

On Liz Lochhead's *Educating Agnes* (2008)

A review by Oludolapo Ojediran, Queen Margaret University, Musselburgh, UK

Educating Agnes (2008) is Liz Lochhead's most recent adaption of Moliere's *School For Wives* (1906). The play showcases another level of domestic and psychological ignorance through the vanity and self-deception of men who think women will never become aware of their situation. On the surface, this is a play that displays the extremes of jealousy, but through further analysis, it exposes the battle between the male and female gender. It also reveals marriage as a social construct which is based on an economic contract that makes most women voiceless within any phallogocentric society.

This play looks beyond the cultural expectation of women and the 'other' that relates a wife's submission to extreme ignorance and cultural domestic expectations such as sewing, quilting, praying, spinning, and loving the man to whom she pledged her allegiance no matter the situation is. The female is portrayed as 'other' (in terms of being marginalised and being voiceless) in this play and this exposes the marginalised coming to terms with their negative situation and trying to break away from such tradition that they feel inhibited them.

The play portrays the selfish and unemotional nature of men in the character of a middle aged man, Arnolphe. He brings a young female ward out of a convent and announces his intention of marrying her to a friend without the girl's knowledge. In *Educating Agnes*, Lochhead uses Agnes' speech and confession of love to show the extent to which the female's language and innocence can also be used against men. While Agnes displays her sincerity and love for young Horace in the presence of her benefactor and admirer who almost thwarts all their hopes of getting married, readers also see the genuineness of love displayed by the young lovers different from that of Arnolphe. The play dramatises a deceptive game with each potential lover innocently revealing their secret plans to Arnolphe who systematically and intentionally tries to thwart their plans. Arnolphe pretends to be a good friend to young Horace who reveals all his plans to him, he promises to keep Agnes safe for him and away from the good for nothing old guardian. With Arnolphe's believe that he understands women so well even when his friend Chrysalde is trying to dissuade him from marrying young Agnes, his superiority complex almost ruins him. During their dialogue, he talks with all assurance to Chrysalde about women, especially Agnes who is unaware about his benefactor's marriage plan to her. Arnolphe describes women derogatorily, qualifies women with contempt and abusive words like 'pits' and 'living ends' and sees men at the mercy of the cheating women (13). This description summarises his own fears and reservations about women in the higher class like Chrysalde's wife, and his main reason for choosing little Agnes who, he feels, can rarely differentiates

between her left and right. Arnolphe's lines express his expectations of a married woman who is not expected to act freely anymore because of the cultural expectations that comes along with marriage and the social belief that a married woman need not think about anything other than her husband. His belief that young females cannot reason outside their cultural expectations and their responsibilities to their husbands, children and marriage is evidenced in his reference to Chrysalde's wife's intelligence and freedom. Agnes is able to deconstruct man's domination and societal view of marriage as she becomes the mouthpiece through which Lochhead creates a positive model of femininity.

At first, Lochhead explores formal and ideological limitations through Agnes to show a behavioural expectation which corresponds with Holland and Eisenhart (1990) that young women learn to judge themselves in terms of their conformity to culture and to differentiate between their romantic and friendship relationships. The young women's failure to do this is always considered a rebellious act. Holland and Eisenhart's view later changes as Agnes engages in a rebellious act which starts with her knowledge and education that becomes an important tool for her socialisation, articulation and assertion of 'self' within the society.

Lochhead's female characters progressively develop a sense of maturity within their male dominant societies outside their domestic spheres. This is evidenced in the play whereby Arnolphe is depicted as being romantic but in reality he is a misogynist which Flood (2007) describes as an attitude common in men but also exists in women towards other women. This is an ideology that accompanies a patriarchal system where societies continue to place women in a subordinate position with limited access to power and decision making. Although Arnolphe helps Agnes to grow out of some socio-cultural expectations of the female gender through education, he becomes a misogynist when Agnes refuses to fall into the category of the acceptable socio-cultural women. Arnolphe fails to realise that there should be some degree of sexual, intellectual, cultural and marital freedom for women before or even after marriage, all he is interested in is his own selfish need for Agnes to satisfy him, obey him and remain ignorant for life. He makes Agnes see marriage as a sacred union in which women are in bondage.

Agnes' revelation about Arnolphe's view of marriage reveals her inner strength to confront the issue of marriage that her guardian describes as a master-servant relationship. Lochhead's portrayal of the new Agnes is to change the thoughts of men like Arnolphe in the existing patriarchal culture where women are referred to as acquired decorative property. Although Agnes is regarded as mute and ignorant from the beginning of the play, at this stage Lochhead makes her gain her audibility by falling in love with a man who sees everything in marriage as being positive and allowing freedom. The content of this letter makes Arnolphe treat Agnes in a more hostile manner. He gets angrier because he realises that Agnes is aware of her ignorance over all these years. He sees Agnes' letter as a way of blackmailing him despite all his assumed love and care towards her and he regrets educating Agnes towards dismissing her feelings and regards towards him.

Lochhead uses the play to reiterate the importance in female education and its societal benefits that seek to liberate women from old time traditions, which limit their potential to the domestic sphere. Arnolphe mutters of Agnes' ingratitude furiously after Horace reads the letter to him, saying 'what was so great about making madam literate?' (53). This exposes some men's belief

that it is a waste of money and resources to educate the female gender who will end up doing the domestic chores when married. He regrets ever allowing Agnes to have access to education instead of the nunnery way of life that could have made her silent throughout her lifetime.

However, Arnolphe's refusal to listen to his friend's opinion about this new type of woman whom Agnes has become through education and falling in love with a man who sees dignity in femininity and voice makes him a loser at the end. He feels that he can still control Agnes who is filled with expressive desires; ready for a cultural and social change that she has been denied.

Works Cited

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