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Perverted Honor and Prostitution: The Struggle for Power in *Boss for Three Days*

In a genre of plays in which henpecked husbands, coarse name-calling, and slapstick humor abound, *Boss for Three Days* stands out as more than simply conventional comic drama. Indeed, on a deeper level these devices speak to an underlying sexual tension between not only the two main characters in the drama, but in male-female relationships in general. In *Boss for Three Days* we are struck by the play's central ironic duality--Jan's quest for "honor" (in this case, "honor" meaning the mastery over his wife Bette which will publicly reaffirm his manhood), and the attainment of that honor through Bette's prostituting her "self" (or more specifically, her will). This gender-based struggle for power is magnified by a second, parallel plot line in which the neighbors, Imbrecht and Lijsbet, reinforce the tension of the first couple's situation in a vicarious attempt to better, or at least maintain, their own positions of power.

On the surface, Jan's argument against Bette seems to stem from the idea introduced by the nameless Messenger in the first speech of the play, "he does not get his will, / who is married to a bad woman" (2-3). Jan himself soon affirms this message when, having met his friend Imbrecht in the local tavern, he bemoans his marital situation:

> there is neither day nor hour
> when she doesn't make my life sour.
> This is an ordeal without end.
> How could I live in this misery!
> How can any wife be so bad!" (83-87)

Taken at face value, Jan's complaints indicate simply that Bette is shrewish and that he does not get his way. Actually, however, his problems with his wife run much deeper. According to him, Bette is a portrait of excess: she verbally berates him, she physically abuses him, and she drinks insatiably.

Concerning her ability to drink, Jan complains to Imbrecht that she won't stop drinking until she has completely emptied the crock:

> And if she doesn't have a cup,
> then she puts the pot to her mouth.
> Thus she doesn't stop until she sees the bottom.
> Neighbor, with this I am being dishonored. (102-05)

The connection Jan sees between Bette's drinking and his "being dishonored" is evident but unclear until we understand Jan's notion of honor and how he acts upon it. Usually, we imagine an honorable person as someone whose moral or ethical worth merits respect, someone who, whether in public or private, maintains the standard of his or her beliefs. Jan's interpretation of honor varies from this definition. He defines honor not as any sort of nobility of character, but rather as *public* veneration and deference. Jan likes, and feels he deserves, the best: he wants Imbrecht to pour his drink first; he reserves the best seat in his house, the one nearest the fire, for himself; he orders Bette to serve the finest wine in the village.

Jan's honor seems to depend upon the way other people — friends, neighbors, fellow tavern-goers--view him. When his reputation is endangered by Bette's blatantly public displays of drunkenness and abusiveness (both verbal and physical, we must assume from her volatile threats), he feels he has lost his honor. In the next few telling lines, Jan, still in the tavern, again stresses his idea of honor, admitting that

> If I could find any way
> to get peace,
> so that I could honorably make her
> keep quiet,
> I would be lord all my days. (106-09)

The emphasis on the word "honorably" is enigmatic: does Jan want to keep Bette quiet and *honorable* (stress on *her* honor), or does he want to keep her quiet *honorably* (stress on *his* honor)? Either way we read the phrase, "honor" in the context of his previous grumbling indicates his ability to publicly control his wife, to keep her "quiet" or submissive.

An interesting layer in this drama, one which corresponds nicely with the theme of honor, is that as much as Jan fears public humiliation, he fears public emasculation. Not only does Bette's raucous behavior dishonor him, her very nature dishonors him. In all her force and fury, Bette exhibits more manly qualities than her husband, explaining Jan's urgent desire to "keep her quiet." Rather than compete in vain against her, Jan chooses the one route that offers the best chance to reaffirm his masculinity and assure Bette's submission: he bribes her. In exchange for a fur, Bette will agree to relinquish her position of power for three days. Jan's honor and his manhood become synonymous: when Jan finally achieves public power over her, he feels he has regained his masculinity, gloating to Imbrecht, "Don't I speak like a man?" (334).

But what kind of honor is Jan's? Although he swears upon it when he and Bette make their trade, her submission for his furs, he immediately reneges on his promise. As soon as he leaves the house, he invites their neighbors Imbrecht and Lijsbet, who will obviously notice the shift of power, to witness him as he lords his temporary power over Bette. If unclear earlier, it is certainly clear now that Jan's idea of honor is strikingly different from the idea of honor as earned by truth or goodness of character, whether publicly recognized or not. Ultimately, Jan fails as master because he violates his own definition of honor as a matter of reputation.

But if we condemn the husband for offering such a bribe, what are we to think of the wife who accepts it? Bette knowingly barters her freedom for material gain. Though at first outraged by the proposition and insulted to think that the fur might have been bought for "another belly" (a mistress), Bette soon accepts the conditions of Jan's deal. She justifies her decision by saying,

> I will [take the fur], because it could hurt me
> if you gave it to another whore than me.
> But I might well say "fie"
> if anyone finds out that I sell myself like this. (186-89)

The message of Bette's speech ironically echoes Jan's earlier one in the tavern: though seemingly opposites, both husband and wife are concerned with public opinion. Bette reluctantly agrees to the barter, but only if no one in town finds out about it, or in other words, only if she can retain in public the appearance or reputation of still being in control.

Running parallel to Bette's fear of public degradation is Bette's anger that someone might find out she has sold herself. In spite of Bette's generally vulgar and abusive tone, the use of the word "whore" here seems particularly pointed. Bette's vitriolic statement above is the first direct

mention in the play of prostitution, although the tension between man and woman, husband and wife, creates an atmosphere ripe for it. Although the term "prostitution" in *Boss for Three Days* does not adhere to the technical definition of prostitution as the exchange of money for sexual services, it does encompass all the more subtle nuances of the word--the exchange of goods for a service, male control, and female subservience.

Bette does not prostitute her body, but she does prostitute her will, her power as "boss" of the household. Immediately realizing her predicament, she assures herself, just before Imbrecht and Lijsbet arrive for dinner, that Jan surely will not go beyond a certain point. She is mistaken. From the moment their friends arrive, Jan belittles and berates Bette, treating her like a common servant while he preens himself before Imbrecht. He promises Imbrecht in private that he will make her "jump through a hoop" before the night is over. Bette fulfills her role as prostitute as she "performs" services for the satisfaction of the men.

While Jan revels in his power to make Bette serve, and Bette attempts to control her seething temper, we are left to wonder what purpose Imbrecht and Lijsbet serve in the play. Are they present merely as witnesses to Jan's and Bette's heated struggle for control? Upon closer analysis, we see that the second couple serves a twofold role in the controversy surrounding Bette's prostituting herself. Primarily, Imbrecht and Lijsbet agitate and intensify their neighbors' marital strife, taking sides and pitting man against woman; secondarily, Imbrecht and Lijsbet offer more insight into the prostitution theme than either Jan or Bette alone.

Before dinner Imbrecht voices a well-justified fear that Bette's obedience will not last until the evening meal. Lijsbet then hurries him: "Now let's go quickly. Let's hurry" (276). Aside from some obvious comic overtones, this passage captures Lijsbet's concern: she cannot wait to see Bette's submission because she cannot believe it has even happened. Her fear is real. If Jan succeeds in this venture, all the men in town will attempt to control their own wives. This single instance of one male's domination over one woman will become a reality for all women.

At dinner, the lines of gender demarcation strengthen as the repercussions of Bette's prostituting herself surface. Fascinated by Bette's subservient behavior, Imbrecht congratulates Jan on his success:

> I can see, people do a lot for money.
> She can give and keep quiet,
> while he does whatever he wants.
> In addition, I can see with which things
> we can overcome bad wives. (309-12)

Their conversation ends with Imbrecht's decision that he will employ the same method to achieve the submission of his own wife Lijsbet. Jan assures him that though risky, the experience is great fun. Imbrecht's reply, "Dear Jan, believe me, / here is food beyond compare" (398-99), in light of other sexual innuendos, perhaps refers to more than just the pastry: "food beyond compare" could carry multiple meanings, including male dominion, female submission, or even just Imbrecht's pleasure in watching the scene played out before him.

Meanwhile, a parallel conversation (but from the opposite perspective) takes place between Lijsbet and Bette. Lijsbet chides, "how did you get yourself into this position? / How did you sell yourself like this?" (364-65). Continuing her diatribe, Lijsbet insists, "And if he [Jan] remained master up to this hour, / we would all suffer for it. It would hurt us all" (370-71). The "we" she refers to is not simply the two of them, but rather all wives who are also in danger of succumbing to their husbands. Finally, Lijsbet convincingly persuades Bette to reconsider selling out:

> You'd best change your tune immediately,
> then you will be mistress of everything.
> And if he comes out on top,
> the men will want amongst themselves
> to dominate their wives this way.
> And there is no woman on the street
> who can carry on with her affairs,
> without being worse off because of you. (380-87)

This passage, rife with sexual innuendo, summarizes the key conflict in the play, the ever-present battle of the sexes. At this point Jan is "on top," if not physically, at least psychologically. Bette sacrifices her position of dominance the moment she accepts the fur. Realizing the potentially widespread consequences of prostituting herself, Bette decides to change her situation: "God curse the fur / that I ever surrendered myself" (392-93).

The play ends (at least in our production) with Bette's rubbing Jan's pastry in his face, thus resuming her rightful position of supremacy. Order, at least in *Boss for Three Days*, is restored. Because his perception of it is skewed, Jan's quest for "honor," or at least a chance to display some manliness in public, leaves him in much the same position from which he began the play. Bette's prostitution, although exposed to Imbrecht and Lijsbet, presumably does not hinder her from regaining total control of her marriage. A theme relevant even today, this gender-based struggle for power underpins the entire play and gives *Boss for Three Days*, a seemingly simple little farce, rich undertones.