

Re-dressing the icons: Unmasking white women's mythologies in Pam Gems's plays *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, and *Camille*

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Abstract

Pam Gems developed her vision and theatrical techniques through dealing with historical subjects, and her example has been influential, making the history play an important characteristic of contemporary women's drama in the U. K. In her plays, Gems distorts the mythologized figures of Queen Christina, Marguerite Gautier, and Edith Piaf by deconstructing received notions in which these icons are culturally imbricated within. This paper will examine how Pam Gems deploys her dramaturgy subversively in three plays Queen Christina, Piaf, and Camille, to demystify and to demythologize three cultural icons – Marguerite Gauthier, Edith Piaf, Queen Christina - via myth-breaking, in an effort to dramatize the human reality of women who have been transformed into cultural symbols.

Key words: *cultural symbols, demythologize, historiographic, subversive dramaturgy, mythologized*

According to Christopher Innes (2002), Pam Gems developed her vision and theatrical techniques by dealing with historical subjects, and Gems's example has been influential, making the history play a notable characteristic of contemporary women's drama in the U. K. since the late 1960s (p. 237). In an essay on the interests of women dramatists, Pam Gems (1989) has observed that:

Today's chemically mutated woman has been released from the murderous dangers of traditional childbed. We are able to begin to explore, to become aware of and to rewrite our own history. We have to discover who and what we are. We must discern our own needs, our demands, in order to know what our contribution should relevantly be. (p. 149)

Karen Worth (1989) remarks that Gems is one of several women playwrights concerned with "...deromanticizing and 'earthing' the images of women they have inherited from the theater and culture of the past"(p. 4). For Dimple Godiwala (2003) Gems's drama is for the most part *herstoriographic* in its methodology (p. 88), or what Elaine Aston (2000) has categorized as a revisionist style of biographical theatre (p. 157), by which Gems undercuts mythology, heterosexism and the category 'woman' as she subverts dominant patriarchal ideology. As Godiwala (2003) argues, in many of her plays Gems:

...endeavors to delineate women as a category within which lies limitless possibilities. She (re) discovers; she un-thinks the unifying regulatory history which seeks to homogenize and categorize a multiplicity of voices and gendered positions under the single rubric 'Woman.' She is Cixous' woman writing woman." (p. 87)

In *Queen Christina* (1977), *Piaf* (1978), and *Camille* (1984), Gems distorts the mythologized figures of Queen Christina, Marguerite Gautier, and Edith Piaf by deconstructing received notions in which these icons are culturally endowed. By casting each of these characters against a familiar and highly romanticized picture, Gems critiques the construction of women's sexuality within normative and regulatory masculinist orthodoxies and heterosexual ideals. In this paper, I will explore those strategies of interrogation by which Gems demythologizes each cultural icon, and in the process critiques ideologies of domination.

In her first play that brought her international recognition as a playwright, *Queen Christitna* (1977), Gems examines the deforming pressures of socially constructed gender roles, by addressing such

issues as sexual definition, biological determinism, and social programming through the historical figure of Queen Christina. Gems identifies the Greta Garbo movie as her source, remarking that the image she carried away was that of "...a shining, pale, intellectual beauty, who had romantically chosen freedom"(as cited in Worth, 1989, p. 7). For Gems, the Hollywood Christina, unaided by the classic beauty of Garbo's face and her strong personality, managed to impress upon audiences a woman who had been brought up as a man and trained to be a king, and who then renounced it all when she realized what her true destiny was, to be a beautiful woman adored by the man she adored. As Gems observes, "The real Christina was a dark, plain woman with a crippled shoulder, daughter of a beautiful mother whose health and nervous system had been ruined by yearly pregnancies in the effort to provide a male heir"(as cited in Worth, 1989, p. 7). Thus, in contrast to the Queen Christina with the poetic aspects of Greta Garbo, Gems casts a plain woman of intellectual rigour, prone to philosophical querying, a bluestocking interested in art, theology and philosophy.

Similarly, Gems's Christina is bisexual, who has had to work hard for any kind of sexual fulfillment, but who still craves the love of a man, one handsome young man in particular. Christina hunts, decides military strategy and state policy, as well as having sexual relations with other young women –such as Ebba, the beautiful lady-in-waiting-and her success as a substitute male ruler handicaps her from fulfilling the female requirement to ensure political stability by procreation. In contrast to the biological reproductive machine who is the Queen mother, "...Christina is best described by utilizing the Lacanian phrase-'a *jouissance* beyond the phallus' quite literally-if only to signify her non-dependence on males for her pleasures"(Godiwala, 2003, p. 94).

Christina's aversion to the prospect of marriage is clearly illustrated in the first part of the play in the following remark, "My dear Chanut, the prospect of a royal marriage is about as attractive as a forced march through mud"(Gems, 2004, p. 200). Christina is shown adamant in refusing to bear children, as she declares, "No, if I must marry I must...but I'm damned if I'll breed for them and be destroyed, like my mother"(p. 201). Christina's prolonged negation of marriage and motherhood can be traced to a condition that Adrienne Rich has labeled *matrophobia*, "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother"(as cited in Godiwala, 2003, p. 97). She rejects another arranged marriage with Prince Karl and abdicates in a scene which, as her mother hysterically announces, is like a wedding. This scene ends with a symbolic expression of freedom as, Christina, left alone, tears off the white wedding-style dress to reveal riding clothes beneath.

When Christina abdicates her throne, she searches Europe for a way of life in which she can be herself, buying sexual pleasures from both men and women, and is shown coming to terms with her sexual identity. Christina lives the life of a "free rover," romping through Europe, antagonizing everybody: the French bluestockings because she is flippant about feminism and likes men; the pope by challenging conventional Catholic doctrine that associates sexual intercourse with bearing children. When she meets the two famous Bluestockings in Paris, Christina is disappointed with the radically separatist nature of the two women's lives, and, in particular, of their hatred of men, whom they define as the enemy. Her meeting with the Pope in Rome proves equally ineffectual, in that the all-knowing father figure's doctrine cannot accommodate her sexual freedom. As Cousin (1996) remarks, "Instead of women with individual characteristics and needs, the Pope sees 'woman' and, for him, woman has 'a sacred destiny,' which is to procreate within a marriage sanctioned by the Church, and so, to become the basis of an ordered and orderly society"(p. 155).

In the closing scene of the play, when a sympathetic cardinal urges her to campaign for the Polish throne, Christina rejects the papal offer, and after having saved a child's life, she reflects on being a woman. Christina questions why should she, a woman, play a man's warlike part which works against women? As Christina remarks to the papal emissary Azzolino, "You say you want me for the fight, and it's true. I was bred as a man, despising the weakness of women. I begin to question the favour. To be invited to join the killing, why,...Half the world rapes and destroys-must women, the other half, join in?"(Gems, 2004, p. 235). Why should she have been denied her right to have children and at the same time to possess an active life of the mind? In an attempt to refashion a gendered identity, Christina repudiates war and violence, the futility in destroying life, associated with the masculine, to contemplate the value of creating life.

Consequently, Queen Christina is ultimately the Fe-Male Bisexual, to borrow from Godiwala, constructed by her upbringing as a man but who rejects compulsory heterosexuality, repudiates the norms of hetero-patriarchy, adopts and relinquishes a masculine script, to finally reconsider the

feminine prerogative of childbearing. In this regards, Gems's treatment of Christina, as Worth (1989) suggests:

...offers effective resistance to the romantic image from which it drew its charges, reshaping the audiences view to allow for understanding of different agonies: above all, the agony of a woman who is not Garbo but just the reverse; whether she lives as man or woman, queen or private person, life cannot compensate for that initial handicap. (p. 10)

In her next play, *Piaf* (1978), Gems stages the gap between the star image of the French cabaret singer Edith Piaf, known as *piaf* or 'the little sparrow', and the hardship of her working-class life, originating in poverty, destitution and prostitution. It is a play constructed on a series of rapid sketches which illustrate Piaf's rapid rise to fame and her subsequent deterioration symbolically and efficiently, with many points of convergence to the most recent film biography written and directed by Olivier Dahan. In characteristic Gems fashion, the demythologizing of the star begins with the meta-theatrical device of the first scene, which begins the play with Piaf in concert but at the downslide of her career. According to Elaine Aston (2000) this cinematic-dramatic technique of transposing the past into the present functions to "...highlight the mythologizing dynamic of the image, culturally owned by both the fictional spectator of the concert and the real spectators of Gems's play, but demythologized in the moment of the failed introduction"(p. 162). This short opening scene not only shows Piaf caught in the spotlight – centre-stage- unable to perform because of acute heroin addiction, but clearly emphasizes Piaf's gender and class resistance to a male-dominated world. As she struggles against the manager who tries to remove her from the stage physically, Piaf yells and swears at him "...get your fucking hands off me, I ain't done nothing yet" (Gems, 2004, p. 13). The eighth scene of the second act is a reprisal of the play's opening scene: Piaf's dependence on heroin disables her ability to perform, and she ruins performance after attempted performance, only to be dragged off the stage unceremoniously. Piaf the legend is thus repeatedly contrasted to Piaf the woman, whose backstreet crudity, verbal and non-verbal coarseness and vulgarity, stands in direct contrast to the glamour of international stardom with which this cultural icon has been imbued.

Piaf is shown surviving in a man's world as a physically brutal and brutalizing experience. According to Aston (2000) "Gems captures this in the *gestus* in which Piaf is struck across the face by different men: by the Inspector who arrests her after she is implicated in the murder of the club owner Louis Lepree, by the club manager, and later in her career, at the point of breakdown, by a male attendant"(p. 162). Her rise to stardom is a process of constant exploitation by the men who manage or marry her, and by her public who project their desires unto her. Against this prevalent exploitation, Gems casts the friendship that develops between Piaf and Antoine, originating at the time the young Edith walked the streets of Paris before the advent of her singing career. This friendship establishes a female solidarity, based on an intimate rapport originating in a sisterhood formed whilst working clients together, and giving Piaf's personal life a sense of continuity which spans her life.

Piaf is regarded as a troublesome woman who refuses to modify her behavior to an acceptable feminine norm. Although she benefits from the material comforts which her singing career brings her, she rejects the values, behaviors, and niceties of middle-class femininity. This is expressed through her sexual freedom, which subverts all the moral codes. According to Michelene Wandor (1986) Gems's Piaf:

...is a woman for whom female independence means an active and vigorous sexuality, which at its most intense parallels the orgasmic satisfaction she gets from singing, and a bristly, individualistic identification with being working class which enables her to resist all the flannel and hypocrisy of showbiz. (p. 163)

Swearing, copulating and urinating in public signal Piaf's refusal to conform to an acceptable standard of feminine behaviour. Resilient, defiant and strong-willed, Gems's Piaf defies the ravenous commercialization of her talent by resisting compromises to her personal and artistic integrity. As Piaf herself declares, "Will they take the rough with the smooth, will they hell! They want the product, they want that all right, all wrapped up with a feather in its ass, but songs-what do they know about songs"(Gems, 2004, pp. 58-59).

In the second act of the play, Gems stages the gradual disintegration of the star performer and the woman, by ruptures in the visual text of a disintegrating corporeality with the aural text of the singing voice. These short scenes depict Piaf at the height of fame, Piaf debilitated by drugs, Piaf's attempts to help several young boys achieve fame, the death of her lover, the boxer Marcel Cerdan in a plane

crash; the driving accidents and heroin addictions she overcomes again and again, to return to the stage to sing and to mesmerize her audiences once more. Car accidents, were a contributory factor in Piaf's deterioration, and Gems cleverly manipulates the results of these multiple collisions by depicting Piaf in performance breaking down, missing her cues, and finally, having to be carried off the stage. The play ends with the death of Piaf in her wheelchair. As the lights fade to black, the audience hears the voice of Piaf singing 'Non, je ne regrette rien.' The mortality of the woman is juxtaposed with the immortality of the legend. The lyrics point to the woman who regrets nothing of her life; the scene shows the more painful reality of an early death. Yet, this is another statement by Gems on womanhood which resists convenient labels and goes against the normative grain. For Godiwala (2003) Piaf emerges as a "...hard-headed foul-mouthed survivor who is prone to emotional vulnerability; generous hearted, insensitive, intense, with the ability to enjoy life to the fullest with no regrets. And a knack for bouncing back from each catastrophe with a vigour and a verve which characterizes her dichotomousness"(p. 114).

The story of *Camille* comes from Alexandre Dumas fils's 1848 novel *La Dame aux Camellias*, in which he recounts the story of a Parisian courtesan, Marguerite Gautier, who has transformed herself from a peasant girl to a woman of exceptional beauty and stature, and who has earned herself the privilege of selling herself to the wealthiest. Dumas fils's story, which is based on his real-life love affair with Alphonsine Duplessis, has been further interpreted in Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853), and George Cukor's 1936 film *Camille*, with Greta Garbo once again in the title role. For Dumas fils, Marguerite's tragedy erupts not from the personal compromises she has had to make, but from the tuberculosis that eventually kills her, and from her fervid, ill-fated love affair with Armand Duval. In Gem's treatment of the same story, she deglamorizes the nineteenth century courtesan image through various strategies of interrogation by focusing on roles and relationships, and on endings that may or may not be anticipated.

To begin, in Pam Gems's *Camille* (1984) the only women characters presented are prostitutes, and the completely male-dominated class system is shown by Gems to be corrupt and depraved. Gems expands the limited notions of human relationships, prominent in Dumas fils's focus on the love affair that develops between Marguerite and Armand, to include same-sex friendships that are most satisfying and reliable bonds. Marguerite's friendship with Sophie and Armand's friendship with Bela, are loving, supportive, and of a sexual nature all at once, as signified in Gems's stage directions calling for kisses "full on the lips," for both Sophie and Marguerite, and Bela and Armand. For Carlson (1989) "Admittedly the sexual and relational freedom of such moments threatens to collapse into mere decadence, but more often there radiates an openness in which the stereotypes of male and female behavior in Dumas fils are transcended"(p. 110).

In addition, Gems not only casts her courtesan as a mother, but also shows us both the boy and Marguerite's love and concern for him. It is her love for little Jean-Paul that takes precedence over her love for Armand, when Armand's father forces Marguerite to choose between the two males in her life. Gems's Marguerite is further defined apart from her passions for Armand in her strong bonds to her female friends. For Carlson (1989):

Throughout the play, the women who have survived and succeeded by trading on their bodies-Marguerite, Prudence, Sophie, and Clemence-depend on one another for support, love and advice. Although they make room for men in their lives, their relations with men rarely compete with their womanly ties. (p. 110)

The importance Gems assigns to female bonding finds a final expression in the appearance of these women around Marguerite's deathbed. Unlike the Hollywood *Camille*, Marguerite must die apart from Armand, but not apart from her female friends.

Gems casts Armand as a stereotypical male in his pursuit of women, with homosexual proclivities, a regular client and not material for romance, who is cruel and prone to abuse the courtesans whose company he seeks. At the beginning of the play, before Marguerite makes her initial and dramatic entrance, Armand's liaison with Sophie is revealed, who appears to be a toy he has tired of, and who has returned from Dieppe from what could only have been a dangerous abortion. Armand appears to have had liaisons with most of the other courtesans as well, and having now tired of them all is ready for a new distraction that will not disappoint him.

Moreover, Gems radically revises the literary figure and the moral context of Dumas' romantic story, by casting Marguerite's background as one of poverty and unremitting sexual exploitation. In the



aftermath of their passionate love-making, Marguerite recounts the horrors of her early life to Armand: raped by the men in her family from the age of five, and made pregnant by a Marquis who not only employs her as a housemaid while still an innocent girl, but also turns out to be the father of Armand, the young man she loves. Gems continues her retelling of the story by juxtaposing Armand's view of love and relationship, this heedless passion that is omnipresent in Dumas fils's novel, to Marguerite's vision of love. Armand outlines an idyllic future of mutual support and equality, a different relationship between the sexes which Gems depicts as being destroyed by financial and emotional blackmail. For Armand, love is transcendent and can provide mutual fulfillment that outweighs economic, class, or familial considerations. Conversely, Marguerite repeatedly reminds Armand that relationships have economic and class dimensions, and for women such dimensions can be particularly brutal. As Carlson (1989) argues, "A woman like herself, Marguerite tells him, must preserve her power by keeping her friends and by maintaining her economic independence" (p. 112). Although her passion for Armand is real, Marguerite's mercenary disposition has been the condition of her survival.

In the second act, all elements of society conspire against the doomed lovers: the effete Prince slashes his wrists in an attempt to persuade Armand not to leave him, and the Marquis threatens to disown and bankrupt his son, or to have Marguerite imprisoned. In her encounter with Armand's father, Marguerite is shown having to choose between maternal interest and self-interest, another of Gems's revisionary strategies. Unlike in Dumas's novel, where Marguerite is persuaded by Armand's father to give up his son for the good of the bourgeois family name, and for the sake of the impending marriage of Armand's sister into a respectable middle-class family, Gems reworks the encounter so that Marguerite chooses for her child, rather than for Armand's aristocratic family. In another revision of Dumas's play, Gems does not depict a scene of reconciliation between Marguerite and Armand. Marguerite's mercenariness causes a rupture in her attempts to be reconciled with her lover, as she orders her maid to admit the drunken Russian prince who intends to buy her with emeralds. As Elaine Aston (2000) observes, "Gems's Marguerite does not, therefore, die a romantic death in the arms of Armand, but in the presence of a creditor making an inventory of her room. Her dying words do not whisper the name of Armand, but that of her child, Jean-Paul" (p. 165). In addition, in the closing moments of the play, the *demi-mondaine* Prudence suggests to Armand that Marguerite may have preferred her freedom to his coming to the rescue.

Gems has Marguerite die within the boundaries of the alternative, sub-cultural, *demi-monde*, which she has chosen over Armand. It is this space that Gems depicts throughout the play as being a venue in which women conduct business, friendship, and sex with each other, using men merely for financial gain, and yet is not a viable alternative to hetero-patriarchy. As Aston (2000) argues Gems thus:

...demonstrates that given the prevalence of hetero-patriarchal and capitalist structures, it is much harder for women to connect socially, politically, and sexually. Hence, although alternative, intra-feminine possibilities are glimpsed and represented as desirable, they cannot overturn the dominant masculine order. (pp. 165-166)

Pam Gems was the first woman playwright to be produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company as a playwright, and to have a series of premieres with the company as well as a number of West End productions. As Caryl Gardner has remarked "...it was Gems who forced West End managers to reconsider the long held opinion that Agatha Christie is the only woman playwright of note the British theatre has produced"(cited in Aston, 2000, p. 164). To this day, only one book-length treatment of the playwright's impressive output as a dramatist exists, Dimple Godiwala's (2003), *Queer Mythologies: The Original Stageplays of Pam Gems*. Throughout her career, Gems has remained free from what she considers to be purely polemical writing. However, it is apparent that issues surrounding gender are prevalent in her plays and essays. Perhaps it is time to unearth the creative genius behind plays like *Queen Christina*, *Piaf*, *Camille*, *The Blue Angel*, and *Marlene*, to name but a few, for systematic study and a more thorough academic consideration.

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