

MEN'S TABLE, WOMEN'S TABLE

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In 2013, Dr. Ragini Verma of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine released a study on brain connectivity in men's and women's brains. It made headlines not only for the scientific community, but for the rest of the population as well. Verma and his colleagues used Magnetic Response Imaging techniques in order to look at almost 1,000 adolescent brains and found that "male brains had more connections within hemispheres, whereas female brains were more connected between hemispheres." This information provided some of the first scientific evidence that "male brains may be optimized for motor skills, and female brains may be optimized for combining analytical and intuitive thinking" (Lewis). The release of this information brought back to light and added credibility to an earlier study also conducted at the University of Pennsylvania: Dr. Ruben C. Gur found that men's brains were more active in the parts associated with action, while women's brains were more active in the parts associated with symbolic meanings. While the intersection and implications of these two studies caused the scientific community to rejoice at the tentative possibility of using this information to further research on disease prevalence and prevention, the rest of the world exploded into an uproar in entirely different territory: had we finally proven that there were fundamental differences between the brains of men and women?

For feminists, this question brought back the equality versus difference debate of the previous decade: if men and women are innately different from each other, how do we account for those differences within the feminist movement's push for equality? And now that those differences are no longer just the stuff of myth and stereotype, the fervor of this debate has intensified. These are not merely surface differences of physical appearance and development, but rather more deeply embedded chemical ones that could cause men and women to perceive the world and respond to it differently. This discontinuity of perception presents a danger that Gina Kolata of *The New York*

Times voices in her article “Man’s World, Woman’s World? Brain Studies Point to Differences”—the danger that “men and women are so intrinsically different that they literally live in different worlds, unable to understand each other’s perspectives fully.” The distinction between motor skills/action and intuition/symbolism has been enough to add a firm scientific voice to feminists’ fears about the division between sexes. The fight for equality may not be serving us because we are governed by a biology that differentiates us. What if we may never be able to understand each other meaningfully enough to fathom a world where both sexes can have equality while remaining fundamentally different?

Charles Mee boldly illustrates these implications in his play *Trojan Women: A Love Story*. He divides the play into two acts—the first of which clearly depicts a world dominated by men, and the second a world dominated by women. Based on Euripides’s tragedy *The Trojan Women*, Act I is painfully bleak. When it begins, we see tableaux of women being beaten, raped, and murdered by Greek soldiers. We hear wild music and patterned gunshots. Then, the lights come up in silence and we see these women crouching like wounded animals in the smoky ruins of the Trojan War—they move like ghosts, eyes glazed over, mouths twitching, their arms empty of their children. They sing Billie Holiday’s “All the Way” with a hollowness that doesn’t quite have the strength to be bitter: “When somebody loves you / it’s no good unless he loves you / all the way” (Mee 2). As the act continues, we tread alongside these women into moments of deeper and deeper devastation: they are given as slaves to the men that remain, the last of their children are taken from them and sacrificed arbitrarily. The only justification for these abominable actions comes from the men themselves when Hecuba, the desecrated queen of Troy, demands:

Why is it at the end of war
the victors can imagine nothing better
than to remake the conditions
that are the cause of war. (14)

The men perkily reply, “The war is not ended . . . we ourselves are the war.” They go on to say, “Men act. . . . To act is to be / No more no less” (15). This assertion is articulated rather flippantly for a statement that will,

though subtly, define the terms of the entire play. Mee implies that a man's entire existence is based on action, and that without it, men believe they are nothing. The weight of such a concept follows when a soldier states with the eeriness and fervor of a malediction that "[t]he world is a bleeding wound / when it comes to that" (15). This is exactly the world to which we have been introduced in Act I—a bleeding wound devoid of the apparently female qualities of subtlety, hope, or symbolism that might reveal some meaning behind their actions. When men dominate, the whole world is war.

Act II of *Trojan Women*, based on the story of Dido and Aeneas, contrastingly represents a woman's world. Mee describes the world in the stage directions, offering that "the dramaturgical rules have shifted here: this is dreamland, a world of drift, heaven" (77). The lights are warm and rosy and the air feels clear and without bite. The women are clean and radiant, seen exercising and lounging together in their utopia. When the men enter this time, they are each taken in by a woman to be undressed, bathed, and cared for with a tenderness and languidness that feels both startlingly foreign (based on what we were shown in the first act) and beautifully refreshing. Aeneas is taken in by Dido as they fall in love at first sight. This time, instead of the shell of a Billie Holiday tune, she sings Linda Ronstadt's "When You Wish Upon a Star" with the voice of a rich, thick mezzo: full of body, health, and warmth. As the act continues, everything about Dido's relationship with Aeneas feels heavily symbolic: she reads Tarot cards, trusts in stars and fate, and believes in things as fleeting as hope. Though there is immense beauty in such mystical and idyllic things, Dido's world also carries an air of stagnancy without the male trait of action; her bliss loses some vitality in its inactive state.

Fifty minutes of the hour-long second act are spent in this nearly exhausting bliss—very, very full, heavy with tenderness, care, and the thickness of love. Abruptly, everything between Dido and Aeneas begins to dissolve as he feels the call to action to go on and do the job he promised to do. Yet Dido sees no reason for him to do so when along the way he found love—true, deep, lasting. The resulting tragedy is born from these two conflicting impulses in the lovers; they fell in love with someone fundamentally different from themselves, someone they inevitably could not understand, and their differences tear them apart. They become violent, catastrophic, wretched.

It seems that Mee is implying that such destruction is inevitable—whether it occurs between men and women in love or merely occupying the same spaces—because we cannot understand one another.

A fitting response to Mee's claim that our differences prevent us from effectively sharing one world may be Judy Chicago's epic feminist art piece *The Dinner Party*, on display at the Brooklyn Museum. The piece is divided into three sections, the most important of which is the Dinner Party itself. At the party, thirty-nine places are set in a triangle—thirteen on each side, all on top of a porcelain floor. At each place setting, there rests a tapestry-like napkin or placemat announcing each "guest of honor"—one of the women Chicago has chosen to showcase. A goblet, utensils, and a china plate painted with the "central motif" that the Museum describes as being "based on butterfly and vulvar forms" decorate each setting. Dimly lit, framed in walls of black marble, and resting on top of a floor which almost seems to glow, the exhibit has a dominant presence, both suggesting the strength and immutable value of the women "who have been lost to history" and giving them their rightful place in the historical timeline ("The Dinner Party"). The exhibit's approach to feminism is a "spread-eagle declaration of arrival" (Beckman 4). According to Chicago, the thirteen place settings on each side of the banquet table are a "reference to Christ and his twelve disciples at the Last Supper"; Chicago is "reinterpret[ing]" that male-dominated event so that women might take their rightful places in the seats of power (Fineman). Her response to Mee's idea is to draw on the inherent differences between the sexes (here represented rather explicitly by the vulva) and carve out a separate table where the women may assert their dominance instead of attempting to join the preexisting men's table. If Mee is saying that men and women can't share the world, Chicago is replying, *forget the men, we'll have our own party*. She is holding her bra over the fire and shouting, *all hail the vulva*.

Many critics, though, find *The Dinner Party*'s "central core" imagery problematic for feminism. Lolette Kuby speaks out against the piece in her essay "The Hoodwinking of the Women's Movement: Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*," saying that it "[binds] the identity of a woman to her biology" and that it is a "reduction . . . of women to vulvas and wombs, seedpods and plants, earth and netherearth" (128). Amelia Jones importantly calls the imagery 'essentializing,' suggesting that when all the women in the exhibit are united

under those common female images, they become limited by them and made inextricably *other* than their male counterparts—a concept not cohesive with an ideal of equality (419). Chicago creates a party for women only, a society that is highly exclusive, a picture that doesn't advocate for occupying the world together—the sexes nonequivalent but equal—but rather, as Hecuba in *Trojan Women* says, “remake[s] the conditions” of the male-dominated world, only this time with women sitting at the table (Mee 14).

As *The Dinner Party* suggests, ours is a society highly trained in the practice of dominance. Whatever the dominating regime, moral position, or doctrine dictates becomes the ideal to which all people must conform. Our whole system of politics is based on the attempt to change others' minds in favor of our own views. This is a concern that Ngugi Wa Thiong'o addresses in his essay “Encounters with Cenorship,” where he references Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Aristotle says “that we should be grateful not only to those with whose views we do agree but also to those with more superficial views” (48). He invites us to welcome the positions that do not match our own, “for these also contribute something” to the richness of our society (48). This notion becomes perhaps more imperative when applied to sex differences. Unlike political views, which can be swayed, these differences are immutable, and thus we have no choice but to accommodate them. And as the problem of *The Dinner Party* demonstrates, to choose to deal with difference by creating two separate worlds divided by sex is to engage a cycle of using dominance in order to accommodate difference—a tactic that does not support the need for full equality.

Thus the ineffectiveness of this tactic creates a demand for another kind of coexistence between men and women. Texas sportscaster Dale Hansen speaks to such a demand in his response to the football player Michael Sam's coming out as gay. Hansen says, “I'm not always comfortable when a man tells me he's gay; I don't understand his world. But I do understand that he's a part of mine.” This seems like a very fitting analysis of the problem we face: though we may not be able to fundamentally understand each other, we are, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” We have to share the world. We must, as Thiong'o develops from Aristotle, begin to allow for the possibility that those different from us “also contribute something” to the world we all inhabit, something that we

ourselves cannot contribute, and that such a contribution might not threaten but enrich our existence (48).

Kathrin Thiele addresses such a concept with the assertion that difference needn't be viewed as the ultimate stumbling block on the road to equality, but rather as the "necessarily complex grounding" for feminist endeavors (14). She argues that it is "not about multiplying the world by (at least) two, so that each sex, body and flesh finds 'a possible place'"—a man's table and a woman's table. Instead, it is about what she calls "nonmimetic sharing," or learning to share the world with another who is inherently different from you not by pushing conformity to the dominating party, but by accepting their existence as "irreducible" to your own (Thiele 23, 24, 15). From that place, where we commit to the understanding that our perceptions and experiences may be inevitably different, where we "start with primary differentiability and an asymmetrical universe" not as the complications but as the grounds for all our interactions, can the idea of a more equitably shared world become fathomable (14).

With this in mind, we can return to *Trojan Women* and find in it a paradox: while Mee demonstrates that the collision of two unlike worlds causes those worlds to annihilate each other, he also shows us something else—that the two worlds are incomplete without each other. At Aeneas's entrance, Dido says to him in a voice low and reverent, "A cave that has been dark for a million years / will become bright / the moment a candle is lit inside it" (Mee 84). The collision of the two worlds first creates a site of completion before becoming one of destruction. It's as if the potential for the outpouring of loveliness, tenderness, and care that exists in the woman's utopia of symbolism and intuition is free to flourish when attached to the male quality of action—the action of loving. Just as the male-dominated society of the first act is incomplete without the women, destined to always be a "bleeding wound," the female-dominated society, though beautiful from the start, becomes unmistakably richer and lusher when the men are adopted into it and introduce action to the otherwise intangible concept of love (15). This provides the clearest illustration as to why the play is, as its title dictates, a love story. Mee gives us a fragile liaison between two different worlds. Perhaps he fervently hopes that we'll recognize that before the two worlds destroy each other, they can make each other better.

What may be the key to breaking down the intersection of equality and difference, then, is finding that sweet spot right before it all goes up in flames. It is a risky thing to do; after all, it is difficult to recall a society where its different members have coexisted by sharing rather than by dominance. Dido illustrates this as Aeneas packs up to leave her—when he announces that he can't stay in the woman's world "without just annihilating [himself]" (Mee 15). She articulates the risk of trusting the possibility of truly sharing the world:

You might become a different person altogether
living here
a kind of person you wouldn't even recognize
Are you afraid you might not be able to tell where it all might end.
What our lives might become.
How we might become lost in one another (120).

Perhaps we fear that, as Mee is suggesting here, to *understand* and even *love*—both revolutionary and transformative acts—something fundamentally different from ourselves is to risk "annihilating [ourselves]" as we already are (122).

But there is also Dido's last word on the matter, where she first concedes that yes, there is always the risk that it could all go up in flames. Then she counters:

or it could lead to something so deep
so lifelong
such a commitment
to another person
who might die
or make a life with you . . .
your only life
for all eternity
this would be your fate (120).

There's the possibility that our sharing the world in celebration of difference could enrich us in ways we could never dream of on our own. Thiele refers to this enrichment as "our human 'becoming'—that is, [coming] to a

more realistic understanding of our rightful place on the planet . . . and grow[ing] as a species—through the cultivation of an authentic relationship to [each] other” (12). Again, it may be hardly imaginable in our society to conceive of this new kind of coexistence, one absent of the need for the dominance of one group or another. This is where Thiele emphasizes we must not shy away from the enormity of the change but put trust in its value. The hope is that we can find a way to share the world in difference instead of dominance. Then we can further grow, evolve, become closer to one another. We can have our lives made richer and our relationships made fuller by the existence and preciousness of the array of our difference.

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