

## Re-constituting Body and Family in *Mergers and Accusations*

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This article will look at ways in which Singaporean playwright Eleanor Wong's play *Mergers and Accusations* challenges patriarchal notions of family, and acceptable male and female roles within the family, as set forth in Singapore. My focus will be specifically on the conceptualisation of these roles as embodied, with male bodies constructed as being stronger and more reliable than weak, unreliable female bodies. I will theorise the gendered body, in the context of Singapore, as a construct aimed at establishing state control of individual bodies; however, this control can be challenged by "deviant" or "resistant" bodies. I will then go on to analyse *Mergers and Accusations* as a site of resistance to the construction of individual bodies, in which individuals seek to reconstitute the borders within which they have been placed. The state seeks to regulate gender identities within rigid boundaries of embodiment in order to reinforce its position of dominance; gender identities and family structure reflect and reify the state's position as dominant, disciplinarian father. Wong, however, presents characters who resist this authoritative discipline by functioning beyond the boundaries which seek to regulate and control individual embodiment. The characters in this play represent resisting rather than docile bodies. The play was first performed in Singapore in 1993, with Rani Moorthy and Ong Keng Sen co-directing for TheatreWorks; the Five Arts Centre of Malaysia then staged the play in Kuala Lumpur, with Anne James directing. Finally, Singaporean theatre group Wild Rice staged *Mergers and Accusations* and two other plays centred on protagonist Ellen Toh as a trilogy called *Invitation to Treat*, in 2003.

Singapore is an eminently patriarchal society, with its government posited as head of state/head of family. Dennis Haskell notes that Lee Kuan Yew stands as Singapore's ultimate father figure: "Few non-communist countries have been so stamped by the values of one man as Singapore, led out of colonialism and its identity shaped until recently by Lee" (237). Lee has positioned himself as modern Singapore's progenitor and moral guide, and from this position has professed his admiration for Confucian values, and has sought to inculcate these values in Singapore's population. While Lee proposes adherence to Confucian values as a

means of countering softness, moral laxity, rebelliousness and lack of discipline, it is also important that "Confucianism [...] positions him as a father figure, with the nation as a family for which he has responsibility and the right to expect duty and obedience" (Haskell 240-241). Heng and Devan take this point even further by referring to the state's "wishful fantasy of exact self-replication" (344); they suggest that the state wishes to father a nation which reflects it in precise, controlled detail. This is fatherhood, or reproduction, taken to the extreme.

The state inscribes and enforces the patriarchal framework at the level of personal relationships, so that the family (consisting, in this structure, of husband, wife and children) functions metonymically, representing the nation; the husband/father stands as the head of the household, to whom all the others (especially the women) are subject. Thus subservience to and respect for the patriarchal structure are ingrained. The state, in its position as "head of the family", is thus able to exert control in areas which are normally deemed personal, or subject to individual choice rather than external legislation.

The Singapore government has, for example, intervened in the area of child-bearing; having implemented strict family-planning laws in the 1970s, seeking to restrict the number of children per family, the leadership now seeks to promote a eugenically-based program of encouraging the well-educated to be fruitful and multiply, while discouraging the less well-educated. Another area of intervention is race: initially closely linked to the patriarchal country of origin and the phenotype associated with it, race has become a matter of authoritative pronouncement. Mixed-race offspring who might very closely resemble their (for example) Chinese mothers, are nonetheless labelled "Indian" or "Malay" depending on their father's officially-designated race. The state presumes a high level of authority in labelling individuals, whether according to gender or race, implying a kind of ownership—and thus, control—of their bodies. Such control of the citizenry allows the state to coerce the self-replication they desire.

Using the body as a means of control is significant, especially in the context of theatre, as actually physically *doing* a constituted identity serves to reiterate it in an inarguably concrete way. However, it also means that the inescapable physical presence of the body provides a space for the re-constitution and re-construction of the authoritatively-produced corporeal identity. An identity, once embodied, ceases to be either abstract or invisible. To physicalise an identity that is at odds with what is "acceptable" is to render it real and visible, thus challenging state rhetoric which seeks to dematerialise the (alternative) material body.

Susan Bordo has argued that the body "is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body" (90). The body is constructed in ways which reinforce the central tenets of



a state or society. Foucault articulates a similar point in terms of the exertion of discipline which “defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes [...]. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (qtd. in Bartky 130). Foucault’s concept of the construction of bodies through manipulation, coercion, and power leads us to the idea that male-female difference as generally understood in society “does not have to do with biological ‘facts’ so much as with the manner in which culture marks bodies and creates specific conditions in which they live and recreate themselves” (Gatens 230 - 231).

The construction of ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies by patriarchal societies has two broad aims. Firstly, it reiterates male superiority: women’s bodies are set as “curiously and uniquely unreliable, most evidently in the female reproductive processes [...which mark] the female body as out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason” (Shildrick and Price 3). Secondly, it subdues and marginalises expressions of gender and sexual difference. For to express a different gender or sexual identity would be to upset the male/female, superior/inferior dyad. This dyad can work only if it is acknowledged that there are only two genders, that heterosexuality is the only option, and that anything ‘other’ is simply deviant. Any body which does not submit to these binary oppositions is dangerous, stepping over boundaries and threatening to disrupt authoritative categories.

Most feminist discourse on the body points out that the male body is regarded as neutral, the norm from which the female body and the homosexual body have deviated. This ‘normative’ body is, however, also constructed: as heterosexual, not subject to the mess and unruliness of the female body, and governed by reason and intellect. For men, whether hetero- or homosexual, this constituted identity can be as false and stifling as the female construct can be for women. The problem lies with binary constructions that do not allow for or accept identities that can cross boundaries.

Binary constructions can be, and often are, challenged by the understanding that the body as it is commonly perceived—as either male or female, as being able to reproduce or not—need not be binding on the individual. Personal experiences of corporeality, although deviating from the accepted norm, need not be thought of as deviant, as such. Feminist thinking, for example, questions the idea that there can be any such thing as ‘a body,’ male or female, conceived of monolithically; it moves towards a vision of “a fluid and open embodiment. At any given moment we are always marked corporeally in specific ways, but not as an unchanging or unchangeable fixture” (Shildrick and Price 8). However, such fluidity of interpretation would undermine the rigid male/female dichotomy which underpins patriarchal control. Individual marking and interpretation of a body—for example in terms of sexual identification, or such matters as dress, bodily ornamentation, or the physical uses to which a body is put—can upset the external constitution,

control and definition of bodies.

Whether in the private domain of the family or the public domain of the state, the structure of patriarchy aims to control and discipline. Grosz points out the potential of physical bodies to disrupt and escape this discipline, noting "the ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control" (Volatile xi). This recognition, that it is impossible to set unchangeable, uncrossable boundaries around a body, moves away from the perception of constructed female bodies as being merely passive and dominated. Feminist thought has moved towards a more empowered view; instead of bemoaning the relatively powerless position of women within a patriarchal society (with that lack of power springing from the construction of the female body as faulty and deviant), postmodern feminist thought "seeks to emphasise the importance and inescapability of embodiment as a differential and fluid construct, the site of potential, rather than as a fixed given" (Shildrick and Price 3).

This view also applies to the construction of the male body; recognition that embodiment is an external force which is therefore subject to change, modification, and interference, gives men the space to alter inscriptive embodiment. Such a view is not only potentially empowering, it is also explosively dangerous, because it entails "the recognition that if the body itself is not a determinate given, then the political and social structures that take it as such are equally open to transformation" (Shildrick and Price 7- 8).

Singapore's insistence on the maintenance of officially-constructed, binary categories of gender identity is rooted in part in their perceived need to control and guide a fragile, fledgling nation. That the high level of control and intervention has continued well beyond the point where Singapore can still be considered vulnerable or struggling, can be attributed to the fact that there is resistance, at the authoritative level, to any potential transformation of the political and social structures that have been put in place. Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan note that postcolonial governments tend "to generate narratives of national crisis" which:

serve more than one category of reassurance: by repeatedly focusing anxiety on the fragility of the new nation, its ostensible vulnerability to every kind of exigency, the state's originating agency is periodically reinvoked and ratified, its access to wide-ranging instruments of power in the service of national protection continually consolidated. (343)

does not lead to any deep engagement with basic ideas of authoritative construction and Heng and Devan suggest that in the years since Singapore's independence, this generation of narratives of crisis has become an entrenched habit, focusing now (whatever the metaphors deployed) on "such segments of society as do not give back an image of the state's founding fathers to themselves" (344). It would appear that the state's central preoccupation is with the perpetuation of a



society which unquestioningly reproduces its own value system. The alternative corporealities presented in Wong's play contain experiences and expressions of family which do not reflect, and thus question and subvert, the state-authored ideal.

In discussing twentieth-century theorising about the body, Elizabeth Grosz notes two main approaches, the "inscriptive" and the "lived body", stating that: "The first conceives the body as a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed; the second refers largely to the lived experience of the body, the body's internal or psychic inscription" (Space 33). In Singapore, the state regards the body as a surface on which various laws and values can be inscribed so that it is thoroughly regulated. Indeed, Heng and Devan suggest that the state "subscribes, without apology, to a projective model of society as an economic and social machine", with individuals forming the component parts of that machine (346). A central point about machines, of course, is that malfunctioning or faulty components can be adjusted or replaced; most importantly, "a machine presupposes—indeed, requires—an operator, since a machine commonly exists in the first place in order to be operated" (Heng and Devan 346). The state assumes not only the ability, but also the right, to operate the machine of society.

As previously noted, the state has from early on assumed the need to control the idea of family and, concomitant with this, the idea of gender and sexual identity. The official view of the family is that it consists of two parents and their children. Ideally, it should also include grandparents. Heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm. There is little acknowledgement of or support for familial or individual identities which break away from the prescribed mould.

For example, although there has been a slight loosening of official attitudes towards homosexuality in Singapore since the early 1990s, state surveillance and discipline (and, implicitly, disapproval and the urge to control) are still in evidence. A gay Singaporean man interviewed by Lim Kean Fan refers to the subtleties involved in the government's apparent loosening of control over public spaces such as gay bars, suggesting that: "It would probably be more problematic controlling the gay community if homosexuals are allowed to express their sexuality on the open streets"(1772). While the increase in the number of public gay spaces and the official tolerance of them relieves gays of the need to search for private, hidden spaces, it also allows the state a high level of control because it knows where these public spaces are, and can therefore monitor them.

State constructions of men and women as heterosexual also place them within narrowly bounded gender roles. Stella Quah, for example, notes that in Singapore, "women have been facing for a long time two contradictory social pressures: to be good wives and mothers [...] and to contribute to the economic growth of the country" (*Family* 63). While Quah acknowledges the existence of

these “contradictory” pressures on Singaporean women, she asserts that “women are increasingly determined to handle both duties—home and job—concurrently” (*Family* 63). She thus presents it as the woman’s choice, without acknowledging the role played by the state in “encouraging” mothers to get back into the workforce, for example by making childcare and domestic help reasonably affordable. Women who “leave their jobs or do not join the labour force at all due to ‘childcare and household commitments’” are labelled “economically inactive” (Quah, *Family* 159-160), a term which devalues the work they accomplish at home, in the domestic sphere, as well as ignoring the support provided for men in the public and economic domain by women who maintain the domestic domain. Quah quotes a female government leader who states that “in today’s age women can complete their work more quickly and have more time in [sic] their hands [...] to pursue careers and contribute to the economy” (*Family* 191); the phrasing here suggests that their primary concern should be “their work” (within the domestic sphere) which is distinct from their “careers.” Women are thus primarily embodied as domestic, and their independent, economically active side is to be subjugated to their domestic side.

State rhetoric exerts different pressures on men. For example, when Goh Chok Tong lamented the reluctance of educated “girls” to have children, he merely wondered in passing “whether the boys must also share the blame” (qtd. in Quah, *Family* 130). Clearly, child-bearing and rearing are seen as the province and responsibility of the female body. Beyond the biological aspects of reproduction, the male body is not constituted as a vital part of the more physical and emotional aspects of parenthood. The same attitude exists in relation to the inscription of domesticity on male and female bodies. Women’s bodies are assumed to be inherently domesticised while men, as Quah points out, “have seldom, if ever, been seen as homemakers in Singapore” (“Marriage” 40). If a man were to take on a domestic role, he would be seen as feminising his male body. Singapore men are constituted as masculinised, contributing to their society politically and economically, with minimal domestic involvement. For both men and women, heterosexuality is also assumed to be the norm. The expression of corporeal identities which do not follow these prescriptions of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality can pose a challenge to state policy.

Resistance to non-conformity is evident in authoritative responses. For example, Heng and Devan note the prevalence of the patriarchal, controlling view in Singapore: responding to Lee Kuan Yew’s exhortation to well-educated women to marry well-educated men and have more children, some women suggested with irony that since they wanted children without the added encumbrance of a husband, the government should support matriarchal families: “Recognizing the threat to patriarchal authority vested in the traditional Asian family—after which its own hierarchies and values were after all patterned—the government conspicuously



failed to generate enthusiasm for this alternative" (349-350). Clearly, a family structure not centred on the male father figure is unacceptable. The underlying agenda here is not only control over individual bodies, but also continuation of and implicit support for the authoritative patriarchal structure which functions as the basis for state rule in Singapore, conditioning individuals into the habit of obedience.

Eleanor Wong examines and resists authoritative embodiment by focusing on alternative lived experiences. *Mergers and Accusations* represents an expression of the lived body which negotiates with and disrupts the inscriptive, authoritative construction of male and female identities by exploring alternative sexualities and family structures, and by questioning patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity. Grosz points out that: "If bodies are traversed and infiltrated by knowledges, meanings, and power, they can also, under certain circumstances, become sites of struggle and resistance, actively inscribing themselves on social practices" (*Space* 35-36). The bodies presented in this play are already inscribed by the state, but try simultaneously to make their own counter-inscriptions. Wong undermines authoritative representations of rigid male-female dyads by presenting a complex picture of men and women who encompass aspects of both masculinity and femininity, thus unsettling ideas of a clear dichotomy between men's and women's identities, and of compulsory, 'natural' heterosexuality.

Critics have generally responded to *Mergers* as a play focused on the issue of lesbianism in Singapore. In her discussion of *Mergers and Wills and Secessions* (also by Wong), Jacqueline Lo refers to Wong as "the first playwright to focus on lesbian sexuality" (99). William Peterson refers to "the mature and confident handling of the lesbian identity of the play's central character" in both *Mergers and Wills* (151). Most of the reviews and previews also refer to lesbianism as the central theme. However, I will approach the play from another angle, viewing it not just as a critique of how lesbianism is treated and responded to in Singapore, but also, importantly, as an interrogation of official constructions, through specific forms of embodiment, of both male and female gender and sexual identities within the family; Wong also questions the basic concept of family as promulgated by the state. She interrogates the refusal of the state to acknowledge the validity of families which do not adhere to the nuclear, patriarchal structure it favours: "'What gives a family legitimacy?' asks Eleanor, almost fiercely. 'Why should one model be validated and others not?'" (Joyce Lim 86). Here, Wong examines the validity of the traditional model, against the non-traditional gender and sexual identities of the characters.

In *Mergers*, Ellen Toh, Jonathan Chin (Jon) and Mary Okada are colleagues in a law firm. Mary is married and has one child. Ellen and Jon are both single, and Ellen makes it clear to Jon that she is a lesbian. Nonetheless, she and Jon embark on an affair, and eventually enter into a marriage of convenience; Ellen has a child,

then continues to work, while Jon gives up his career to become a stay-at-home father. Their relationship is "open", in that Ellen can have affairs with whomever she wants, as long as she comes home each night to her husband and daughter. Things change when Lesley Ryan, "the lesbian lawyer from London" (*Mergers* 37), appears; she and Ellen fall in love. The relationship with Jon disintegrates, but we are left uncertain if there will be a lasting relationship between Lesley and Ellen.

Wong uses the story of Ellen, Jon and Lesley as a framework for interrogating and exploring the inadequacy of state constructions of narrowly defined "male" and "female" bodies. The state foregrounds heterosexuality, and actively encourages reproduction within the bounds of state-defined marriage. *Mergers*, however, "deliberately [sets] out to unsettle and challenge dominant assumptions about sexuality and gender within the context of a mainstream culture which tends to portray the lesbian as the outsider and/or deviant" (Lo, "Prison-house" 100).

The challenge to state-ordered discipline of the body comes through most clearly in Ellen. The simple fact that she is the central character and that she identifies herself unambiguously as a lesbian can be seen as a strong challenge to the invisibility of lesbian bodies within state discourse. Both Peterson and Lo note that the portrayal of lesbianism on stage has never attracted the kind of punitive censorship that occurs when gay male relationships are portrayed (Peterson 137; Lo 100); Peterson further notes that lesbians in Singapore are "all but invisible" (135). Lim Kean Fan states that "lesbianism is totally *unrecognised* by the law, which can be construed as an even more extreme form of oppression" (1765). Female homosexuality is not punished, because it is assumed simply not to exist. Wong's play provides a site in which the invisible can be made visible. The process of making visible a female character for whom men and the patriarchy are not central, resists the dominance of this hegemonic discourse.

The process of being made visible takes the form of verbal statements, such as Ellen's and Lesley's unequivocal declarations that they are lesbians (*Mergers* 16, 36-37). Their clear and open statements make it impossible to ignore the presence of identities which are otherwise unacknowledged.

However, it is by physicalising Ellen's sexuality that Wong is able to centre lesbianism as a challenge to state-constructed sexual identities. The stage directions state that Ellen and Lesley kiss, which was done in the Singapore production. The Malaysian production had to literally dance around the portrayal of a sexual relationship. Reviewer Tan Ling Ai describes the scene, as staged in Kuala Lumpur, as follows: "Ellen slow-dancing with Lesley (a refined way to show that they are having sex) and speaking about their relationship." In socially and religiously conservative Malaysia, it would have been impossible to stage a passionate kiss between two women. As the script is written, it would have been possible to



focus on the spoken word, with perhaps a few fleeting touches between the two women. The director's decision to physicalise the scene through dance, which allows the women intimate bodily contact, shows the centrality of the physical sexual relationship. By actively engaging in sex, Ellen frees her closeted sexuality. If *Mergers* is looked at as a *Bildungsroman*, then at this stage Ellen is further on in the development of her visible lesbian identity; from merely articulating it verbally, she has gone on to assert that identity through the sexualised use of her body. It is thus made visible and real to the audience.

Wong also physicalises Ellen's relationship with Jon. Would it therefore be possible to identify Ellen as bisexual, or to assume that she would change if the "right man" came along? That is, could she be reclaimed into the fold of "normalcy"? Wong undermines this possibility through her approach to the dialogue which precedes the sexual consummation of both relationships. Between Jon and Ellen, the tone is light-hearted; their dialogue is characterised by teasing insults and jokes. Between Ellen and Lesley, however, the conversations are more intense and serious. Here the interplay between the verbal and the physical shows that it is the relationship with Lesley that is more meaningful to Ellen. Thus Wong hints at the possibility of Ellen turning to an "acceptable" relationship, but then rejects it, letting Ellen express her true sexuality rather than allowing authority to inscribe a sexual identity on her.

Ellen's responses to motherhood and household chores destabilise the official constitution of women as naturally maternal, gentle and domesticised. When Jon speaks fondly of Mary's "beautiful" baby, Ellen responds that babies "remind me of fish at that age;" she counters Jon's love of children with the rejoinder that children are "tolerable when they're not mine" (*Mergers* 8). This response is distant and cool, with none of the sentimentality or the instant nurturing response that is considered natural for women. Ellen thus undermines the stance, promulgated at official levels, that women are instinctively and naturally maternal. After the birth of their daughter, Ellen remains distant from her; we are never aware of her interacting with the child, whereas we hear of Jon taking her to the clinic, or out shopping. However, Ellen refers to a case she is handling as "my baby" (*Mergers* 37); emotionally, she is far more absorbed by her job than by her child. She thus refuses to be embodied or constructed as a mother in the conventionally-accepted sense of the term.

The "joy" of the experience of pregnancy and parenthood seems to belong to Jon, who is shown prancing exuberantly, while Ellen looks on with "indulgent disapproval" (*Mergers* 33). It is he rather than Ellen who is willing to subdue his careerist impulses to focus on his child. Ellen remarks that children "require commitment," and that the commitment usually comes from women. She is clearly unwilling to take that step whereas Jon, apparently "a shoo-in for partner," has considered leaving his career to concentrate on child-rearing (*Mergers* 8-9).

Jon's response runs counter to Singaporean constructions of masculinity. Ellen here takes on what are traditionally considered the male attitudes (ambition, drive, emotional distance from the family) while Jon is willing to embrace the traditional female role. This reversal is underlined by the play-acting indulged in by Jon and Ellen, with Jon playing the docile, subservient, "wife" kneeling at the feet of the "husband" who brings home the bacon (*Mergers* 9).

The idea of playing roles is also brought out through a series of photographs of the now-married Jon and Ellen, which are shown during the interval. The photographs showing Jon and Ellen handling household chores subvert traditional constructions of male and female roles, with Ellen handling 'masculine' chores such as fixing lights, while Jon hangs up the laundry. Another photograph has Jon and Ellen "doing a mock of Rockwell's American Gothic," with Jon (positioned in the spot occupied by the woman in the painting) holding clothes pegs while Ellen holds a screwdriver (*Mergers* 33). The original artwork seems to invoke traditional gender roles: the dominant father/husband gazes directly at the viewer, while the subservient daughter/wife stands a little behind and inclines her gaze slightly towards him, not engaging directly with the viewer. In the photograph shown during the 1993 production, Jon holds a ladle while Ellen holds a hammer; both gaze confidently and happily at the camera, clearly at ease with the roles they have chosen. Thus the conventions which suggest that their arrangement is wrong or deviant are turned on their head, questioning the validity of the Singaporean construction of Jon and Ellen as male and female in the traditional, binarised way. The parodic enactments evident in the photographs underscore the constructedness of gender roles by "overplaying" them; if they can be overplayed, it is because they are only "played" in the first place, that is, they are *acted* rather than *inherent*. And if they are only acted, they can be reacted against, or re-acted differently.

While Jon and Ellen react against authoritative constructions of their bodies as masculine and feminine, the simple role-reversal of their situation does not question the validity of binarised, value-loaded constructions of identity. As Lo points out: "Reorganising the male-female dichotomy by giving the female partner a stronger (masculinised) role does nothing to deconstruct the gender economy—it only changes the placement of the terms" (103). In other words, the binary relationship remains in place, with greater value being placed on one half of the equation than on the other. In fact, the response of some reviewers of the Singapore and Kuala Lumpur productions suggests that they were unable to move beyond traditional views of men's and women's roles, despite the role-reversal. Tan Ling Ai, for example, referring to the Kuala Lumpur production, asserts that Jon's "ego is deeply bruised, for he has become something he cannot accept ... a jobless man who cooks, cleans, takes care of the child and depends on his wife to feed and clothe him." Despite the role-reversal and the potential undermining of traditional authoritative constructs, she is still locked in thought patterns which



view domesticity as demeaning and unnatural for a man. Referring to the 1993 Singapore production, Ng Sek Chow states that "Jonathan does have a 'baby fixation' (he wants a brood), but surely with his good looks and promising career, he should not have much difficulty in finding a straight woman who would be more than willing to fulfil this function for him." Ng's critique is reductive of women, who appear in this evaluation to be merely on the lookout for attractive providers, waiting to fulfil their natural biological function as bearers of offspring. Ng also does not take into account Jon's desire to look after his children himself, rather than just hand the job on to a woman who is waiting to "fulfil this function."

To focus purely on the obvious role reversal (male/homemaker – female/breadwinner) inscription of particular roles as "male" and "female". A far more complex exploration of the constructedness of male and female embodiment can be achieved if we approach Jon and Ellen as inhabiting bodies which incorporate both male and female elements.

The reading of male-female embodiment becomes far more nuanced if Jon, for example, is treated not as a simple representation of a straight man, but as a feminised male body. Although professedly straight, Jon nonetheless displays a high degree of gender and sexual ambiguity. The absence of an accepting attitude towards homosexuality at the time when Wong wrote *Mergers* meant that specifically male homosexual identities had to remain closeted and that men had to adhere to state disciplining of their bodies into "masculinised" roles. Jon can be seen as a possible representation, albeit disguised, of hidden male homosexuality and the feminised male body. He identifies himself as straight, and frequent reference is made to his relationships with various women; however, as Lo points out, the character includes many elements of high camp which do not jibe with his putative 'straightness' (105-106).

Through the dialogue, Jon is constructed as a "normal", sexually active heterosexual man—for example, through references to his sexual relationships with other women. However, there is a constant subtext running through the play which destabilises this construction. The opening scene shows him on his knees, proposing marriage to Mary, and then making suggestive, leering remarks to Ellen; the only adult relationship (physical or emotional) in which we see him engaged during the course of the play is with Ellen. Lo argues that such incidents within the play serve to emphasise the dominance of heterosexuality, leaving "lesbian desire [...] positioned in a supplementary role, in opposition to the dominant heterosexual order" (102). By proposing marriage to one woman and then making sexual advances to another, Jon appears to reiterate the heterosexual male-female dyad. Thus the mock marriage proposal and the sexual relationship between Jon and Ellen appear to position heterosexuality as the dominant order. I would argue, however, that Jon's actions in fact unbalance that dominance. He proposes to Mary knowing that she cannot, or will not, accept, just as he embarks on the liaison with

Ellen in the full knowledge that she is gay. He does not seem to want to embark on a “normal” heterosexual relationship with either woman. His actions do not, in either case, re-entrench the heterosexual frame.

Also significant is the way in which Jon might be physically portrayed on stage. Lo argues that “Jon is in many ways the typical ‘camp male’ [...who] does not perform the stereotypical masculine role” (106). Lo has pointed out the significance of the constant references in Jon’s speech to Broadway musicals; his exuberant speech and his flamboyance point to his difference from normative constructions of the male body as dignified and contained, the seat of reason and intellect. Jon cannot realistically be played “straight”, he frequently bursts out singing and dancing, and his speech is overblown and comically theatrical. However, because Wong repeatedly identifies him as heterosexual, she prevents us from being able to respond to him as gay. By embodying a “straight” man within a feminised, sexually ambiguous body, Wong overturns simplistic notions of gender identity.

She continues this project in her portrayal of Jon and Ellen’s marriage of convenience. The need felt by Jon and Ellen to enter into this marriage, simply in order to be allowed the space to fulfil their non-normative gender and sexual identities, speaks of a level of interpellation into the dominant discourse. They are unable, at this stage, to live openly defiant lives. Marriage provides Ellen with a respectable cover (she appears in society’s eyes to have defined herself within the bounds of a normative heterosexual relationship) while allowing her to be involved in lesbian relationships. It is “convenient” for Jon in that his role as househusband allows him to exist within a feminised body. This is no mere case of swapping roles; Jon rejects the purely masculine body within which society has placed him. For example, he declares to Ellen that he wants to have many children: “I want to have them, to look after them, to be there when they fall down, to pick them up” (*Mergers* 9, emphasis added). Note that he does not merely express a desire to have a closer relationship with his children than might be typical for a father; he wants to be physically involved even to the extent of bearing them himself. The feminisation of Jon’s body—through his desire for children and his flamboyant campness—is deeply unsettling to the construction of men as masculinised, ‘male’ bodies. Although a man, and self-identified as heterosexual, Jon’s *body* is ‘female’ (according to hegemonic constructions), identified as such by his desire for children and domesticity.

The embodiment of Ellen is complex, as she cannot be categorically positioned as either male or female. She identifies herself as a lesbian, and in her relationship with Jon she takes on the male role: as breadwinner, she is embodied as masculine. Yet her relationship with Lesley complicates this masculinity, so that she cannot be categorised as purely butch to Jon’s and/or Lesley’s femme. When they begin their relationship, it is Lesley who takes the dominant role; once the relationship



is established, Ellen becomes dominant, taking on the butch role while Lesley is positioned as femme, cooking for Ellen. At various points in this relationship, they switch roles. As Lo points out:

The power dynamics between Ellen and Lesley contribute to the further destabilising of dominant gender and sexual categories. If Ellen comes across as the “butch” lesbian passing as “straight” in her marriage to Jon, her relationship with Lesley destabilises any reification of these roles. The same-sex relationship dismantles the dominant masculine-feminine dyad. (108)

Clearly, their relationship cannot be defined as a stable binary, with one partner being male/butch/dominant, and the other female/femme/subservient. The inclusion of Jon in this relationship makes it even more fluid and unstable. The fluidity of the gender roles played by Jon, Ellen and Lesley demands that we recognise fixed and unchanging binary relationships, posited around a male-female dyad, as authoritative constructs rather than as natural positions. By physically embodying gender and sexual identities which cannot be pinned down, Wong shows these identities to be externally constituted rather than inherent, and deconstructs common notions of male and female bodies.

Wong thus questions prevailing ideas of male/female embodiment and “proper” roles in society: women are generally seen as being purely of the body, in so far as they are defined by their reproductive functions, while male bodies are constructed as having a place outside the home, in the role of breadwinner. However, where feminist theory concentrates largely on the embodiment of women, Wong also examines male embodiment, revealing it to be potentially as limiting and reductive as female embodiment. She seeks a level of corporeality which embraces attributes currently dichotomised as specifically “male” and “female”, thus attempting to overcome the authoritative construction of gender identities as oppositional binaries.

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