lines makes women’s spectatorship particularly complex and problematic also in the case of pornography or even erotic images. Referring to Fetterley’s concept of “resistant reader,” Jill Dolan defines the position of the resistant/feminist spectator as the one suspended between two positions offered and dependent on gender. Rejecting the identification with the passivity, invisibility and muteness of female characters, the feminist spectator, according to Dolan, “contemplates the option of participating in the play’s narrative from the hero’s point of view,” having “a nagging suspicion that she has become complicit in the objectification or erasure of

her own gender class” (289). The resultant position is that of the cultural and political intervention exposing the processes of naturalizing ideologies related to gender (Dolan 289). But this position can be achieved only by an outsider who is able to notice the constructedness and limitation of each of the immediate spectator positions offered by performance. The lack of detachment imprisons the viewer in the choice between the two limited positions, both of which a female spectator might find unsatisfactory.

Rowena, as the main focalizer in the play, exemplifies an inability to reach this alternative detached position; she notices that women in film, pornography and everyday life tend to be objectified, but she accepts this as the only possibility of reading these representations. In this she accepts the authority and domination of the male reading and viewing position, seeing herself through the male objectifying gaze. She has not yet discovered the pleasures offered by opposing the dominant structures, such as evasion and resistance (see Fiske 2), which seem to be activated by Jennifer (her mother) in her carnivalesque, non-gendered laughter. Rowena cannot notice other viewing positions, nor can she perceive different representations, attributing to all male characters this dominant objectifying gaze, even where the viewers or the readers of the play can see evidence to the contrary. Hence she defines herself as the object of men’s gaze in many public situations, “sexually assaulted” by erotic images in advertising (Daniels 207). Her decision to abandon her habit of wearing skirts, for example, is one of her attempts to gain some sort of invisibility and thus escape men’s objectifying gaze (cf. Godiwala 147). Her strategies aim at escaping from the panoptic male supervision into the invisible zone where she paradoxically becomes more passive and limited. The act of pushing a strange man onto the track in front of an approaching train symbolically transfers her from the position of a passive object to an agent, using excessive violence towards the opposite sex. She inscribes herself into the major masculine narrative, whereas her deed is interpreted by others in generic terms echoing her earlier interpretation of male violence.

When we juxtapose Rowena’s version of the film with the real coda of *Snuff*, we observe that several elements have been omitted, including the third character in the film—the second woman called June³—dark haired and dressed in black as contrasted with the lighter clothes of the blonde victim. Rowena’s inability to notice the third viewing position in relation to pornography and relationships with men echoes a general omission of the third figure in the *Snuff* coda in criticism and feminist protests. Heller-Nicholas observes the significance of this omission for the misinterpretation of the film:

³ Here I rely on the identification of the name made by Heller-Nicholas.

The presence of June in the *Snuff* coda therefore rejects the simplistic “men versus women” scenario that it is so often purported to be, and upon which much of its ideological debate is based. Its sexual politics are far more complex. The female victim is not only at the mercy of a man, she is tortured by a man, and restrained by a smiling woman. (Heller-Nicholas)

162

The smiling woman might suggest, as Heller-Nicholas argues, the dark woman’s participation in the sado-masochistic pleasure, but it even more importantly disturbs the viewing position and gaze relationships in the film. The third character stands away from the enacted scene of violence for most of the time, as she is busy taking notes and rearranging the objects on the two beds. She is aware, just like the other two characters, of the crew and cameras filming, sometimes looking straight into the camera. Her participation in the act of violence is detached and instrumental—she simply helps to hold the victim for a short time casually as a part of her off-screen duties. Her meta-fictional placement defines her smile rather in terms of aesthetic satisfaction at the efficiency of the actors’ work. Whichever the case, she is placed in a position superior to both the male oppressor and the female victim in her meta-filmic distance as well as the third position of gaze. The cameras’ changing perspectives, the *mise-en-abyme* technique of recording the image of the other camera in the act of filming the characters, the characters looking straight into the camera as well as a conspicuous mirror as part of the set reflecting the procedure of recording and gazing—all of these generate the complex network of gaze, complicating the relationship between victims and torturers, passivity and agency, as well as the subject and object of gaze. Rowena’s interpretation of the film and her own viewing position are founded on the simplification of this network and erasure of some of its elements.

FICTIONALITY AND AUTHENTICITY

All the analogies and connections established in the play between the snuff movie murder and Rowena’s homicide cannot obscure a basic difference between them, that is the mediated nature of the film and the direct real dimension of Rowena’s deed within the fictional world of the play. Although the prosecutor’s definition suggests that the snuff movie registers a real act of murder in front of the camera, it might be only a promotional strategy that tries to introduce the element of authenticity to the branch of film that might suffer particularly because of its fake-ness and acting. Even if the film is a recording of a real murder, it uses

a number of film techniques which frame it into a fictional matrix. While it seems that Rowena can notice the moment the film changes from its fictional to authentic dimension, she finishes her summary of the film with a rather uncertain statement: “And I kept forcing myself, to pretend that it was only a movie” (Daniels 230). The comment that she receives from the policewoman, “No. It happens. I’ve seen photos, hundreds of photos of little girls, young women, middle-aged women, old women . . . mutilated beyond recognition” (Daniels 230), does not dispel this uncertainty as it contains two contradictory implications; on the one hand, a photograph as a testimony of “having been there” (Barthes 23) appears to show to us what really happened but on the other hand, the expression “beyond recognition” undermines the denotative capacities of photographs. The photographs thus testify to something that happened but the picture’s denotation cannot be established—its representation is unrecognizable. The phrase “beyond recognition” in conjunction with the policewoman’s final comment “I try not to think about it” (Daniels 230) implies a possible rejection of recognizing oneself in the images. In contrast, Rowena interprets both the film and pornographic pictures as representations in which she recognizes herself, into which she translates herself, forming a generic category of the woman as a victim.

Another issue related to the question of the difference between fictional representations and reality is a general tendency in the discussion on pornography to disregard its fictional quality. For example, in the work of the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, as Vance reports, “the conventions we use to decipher ordinary images are suspended when it comes to SM [sadoomasochistic] images” (447). The Commission failed to recognize that erotic images or fantasies do not have to exert a direct effect on human behaviour or that “sexual images could be used and remain on the fantasy level” while human imagination and “the symbolic realm” could have “autonomous existence” (Vance 447). In this respect, the discussion on pornography resembled the debate on the representation of violence on television, in which two positions were confronted—one claiming that violence on TV has a direct impact on human behaviour and thus contributes to the general increase in violence, and the other seeing violence on television as a strongly coded reflection of social and cultural values, in which violent behaviour is symbolic and rather instrumental (Fiske and Hartley 178–79). Rowena seems to be unable to perceive sexual violence represented in a snuff movie as fictional and encoded, neither is she able later in the play to accept a possibility of varied responses to pornography, eroticism and jokes. To her, pornographic and erotic images and jokes are authentic manifestations of hatred towards women and realizations of sexual violence against them.

Her slippage from fiction to reality in the act of murder is a consequence of this interpretative fallacy.

In fact, the play abounds in situations representing slippages from fiction to reality, ranging between such trivial transitions as the one between the joke about tiling and the discussion on house repairs and investment that emerges from it, more serious shifts from the boys' looking at pornographic images of women and comparing their teacher with them, and the possible transference from these images into reality in the form of rape as well as the links between the jokes about rape and real violence against women. All of these ambiguities, fallacies or slippages seem to derive from the very nature of the snuff movie as one exploring the possibility of authenticity while being overtly fictional. The *Snuff* coda plays with this possibility while engaging in the metafictional game of multiple viewing positions, each distancing the filmed act more and more from the notion of reality.

LAUGHTER AND AGENCY

Apart from the two acts of murder which polarize the play in respect of agency and generic perception, the play contains a number of less noticeable references to these issues. The contrast between generic and specific thinking and agency and passivity are first problematized in the initial scene of the dinner party, particularly in the reactions of various characters to the jokes told during the dinner. Yvonne's (Rowena's friend's) absence of reaction testifies to her inability to detach herself from identification with any women referred to. Jennifer's spontaneous reactions to jokes both about women and men is the first evidence of her ability to exceed gender identities. As a post-menopausal creature, she moves beyond inhibitions and prejudices based on sexual experiences and gender definitions. Marginalized and carnivalesque, Jennifer distances herself from references to sexual abuse, as these seem irrelevant to her condition. In contrast to many other reviewers, who criticize Jennifer's complicity in male laughter against women and her lack of feminist awareness, Aston rightly notices Jennifer's ability to go beyond divisions and classifications: "it is a laughter which de-familiarizes the common position of women who are forced into the position of laughing in spite of themselves. It is a laughter which speaks the 'but I am not that'" (*An Introduction* 130). Jennifer's laughter signals a non-generic reception. In another article, "Gender as Sign-System," Aston describes laughing in spite of oneself experienced by a female competent reader or spectator as unpleasurable ("Where is the pleasure of finding yourself the object of the joke?", Aston 60) and deprived of *punctum* ("a mode of painful and compulsive pleasure," Elam

qtd. in Aston 58). Jennifer's reactions to the jokes contrast with this type of laughter as her response is depicted in the play text as excessive and spontaneous: "Jennifer laughs uproariously and rather disconcertingly so," "Jennifer who laughs even louder," "Jennifer laughs raucously," "Jennifer laughs genuinely" (Daniels 166–69). Thus in her ability to go beyond generic reception, Jennifer can distance herself from the spectator/reader position available to women in most texts and situations. She is even capable of turning herself into an object of laughter when she tells about her excesses in a women's flower arranging guild "infiltrating exhibitions with [their] outrageous arrangements" (Daniels 175). She embarrasses male characters by describing the flower arrangements that she and her friends made using diaphragms, empty pill packets and a sanitary towel to grow plants in. In their subversive flower compositions, Jennifer and her friends deconstruct conventional femininity expressed in the activity of flower arranging connoting delicacy, good taste and beauty. The substitution of some of the materials used in flower compositions evades conventional definitions of femininity and redefines identities. It marks the presence of a category of a menopausal woman disregarded in the general notion of femininity. Jennifer and her friends' decision "to act mad" in order to "get [their] revenge on society for writing [them] off" (Daniels 175) places them outside social categories in the liminal non-gendered space. The critical distance towards herself manifested by Jennifer makes it possible for her to experience the *punctum* as well as to enjoy turning herself into an object of a joke. However, perhaps most importantly for the main theme of the play, the act of displaying publicly objects intimately related to female sexuality and biology generates anti-erotic effects. The viewer or listener, especially of male gender, is exposed unwillingly to the intimate attributes of the female body which cannot be easily turned into a pleasurable fetishistic object of gaze. A woman or her parts are no longer available as the source of pleasure, while the onlooker is denied the power of authority and agency. Jennifer's artefacts refute and offend the male gaze. Thus Jennifer is capable of creating for herself an alternative viewing or reading of the position in which she both escapes objectification and subverts male authority.

Rowena's "rather hesitant" joining in laughter in her reaction to the jokes told during the dinner seems to hint at her trapped position as a reader/receiver. Rowena feels that there is no other option but to unwillingly comply, which already prepares the ground for her later development. In contrast to her, Yvonne's negative response to the jokes suggests her ability to evade the dominant reading of the joke message. Yvonne even tries to reverse the power relationship by telling a joke about men in which the undertones of violence are more pronounced and do not belong to the

text's presupposition (as in the case of the jokes about rape, in which rape as a violent sexual act is totally disregarded).

The joke contributed by Yvonne: "How many men does it take to tile a bathroom? (*Pause.*) Three but you have to slice them thinly" (Daniels 169) is the only one after which there is no reaction of any kind even from Jennifer. In a number of ways the joke refers back and forth to the culmination points of the play presenting murder—the description of the snuff movie and the act of pushing a stranger onto the railway track. The pleasure of the joke resembles the one experienced and displayed in the snuff movie—slicing corresponds to cutting up the woman's body in the film. In both, the person acted upon is depersonalized and objectified. However, the joke is reticent about the suffering and violence involved in the act. Its concise and matter-of-fact statement precludes sadistic satisfaction. A number of reversals activated in the slicing joke make it an instance of carnivalesque topsy-turvyism—a temporary suspension of social rules and gender roles. In contrast to the snuff movie, the context and the purpose for fragmenting the victim's body is absurd and trivial. The Man's body is totally inadequate as a tiling material. Furthermore, the joke reverses the man's position as an agent in the context of tiling, making him the object or rather material acted upon. From the domain of agency a man is pushed into the domain of receptivity and passivity. The number three as well as the reservation that you have to slice them thinly further suggests the deficiency of men in the discussed context. At the same time, the activity of slicing, conventionally belonging to women's household chores related to cooking, makes a woman the hypothetical agent. There is then a transition from the masculine domain of tiling to the feminine domain of cooking accompanied by the objectification of men and activation of women.

Even in the earlier jokes about rape and women as sexual objects with a largely misogynist message, one can notice foregrounding and ambivalence of the notion of agency and passivity. Two of the rape jokes told during the dinner depend for their effect on paradox. Rape in its legal definition is based on the use of force or threat by the oppressor and is performed against the will of the victim (Heise 418, Table 3), thus implying the aggressor's agency and activity and the victim's passivity and lack of contribution. The jokes told in the play define the situation initially as rape, but the second part of the jokes suggests the victim's contribution or control over the act. Going back the same way, knowing that the rapist might attack the women again, or telling the "idiot" rapist what to do, are actions that transfer the decision or control from men to women. And it is this transfer or paradox that makes the jokes laughable to Jennifer. In fact, in her laughter, one can notice a gradual degradation of men, their control, value and masculinity. Her contribution to the jokes told seems to imply

that what she laughs at is the discrediting of men and their authority. Even in the joke that most visibly objectifies women—the ideal date as a combination of a sexual object and a pizza—the target of laughter is not the fact that women serve as sources of satisfaction for men but rather that men’s needs are primitive and simplistic. However, the lack of response from Rowena and the negative reaction on the part of Yvonne derive from the initial imbalance of powers in the jokes; even if a woman enjoys the sexual experience with a rapist, he has no right to violate her independence and freedom, or even if we laugh at male primitive nature, there is no justification for objectifying women to prove the point. Nevertheless, the other characters seem to ignore the presuppositions contained in these jokes.

The absence of a response from the listeners to the tiling joke indicates that the presuppositions activated in the process of receiving it make laughter impossible; it yields to deconstruction more effectively as it denaturalizes the dominant distribution of agency and objectification. The act of slicing seems a more evident manifestation of violence and objectification than the implied abuse in the other jokes, making the analogy to the snuff movie more pronounced. Nevertheless, the absence of response from the characters might denote another imbalance of distribution of attention and sensitivity: sexual violence against women suggested in the reference to rape is received as far more acceptable than the absurd abuse of the man’s body. In fact, it is possible to notice the analogy between the degrees and types of violence used in the joke scene and the other more serious situations in the play. Yvonne’s joke as her answer to the earlier largely misogynist jokes corresponds to Rowena’s murder of a stranger as her response to pornography and sexual abuse. In both cases the female characters’ reaction is perceived as too extreme and irrational in comparison with which stories about rape and the sadistic treatment of women appear natural and almost justifiable as they are more in tune with the essentialist notions of what women and men are like. If even in anti-pornography feminism women are defined through their victimization and men through their violence and domination (Vance 443), violence committed by women emerges as something far more unnatural and punishable than the same deed committed by men against women.

CONCLUSION

Considering Rowena’s generic identification with women as victims of patriarchy and misogyny as well as her transition from passivity to acting and agency, it is possible to interpret Rowena as a character acting on behalf of all women, taking responsibility for other women-victims and identifying with them to the extent that she could be attributed with

heroic functions. In fact, some critics see Rowena as a character who decides to act against misogyny and violence against women although she personally has no direct experience of violence towards her. Davis, for example, praises the play's "social purpose to instruct and improve" (148), claiming that "when Rowena acts, she acts for other women, not just herself, and sees the action through to completion" (147). In this way, as Davis argues, the play "suggests that people can and should take action against the offenders [violent and misogynist men]" (148). However, such an interpretation disregards the personal perspective that is established in the play and contrasted with other views and objectified data gathered by the readers/spectators. The play seems rather to illustrate the destructive effects of male violence, pornography, and misogyny on women, leading to interpretative fallacies, misapprehension, wrong assessments and mistakes, as well as to fear, hatred of men, and finally murder. In this context, Rowena remains a victim, not a victor, as her isolation from men realized in her imprisonment cannot be interpreted as a victory or a radical action, but as an escape and social annihilation.

Masterpieces might also illustrate another difference in gendered readership/spectatorship. One of the male reviewers of the play, Robin Thornber, writes: "The play made me angry and filled me with hate for men. But then I am one" (qtd. in Aston, "Gender" 65). In this comment one can notice the generic reception of the play that is parallel to Rowena's point of view. Nonetheless, hatred and anger are further qualified by the reviewer's individual identification with his gender class. Instead of hating himself, however, the reviewer appears to reject the legitimacy of the hatred discourse dominant in the play. If he is a man then the feeling of anger and hatred cannot be directed at men in general. Rowena's case suggests the opposite strategy of reading. Instead of seeing a difference between herself and women's images in erotic and pornographic images, which would enable her to notice that women tend to be victimized and objectified, but that she is not a victim or an object, she identifies with these representations. Rather than qualify generic perceptions, she adjusts her identity to be accommodated within the generic category of the woman as a victim and an object. Her desperate act of defence is misguided and misdirected and thus cannot be described as a constructive battle against misogyny and gendered violence manifested in various spheres of cultural and social life. In this context, *Masterpieces* can hardly be classified as a radical play advocating anti-pornography feminism if we take into consideration the values and positions held by its main character. Although anti-pornography feminism introduced a revolutionary discourse into the pornography debate—the discourse of violated human rights as contrasted with the conservative discourse of decency and morality (Vance 444)—its concentration on essentialist notions of women's

victimization and men's sexual violence seems to some extent to perpetuate women's passivity and objectification (cf. Heise 413–14). Sarah Daniels confronts in her play a number of discourses on pornography without advocating particular ideological positions. In fact, by presenting a transformation of one character under the influence of indirect confrontations with violence and direct viewing of pornography Daniels shows the traps of essentialist and generic perceptions on genders as well as exposing the problem of viewing or reading positions available to and negotiated by women in pornography, humour and everyday life.

WORKS CITED

169

- Aston, Elaine. *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- . "Gender as Sign-System: The Feminist Spectator as Subject." *Analysing Performance: a Critical Reader*. Ed. Patrick Campbell. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996. 56–69. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Rhetoric of the Image." Trans. Stephen Heath. *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*. Ed. Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan. London: Arnold, 1993. 15–27. Print.
- Daniels, Sarah. "Masterpieces." *Plays 1*. London: Methuen, 1997. 159–230. Print.
- Davis, Tracy, C. "Extremities and Masterpieces: A Feminist Paradigm of Art and Politics." *Feminist Theatre and Theory*. Ed. Helene Keyssar. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996. 137–54. Print.
- Dolan, Jill. "The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation." *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*. Ed. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay. London: Routledge, 2003. 288–94. Print.
- Fiske, John. *Reading the Popular*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Fiske, John, and John Hartley. *Reading Television*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Godiwala, Dimple. *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980*. New York: Lang, 2003. Print.
- Goodman, Lizbeth. *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Heise, Lori L. "Violence, Sexuality, and Women's Lives." *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*. Ed. Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo. New York: Routledge, 1997. 411–33. Print.
- Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. "Snuff Boxing: Revisiting the Snuff Coda." *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia's Film Journal* 5.2 (2009): n. pag. Web. 3 Sept. 2011.

- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997. 438–48. Print.
- Vance, Carole S. "Negotiating Sex and Gender in the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography." *The Gender/Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*. Ed. Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo. New York: Routledge, 1997. 440–52. Print.
- Wandor, Michelene. *Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Anger*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Whatley, Marianna H. "Raging Hormones and Powerful Cars: the Construction of Men's Sexuality in School Sex Education and Popular Adolescent Films." *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*. Ed. Henry A. Giroux. Albany: State U of New York P, 1991. 119–43. Print.