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**The Language of Power:
A Feminist Reading of *Nu noch***

Feminist studies have given us many new terms and ways of looking at women's roles in literary texts. Feminist critics often discuss the importance of speech and language and the strength of a woman's voice or the absence of her voice. Language, then, is a means to power, and the ways women direct or use language can affect the balance of power in their relationships. But can the same terms and approaches be applied to men's roles? In the Middle Dutch play *Nu noch* we see four characters - three men and one woman - using language in their struggle for power. The wife in *Nu noch*, for instance, uses her power of speech to nag at and belittle her husband. Her efforts work: she makes her husband miserable and cowardly. The men in *Nu noch*, however, are not nearly as successful in their manipulation of language. The result is that in this play there seems to be a reversal of stereotypical gender roles. The wife appears to have all the strength - both verbally and physically - while the men are disempowered.

What is it that makes the men seem to be the weaker sex in this play? Many feminists, particularly those influenced by French feminist theory, believe that language is phallogentric and therefore automatically privileges men, but in *Nu noch* the men are ultimately defeated by their inability to use language successfully. In *Nu noch*, then, is language - and, by association, society - gynocentric? Is this a female-centered, female-dominated society? By looking at the use of language in this play, I hope to gain a better understanding of the positions men and women held, both in this play and in the society which produced it. Specifically, I want to look at the ways in which the male characters in this play attempt to overcome their feelings of inadequacy by using speech and language to gain power. By looking at all three male characters, first the neighbor, then the priest, and then the husband, we will see that even though their attempts to gain power through language are quite different, ultimately they are all equally unsuccessful. Finally, by looking at the way the wife

obtains her power, we will see that although she appears to be victorious, she is ultimately as unsuccessful as the men.

Before we consider the neighbor, I should acknowledge that since the manuscript contains no stage directions, our director, Julianne Roe, made several interpretations based on the lines the characters speak. In our performance at Plymouth, New Hampshire, for example, the husband enters the first scene drunk, even though the text does not directly say that he does so. At the opening of our production of the play, in any case, the neighbor sees Jack stumbling home from a day at the tavern and seizes on the opportunity to take advantage of his tipsy friend. When Jack complains about his troublesome wife, the neighbor responds "Well, I'll give you a few *words* of good advice" (26, my emphasis). The neighbor claims to have knowledge of some special words that can help Jack. He convinces Jack that this knowledge or language will give him power and control over his shrewish wife, yet he is obviously deceiving and controlling Jack himself. Jack hesitates - unwilling to be taken in - but the neighbor continues to use his power of suggestion. He asks, "Suppose afterwards she stuffed your face with good food, just as you like it?" (46-47). Through his words, the neighbor successfully convinces Jack to place his trust in him. At this point, the neighbor's manipulation has succeeded - Jack is his pawn.

The neighbor does not just stop there, however. His scheme gets more elaborate as he realizes that he can also manipulate the wife. He continues developing his plan as he says, "And then I'll come and explain to her that she's knocked you around until you went crazy, that you're possessed by the devil, and that it's her fault for beating you up so much" (59-62). We see not only the development of the plan, but also the neighbor's eagerness to be able to set the plan in motion. Throughout the play, the

neighbor controls the course of action through his language. His ability to use speech to manipulate others brings him power. He is gifted with this power - this art of persuasion - and he uses it both for his own amusement and for the sake of domination.

Now, while the neighbor uses his language to manipulate others, the priest uses his language in a less malicious manner. The wife calls upon the priest to help her cure her husband's strange affliction because she believes in the power of the church. The priest responds to the wife's pleas by saying, "What? That's a bad sign. 'Now again' - what curse could be hidden in that?" (138). He has no solution in mind - he knows no cure for this unusual madness. When he goes to see Jack he falls back on the only power he knows - language in the form of chants and prayers. Unfortunately for him, his language is not as convincing as the neighbor's. His chants and admonitions provide amusement for the audience and even for Jack and the neighbor, who can easily see through his pompous invocation, but they are not effective.

After trying unsuccessfully to conjure Jack with everything from the two trees that were the sun and the moon to the trolls that fly in storms, the priest says, "Why, God help us! I don't know what's the matter with him" (175). The difference between his styles of speech is striking. The pretentiousness of his chanting is absent in his regular, true voice and behind that pretense is a powerless man. After Jack is miraculously cured, the priest leaves, saying, "Now God be praised that this evil has departed from this man" (201-02). He tries to reaffirm his power through his ability to exorcise demons from the mad husband. But while he may think he has exhibited his power through the language of prayer, his powerlessness is transparent to everyone but himself.

Perhaps the character whose use of speech for power is most complex is the husband, Jack. Jack opens the play by lamenting his sad condition and the lack of power he has at home. He says, "If I go out I can have at least some fun. But the minute I get home I'm like a slave and live the life of a dog" (4-6). Jack's frustration is obvious. While he believes that he should be the one who has authority in his own home, his wife is actually the dominant partner there. The home is her domain - her arena for power. All of his previous attempts to use language to usurp

his wife's power have failed. When the neighbor asks him, "Have you tried cursing her? Sweet-talking her?" (22), Jack sadly responds, "I've tried everything I thought would work. Sweet-talk or cussing, it's all the same" (23). Since both extremes of language - swearing and sweet-talking - have failed, the neighbor is able to convince Jack that what he must do is give up his power of speech.

The very thought of saying only "Now again" is frightening to Jack. He is understandably reluctant: "Why should I make even more trouble for myself than I've got already? If she wallops me, and I say 'Now again', she'll only wallop me a thousand times more. Then what will I do?" (43-45). Without the power of language, Jack knows he doesn't stand a chance against his wife. He will be powerless - completely unable to defend himself against her vicious blows if all he can say is "Now again." The neighbor reassures him, though, that he only has to say it until he's "softened her up" (42). That reassurance, and the promise of delicious food once the plan has succeeded, are enough for Jack, and he agrees to go ahead with the plan. When he arrives home he sticks to the plan and will only say "Now again" through the beatings and verbal abuse he receives from his wife. He is significantly meeker than he was in the first scene with the neighbor, and his wife is clearly the dominant person in the relationship. When all the beatings have failed, however, Jack's wife surrenders. His confidence escalates as he realizes that the neighbor's plan has worked. Giving up his power of speech has brought him power in his marriage. In our performance, Jack's "Now again" becomes at this point strong and taunting. He can frighten his wife and control her behavior instead of being frightened and controlled himself.

When the wife, the priest, and the neighbor come back and Jack is finally fed, he sees that his wife is defeated and he reclaims his voice and begins speaking again. He is confident of his power now, and he tells her, "I'm perfectly all right. As long as you promise not to be mad at me any longer" (199). He believes he has found an infallible way to seize power and that if his wife ever starts nagging at him again, he can simply stop speaking except for his influential two words.

The complexity of this scene is clear when we

realize that at the moment he reclaims his voice and begins speaking again, Jack loses all hope of ever having power over his wife. When his wife comes back into the house to say she's "heard every word" (219) Jack immediately cries, "Help! Help!" (220). He swears he'll never say it again and implicates the neighbor as the force behind the plot in the first place. At this point, the neighbor too loses all of his power to control others through language. He tries to appeal to Jack by crying out, "Murder! Help! This woman's going to kill us!" (221). Unfortunately, Jack will no longer listen and the neighbor's words are powerless. Then the neighbor tries to manipulate the situation once more by saying desperately, "Sir, I did not advise you to do it. You just leave me out of this" (226-27). Again, his words fail. The wife is now the only powerful character.

All three men in this play have failed in their attempts to gain power through language. The priest is still transparent in his attempts to hide behind his prayers, the neighbor cannot keep his power over the couple, and Jack is worse off than he was when he started. The men all realize the power that language holds, but they are not successful at using language in such a way as to gain that power, or to hold onto it. In the end, the three men remain powerless and no speech can redeem them. As the wife chases Jack and the neighbor out of the house, crying, "You just watch out!" (231), it appears that she has the last word.

But does she? Before we accept this play as a testament to women's power, we must look more closely at the ways the wife obtains and uses her power. Like her male counterparts, the wife also tries to use language to control others. When Jack first returns home and will only say "Now again," the wife orders, "Shut up! Goddamn you for living so long, you old fool!" (74). She continues to berate him through the entire scene, saying things like "Leave me alone with this 'Now again.' Go to the devil" (84-85). But for her, too, words alone fail. The wife's language is almost as meaningless as her husband's. She "scolds and curses" (7) and threatens him, but her words hold no power over Jack and she resorts to physical violence, saying, "Hell! It's useless. I'll give you something to yell about!" (93). It is only through beatings that the wife can obtain any power over the men around her. And as we condemn the behavior of men who beat women, so must we eventually condemn the wife. As much as we may

long to see her as a female heroine, resisting and outwitting the men who try to manipulate her, the author - presumably a male - does not permit it. As members of an audience, we have as little sympathy for the wife as we do for the husband. Thus, when she chases the men out of the house, instead of laughing at the men's weakness and cheering for her victory, we can only laugh at the whole group and leave feeling slightly disappointed.

So it is here, as we exit the play, that the vision of female power in *Nu noch* falls apart. Regardless of the temporary female domination in the play, *Nu noch* is anything but gyno-centric. The wife's use of language is ultimately even less successful than the men's feeble attempts to manipulate speech, because her speech makes her shrewish and undesirable. The male characters here are defeated but not oppressed, and the wife, who obtains her power by beating the men around her into submission, is not a positive image of female power, but an antifeminist representation of women. In this play, the woman may have won the battle, but she has lost the war.