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Stereotypes as Reinforced Structure in *M. Butterfly*

Hope Hoffman

“And what was waiting for me back in Paris?” Gallimard asks himself, “[B]etter Chinese food than I’d eaten in China” (Hwang 2859). Gallimard’s mind constantly fulfills his expectations about the East rather than recognizing the region’s reality. As French diplomat who is married to a Chinese actress for twenty years before discovering that she is a man, Gallimard depends heavily on the power of stereotypes in order to keep his wife, Butterfly, as “Oriental” and female as he believes she should be. Despite living in the physical reality of the East, he never seems to leave his European home—he remains burrowed into his safe space, the fantasy realm in which his Western perceptions and stereotypes are the only reality. As Gallimard desperately preserves this fantasy, Song’s calculated role-playing keeps the stereotypes “real.” Song not only reinforces Gallimard’s fantasy, but also caters to a broader sense of imperialist nostalgia. Song knows that Gallimard “looks back with nostalgic fondness to a time when measured space was possible” (Shimakawa 349), and exploits Gallimard’s romance with stereotypes.

Though *M. Butterfly* has been examined as a deconstructivist work which disassembles stereotypes, it actually affirms their construction. At the core of *M. Butterfly* are the character’s efforts to preserve a

sense of stable boundaries and safe, measured space. Boundaries are blurred and roles often reversed, but the stereotypes remain intact throughout the play. In fact, the more these spaces are confused, the more Gallimard and Song rely on their sense of defined space in the form of clear, stereotypical roles, and they ultimately retreat into these rigid spaces. Stereotypes provide structure, orientation, and an ultimate “truth” safe from the clutches of a more chaotic reality.

On the surface, it appears that roles and boundaries would be obscured or destroyed by so much reversal and blurring. But, just as “sometimes a counterrevolutionary act is necessary to counter a counter-revolutionary act” (Hwang 2854), so sometimes role-playing is necessary to reify a fantasy role. *M. Butterfly* is riddled with role reversals which often do not question the premise of the roles, but only play with who fills them. For example, Song plays a submissive role for his Communist boss and for Gallimard, and simultaneously assumes the role of Gallimard’s dominator by taking advantage of him. Thus, Song plays three roles at once: two submissive, one dominant. Whether or not he succeeds in actually dominating is not the question. These reversals do not confuse the meanings of the roles; they only question who plays what.

Since Song uses Western male tactics to control and exploit Gallimard, the audience isn’t invited to re-evaluate how power is wielded. Watching such a simple transfer of set modes of power, we merely wonder, “Who’s got it now?”¹ For instance, by deciding which parts of the story are told at what point in the play, Song steals Gallimard’s inherent power as a Western colonizer to “tell the story” of the peoples the West dominates—he mimics the process of a dominant people taking the power to represent the colonized with stereotypes. And, though non-Western peoples are traditionally exoticized and made a spectacle or art object in Western displays of dominance,² it is not Song, the actor (inherently the center of attention on stage) who is the spectacle—it is Gallimard, who becomes the butt of a rash of jokes at parties all over the West. Song also takes a discourse traditionally used by the Western male to assert power over females—“Your mouth says no, but your eyes

say yes” (Hwang 2866)—and uses it against Gallimard. The most dramatic switch in positions of power occurs at the close of the play. Gallimard becomes his own “Perfect Woman,” the one he wanted Song to be all along, and Song plays the part of the man who exploits and deserts that woman (Gallimard). It doesn’t matter that Gallimard is not actually a woman and Song never was—this role-playing reinforces the paradigm of male dominance just as it did when the actors were reversed, because the roles remain the same.

As a colonized subject, Song seems to have a “mobility of consciousness” (qtd. in Shimakawa) which enables him to “occupy . . . [Western] subjectivities in a process which at once both enacts and yet de-colonizes . . . relations to [his] real conditions of existence” (qtd. in Shimakawa): he acts out the stereotype and occupies the fantasy space, using this advantageous position to take power from his colonizer. Song’s reveling in the power of stereotypes is key to his behavior. “I take the words [of stereotypes] from your mouth. Then I wait for you to come and retrieve them,” he says (Hwang 2865). Song sets the safe space of the stereotype as a trap; he tells Gallimard what Gallimard wants to hear, then expects him to take the bait, and fall into his own fantasy. Song depends on the accuracy of his assumptions about men in order to capture Gallimard’s devotion. He uses them as formulas to calculate his seduction. For example, because he is confident that “Men always believe what they want to hear. So a girl can tell the most obnoxious lies and the guys will believe them every time” (Hwang 2863), he proceeds to tell Gallimard exactly what he wants to hear about Eastern women, and is convinced of this “truth” enough to hang the entire success of his espionage mission on this assumption.

Recognition of the power of role-playing is crucial to the characters’ actions in general. Gallimard also depends on the boundaries of safe, fantasy spaces as guidelines dictating how he interacts with Song. Basing his perception of Song on stereotypes of “Oriental” peoples, he treats Song as a submissive female because he assumes that “the Oriental in her” (Hwang 2837) guarantees that Song has these characteristics. Gallimard also expects Song to submit to his Western/male

power because “Orientals will always submit to a greater force” (Hwang 2846). Song, in turn, uses this essentializing statement to his own advantage. For example, in order to avoid exposing himself to Gallimard he submits to Gallimard's request to strip, because he knows the submission itself will satisfy Gallimard and eliminate the need to actually strip.

Roles and boundaries not only determine how Gallimard and Song interact, but also shape the characters' identities in relation to one another. Song's identity as a weak Eastern woman depends on Gallimard's expectation that his fantasy would be fulfilled. In turn, “Gallimard's identity as Western male . . . derived its contours in relief to Song's identity as Eastern female” (Shimakawa 349). Gallimard develops his identity as a dominant Western man by juxtaposing it against a submissive Eastern female, thus defining himself largely in relation to his fantasy.

Though Gallimard accuses Song of having an identity problem (Hwang 2866), Song's problem is minor compared to Gallimard's reality problem. It doesn't matter what Song's identity is—Gallimard will perceive it as whatever he wants. Gallimard wants to separate himself from any reality which might undermine his fantasy of Western male dominance; this impulse is illustrated by his desire to divorce his wife when she reveals to him what he thinks are “ridiculous ideas, that the West is falling apart, that China was spitting in our faces” (Hwang 2860). Gallimard refuses outright to acknowledge reality; even “knowing the difference [between fantasy and reality],” he says, “I choose fantasy” (Hwang 2867). When Song no longer sustains the fantasy of Butterfly, Gallimard dismisses him and maintains the fantasy without him. To Gallimard, the fantasy is real, and Song is “without substance . . . so little like my Butterfly” (Hwang 2864). In reality, Song is “real as hamburger” (Hwang 2867), so Gallimard doesn't want him—he wants only his image of Butterfly. Song (reality) and Butterfly (fantasy) are split into distinct entities in this exchange:

GALLIMARD: You have to do what I say! I'm
conjuring you up in my mind!

SONG: Rene, I've never done what you said.

Song then defies Gallimard's orders and physically transforms into the real, male Song, while the obedient Butterfly remains intact in Gallimard's mind. All the apparent contradiction and confusion does not alter his image of her; at the conclusion of the play, he is able to retreat into a fully intact fantasy.

Gallimard succeeds in finally living safely with Butterfly in a world where he knows who is boss. The only way he can return to Butterfly's arms is to retreat as far as possible into the realm of stereotypes ("the world of fantasy where [he] first met her" [Hwang 2868]), and into the absolute heart of his perceptions: himself. He has "found her at last" only when he becomes his fantasy, describing himself as "Madame Butterfly" (Hwang 2869).

"No matter what your eyes tell you, you can't ignore the truth" (Hwang 2862), Song tells Gallimard. He is right. No matter what Gallimard sees (even Song's penis), the facts don't change the ultimate "truth" of the stereotype. Song expects to disillusion Gallimard by proving that he is a man (saying, "Look at me, you fool" [Hwang 2866]), but he learns that it is impossible to destroy the image Gallimard has constructed as the ultimate truth. Gallimard really is no fool; he realizes that his deception has more to do with his own perception than with Song's disguise. He can still believe in his Butterfly even after her physical representation is destroyed in the "unsafe" space beyond the boundary of his fantasy world—while safe inside it, he has "a date with my Butterfly" (Hwang 2867).

The stereotypes and predictions presented turn out to be "true" because they are supported rather than disproved. For example, when Song falls back on his stereotypes about men, his expectations are realized: men see what they want to see. Unfortunately, this means that Gallimard doesn't see Song—he only sees Butterfly. This confirmation of expectations leaves Song not in a safe space, but in a no-man's land of invisibility; by acknowledging Song only as an embodiment of an image, Gallimard disembodies the "real" Song and replaces him with stereotypes. Gallimard's stereotypes serve him just as tragically, direct-

ing him to symbolically commit suicide.

Gallimard's ultimate triumph is that he preserves his fantasy space despite all Song's tricks which might sabotage it. In a post-modern world riddled with paradox, role reversals, and broken boundaries, Hwang's characters prove how stereotypes can be not only saved from destruction, but in fact are further reified. Ultimately, Gallimard is not fooled by any of Song's guises—they never enter his true consciousness. "I am pure imagination," he says. "And in imagination I will remain" (Hwang 2868).

NOTES

1. Theodore Roosevelt advised those wishing to become a world power, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." This transfer of power could be compared to a relay race in which the baton is the "big stick."
2. Fusco and her partner Guillermo toured America and Europe with an interactive performance art exhibit: inside a cage, they played the stereotypical roles of "undiscovered" Amerindians from an island off the coast of Mexico. They catered to the audiences' expectations of what "primitive" (non-white) natives were like, performing "traditional tasks" such as sewing voodoo dolls, and conforming to the idea that foreign Natives should be spoken for rather than telling their own story (at press conferences, the artists did not speak, they made unintelligible sounds and gestures meant to meet the public's expectations of non-white natives).

By letting the audience speak for and represent them, the artists focused their work on the audiences' interactions and how those outside the cage interpreted their performance. This "reverse ethnography" held a mirror up to the audience to see what they thought of "Native" and "undiscovered" people. The audience readily assumed roles of power and of the colonizer. Some objectified the Amerindians sexually, some dehumanized them by treating them as if they really were zoo specimens, and one woman apologized for taking away their land. I don't think the "white" world view has changed much since people were displayed in the 1800s. The same basic reactions and perceptions are still in play, though we are more conscious of and less comfortable with them than ever before.

M. Butterfly illustrates how, just as in Fusco's experiment, attitudes and expectations remain intact even as "real" political and social circumstances change.

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