

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS...

- a)... the difference between:
- i) Female, feminine and feminist?
 - ii) Male and masculine?
- b)
- i) What constitutes 'femininity'?
 - ii) What constitutes 'masculinity'?
- c)
- i) Do you have to female to be feminine?
 - ii) Do you have to male to be masculine? Examples?
- d) Can you draw any conclusions about how ideas of femininity and masculinity come into existence?

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

In the 21st Century, we live in a culture and a society where a broad spectrum of different kinds of male and female behaviour are welcomed and celebrated. Think how tricky, for example, it would have been for people like Dale Winton or Graham Norton to have become mainstream even as recently as 25 or 30 years ago. There seems, over recent years, to have been an easing up on the expectation that women must be, or are automatically, feminine and men must be, or are automatically, masculine. We might think that we are right to feel suspicious of the concepts of "feminine" and "masculine"; that they can be used to impose on us expectations of certain kinds of behaviours we choose not to display. How would you, as a 21stC teenager, feel if you were accused of behaving in an 'unladylike' fashion, for example; or of displaying 'ungentlemanly' conduct? Is it advisable to treat such ideas completely without irony?

We could argue, then, that contemporary culture tends to use the concepts of masculinity and femininity in a *self-conscious* and *self-aware* manner. People are attuned to the fact that they can choose how to project themselves. Thus someone might want to go out "looking girly" or "acting macho" for just one evening. It is not unreasonable today to expect that your behaviour one evening as a "girly" will be read as voluntary, and that the next day you might go play football with impunity about any "contradictions".

Now think how recently this difference has come about. It is not difficult to see that for women in earlier centuries, displaying behaviour which contravened definitions of 'womanhood' would have been far less acceptable. Why is it that Rosalind in *As You Like It* has to dress up as a man before she can exert any authority on her community? Or Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*? Why does the strident Volumnia in *Coriolanus* cause such terror? For the latter case, it is due at least in part to the fact that she, along with Lear's daughters Regan and Goneril, contravenes expectations of how women should behave. Rosalind and Portia could never bring about the conclusions they engineer if they remained dressed as women throughout the play. Their temporary power is located in the fact that people think they are men. They live their lives controlled by social expectations of how they will behave as women.

Toril Moi: Sexual/Textual Politics (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester 1985)

Her thesis:

- That you are female or male is a *biological fact*
- But femininity and masculinity are artificially invented *cultural and social constructs*. (For example, for 19thC Turkish women, the more you weighed, the more attractive you were considered to be).
- To be feminist is to have a certain *political attitude*. (This is small 'p' politics: the power structures that are built into inter-personal relationships).

Therefore your *sex* is a *biological fact* but your *gender* is a *social construct*. This is a term that may prove very useful to us in reading the play. So let's turn our attention now back to it.

If we are happy to agree (for the sake of argument, if nothing else) that *femininity* and *masculinity* are *artificial concepts* that are *constructed by societies* and then, through a variety of means presented to us *as if* they were natural – and given the fact that one of those means is written and spoken language – we should, in theory be able to *deconstruct* how Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca are represented in the play. We should be able to look at the language that is used about them, to them and by them and see if we can analyse a) *what* is expected of each woman *as a woman* and b) therefore, what versions of femininity are represented in the play.

ONE CRUCIAL NOTE

I hope it is also clear that we could use *exactly the same approach* to look at different versions of masculinity in the play. Feminist critics are often perceived as being anti-men. However, the recent preference for the term 'Gender Studies' as opposed to feminism reminds us of what Moi's insights reveal. Masculinity is just as artificial a construct as femininity, and it is just as necessary to deconstruct it as femininity.

LOOK AT THE FOLLOWING QUOTATIONS

For each of the quotes below, consider what is shown about

- **perceptions of women,**
- and women's **social** and **political** status.

Be as thorough and as detailed as you can in your answers.

You should also assess which, if any, of the statements below are accurate assessments of the women's characters. If so, what is it about the context of the situation allows that accuracy? Try to make as many connections as you can between quotations and draw conclusions about attitudes wherever possible.

Iago:	(A fellow almost damned in a fair wife) That never set a squadron in the field, Nor the division of a battle knows More than a spinster.
Iago	Look to your house, your daughter and your bags! I.i.81
Iago	An old black ram is tuppung your white ewe I.i.89-90
Roderigo	Your daughter, if you have not given her leave, I say again, hath made a gross revolt I.i.132-3
Brabantio	How didst thou know 'twas she? O she deceives me Past thought! I.i.164-5 Fathers, from hence, trust not your daughters' minds By what you see them act. I.i.169-70

MEN AND WOMEN IN *OTHELLO*

Iago	Faith, he tonight hath boarded a land carrack; If it prove lawful prize, he's made forever I.ii.50-51
Brabantio Duke Brabantio	My daughter! O, my daughter! <p style="text-align: center;">Dead?</p> Ay, to me I.iii.57-59
Othello	Send for the lady to the Sagittary And let her speak of me before her father I.iii.115-116
Othello	She'd come again, and with a greedy ear Devour up my discourse I.iii.148-9
Brabantio Desdemona	Do you perceive in all this noble company Where most you owe obedience? My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty: To you I am bound for life and education; My life and education both do learn me How to respect you. You are lord of all my duty: I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband; And so much duty as my mother showed To you, preferring you before her father, So much I challenge that I may profess Due to the Moor my lord I.iii.178-187
Desdemona	That I did love the Moor to be with him, My downright violence and storm of fortunes May trumpet to the world. I.iii. 244-246
Brabantio	Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: She has deceived her father and may thee. I.iii.288-9
Othello	My life upon her faith!
Iago	She must change for youth; when she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice...If sanctimony and a frail vow between an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian be not too hard for my wits and all the tribe of hell... I.iii. 335-345
Iago	He hath a person and a smooth dispose To be suspected, framed to make women false... I.iii.379-80

ACT TWO

What additions can you make to your observations from the developments in Act Two?

Cassio	O, behold, The riches of the ship is come on shore! You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees. Hail to thee, lady! And the grace of heaven, Before, behind thee, and on every hand, Enwheel thee round. II.i.82-6
Iago	Sir, would she give you so much of her lips As of her tongue she oft bestows on me You would have enough II.i.100-102
Iago	You rise to play, and go to bed to work II.i.112
Othello	I cannot speak enough of this content; It stops me here; it is too much of joy. II.i.188-189
Iago	Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies...Her eye must be fed...Now for want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it, and compel her to some second choice
Roderigo	I cannot believe that in her: she's full of most blessed condition
Iago	Blest fig's end! The wine she drink is made of grapes...Didst thou not see her peddle with the palm of his hand?...
Roderigo	Yes, I did: but that was but courtesy
Iago	Lechery, by this hand: an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts. . II.i.212-245
Othello	Come, my dear love, The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue; The profit's yet to come 'tween me and you II.iii.8-10
Iago	...[H]e hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for Jove
Cassio	She's a most exquisite lady
Iago	And I'll warrant her full of game
Cassio	Indeed she is a most fresh and delicate creature
Iago	What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation
Cassio	An inviting eye, and yet methinks right modest
Iago	And when she speaks is it not an alarum to love?
Cassio	She is indeed perfection
Iago	Well, happiness to their sheets! II.iii.15-25

Iago	Our general's wife is now the general. I may say so in this respect, for that he hath devoted and given himself up to the contemplation, mark and denotement of her parts and graces. Confess yourself freely to her, importune her help to out you in your place again. She is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blest a disposition that she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested. II.iii. 290-2
Iago	...For tis most easy Th'inclining Desdemona to subdue In any honest suit. She's framed as fruitful As the free elements; and then for her To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism... His soul is so enfetted to her love, That she may make, unmake, do what she list, Even as her appetite shall play the god With his weak function. II.iii.306-315

Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (London: Routledge, 1990)

Her thesis, building on Moi's conclusions

- We are *not* *hidebound* to act in a certain way simply because we are male or female;
- Nonetheless, as men and women, we may make conscious but much more usually sub-conscious *choices* about how to behave in certain situations, taking our cue from the specific context.
- Therefore gender is not just a social construct; it is also *a performance*, because you modify and alter it according to the particular situation you are in.

We are subconsciously aware of our audience and – and this is a generalisation – many of us will take account of that in judging how to be, how to behave, how to perform. Aspects of this will happen with reference to gender expectations, whether to be normative or subversive.