

The Illusion of Masculinity in Tom Tulliver's Sword Performance

George Eliot's depiction of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* is commonly accepted to be (loosely) based on Eliot's own life experiences (Philip 35). As a result, there is a large body of criticism that focuses on Maggie's characterization in order to uncover Eliot's possible critiques on Victorian society. Unfortunately, the autobiographical elements in *The Mill on the Floss* tend to lead critics to either ignore Tom Tulliver, or unfavorably analyze him. Catherine Akça and Ali Güneş, for example, focus solely on Maggie in their feminist analysis to make a larger claim about the patriarchy: "Eliot does not radically challenge the dominant patriarchal culture in *The Mill on the Floss*, in the sense of providing a prescription for immediate change" (1). Akça and Güneş' application of feminist theory comes close to the heart of the issue by noting that both children are "constrained by patriarchal ideology" (5), but they mainly focus on how this affects Maggie. Even when a critic does give Tom a fair amount of attention, the analysis seems unsympathetic and more interested in finding fault with Tom as a character. Ranjini Philip dedicates his entire Lacanian analysis of *The Mill on the Floss* to Tom by marking him as the symbolic mother, father, and "lover" to Maggie (35). Although Philip applies Lacanian theory accurately, his analysis seems far-fetched and leaves the reader feeling a bit uneasy at his awkward implications. Indeed, Tom hardly provides the reader, much less the critic, a reason to identify with him. However, a fair analysis of Tom's characterization can provide a critique of the patriarchy without condemning Tom. Superficially, Tom does appear to be a patriarchal male throughout the novel. He has a firm moral code that does not allow for any exceptions, which eventually leads him to condemn his own sister. Although it may seem like Tom's characterization sets him up as a

perpetuator of patriarchal ideologies, Eliot provides a scene that allows the reader to be sympathetic to Tom and his position in society. This scene occurs when Tom is still away at school and Maggie comes to visit for the second time; he plans a sort of “performance” for Maggie that is supposed to demonstrate his masculine prowess, but instead illustrates the flaws in the term “masculine.” When Tom brandishes the sword to frighten Maggie, Eliot is challenging the patriarchal ideology of male dominance by illustrating the performative nature of masculinity rather than its innate “power.”

When the term “performing” is utilized in this paper, it is rooted in Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. Butler’s theory “involves a radical critique of identity categories” because she labels gender, sex, and sexuality as “cultural products” (Jagger 1). Thus, gender roles are culturally conceived and are not based on any sort of biological difference between the sexes. Gill Jagger explains Butler’s use of “performance,” in terms of gender: “Rather than expressing some inner core or pre-given identity, the performance of gender produces the *illusion* of such a core or essence (21). Consequently, Butler’s theory opens the door for fault to be found in 19th century conceptions of gender; during that time, differences between men and women (and the rights they were given) were supposedly based on a “*natural* or biological difference” (Tosh 103). Of course, George Eliot could not have been aware of a 20th century theory as she wrote *The Mill on the Floss*, but her writing opens the door for this modern theory to be applied—as will be demonstrated.

The scene in question that exemplifies Butler’s theory of performativity begins when Tom lures his sister upstairs: “I say, Magsie. . . . I’ve done my lessons now. Come up-stairs with me” (Eliot 148-9). The beginning of this scene foregrounds the preparation that Tom puts into his performance for Maggie and thus highlights the illusion. Tom lures Maggie upstairs, has her turn around, and tells her not to “peep” while he gets himself ready (149). This highlights the performative nature because Tom has to prepare himself before Maggie can see him. Butler’s theory would recognize this scene as “a kind of enforced cultural performance” because Tom is trying to give the “illusion of such a [masculine] core or essence” (Jagger 20-1). Tom’s performance illustrates the “illusion” of masculinity because the narrator states that “Nothing but” preparation “enabled” Tom to appear as “striking” or

masculine to Maggie (149). His masculinity and power is thus associated with meditation and preparation rather than an inborn trait that only men are imbued with. This is unfortunate for the patriarchy because both men and women are capable of meditation and preparation. Taking a step back, Tom has several reasons to perform his societally prescribed role even though he appears to come by his masculinity naturally. While Tom is at school, his power is stripped from him and he is made dependent on Mr. Stelling's teachings. Nancy Henry astutely points out that Tom's time at school makes him "more like a girl than he had ever been in his life before" (qtd. in Kiesel 120). As a result, Tom's masculinity is in question and he has to prove his manliness to himself and others. In the 19th century, "Becoming a man . . . depended on the recognition of manhood by one's peers" (Tosh 110). It is not hard to figure out why Tom would choose Maggie, who would do anything for him, to be his "peer" to recognize his masculine status. Of course, Tom is not some sort of patriarchal boy plotting to dominate his little sister—he is simply scared of not fitting in, so he does his best to give the illusion of fitting in.

Tom's family also makes him acutely aware of his feminine traits. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the characters talk openly of how Tom takes after his mother's side of the family, which is comprised of all women. Tom is just a boy, but he is made aware that it is a "pity" to be like his mother (Eliot 11). It is extremely important to note that Tom's parents are afraid that he is not intelligent, which is part of the reason why Tom is labeled to be more from his mother's side (Eliot 11). Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver are regulating Tom's idea of masculinity in such a way that perpetuates patriarchal ideologies. Consequently, Tom questions his own masculinity even in his physical features; he is insecure with his appearance because his face is soft and nice, rather than fierce: "Dissatisfied with the pacific aspect of a face which had no more than the faintest hint of flaxen eyebrow, together with a pair of amiable blue-grey eyes and round pink cheeks that refused to look formidable, let him frown as he would before the looking glass" (149). The traits that Tom picks out as unsatisfactory are considered feminine. Tom even reveals that he is unsatisfied with his features not being "formidable," or a cause for fear or alarm ("formidable"). Tom's extreme view of masculinity caricatures the disparity between the patriarchal ideology of masculine

traits and the reality of what Tom is born with. Eliot thus gives the reader an image of an insecure boy who recognizes that he lacks what he has been told men are supposed to have.

Tom's insecurity leads him to change his physical appearance to make up for what he lacks. Tom dons what could only be described as a costume—complete with makeup and props. Tom's makeup comes from a burnt cork that he smears on his face to give him “satisfactory” eyebrows and a black beard; Tom also dons a red handkerchief as a turban, and a red comforter as a scarf (Eliot 149). He purposefully chooses to wear the color red—associated with violence—and even decides which would be the best way to hold his sword (150). Clearly, this costume is not meant to represent an Englishman's masculinity, but Tom likely took some inspiration from the heroic stories he loves to be told. This also explains why Tom arranges himself like a tableau; it is almost like he is recreating a picture from a book. The construction of Tom's costume in this scene is an exaggeration of the daily “fabrication” that everyone must undergo in order to perform their gender. If nothing else, Tom's gender is truly culturally constructed because he dons anything that he considers is masculine, down even to his choice of color. The narrator even hints a little that Tom might be consciously aware that he does not inherently possess masculine traits because he hopes that his crafted image “would suffice to convey an approximate idea of his fierce and blood-thirsty disposition” (150). Especially since Tom hopes that his effort will “suffice” implies that his artifice might not be enough to make up for what he lacks.

Just as an actor looks for a reaction from the audience, Tom looks for a specific reaction from Maggie. Tom plays off of his crowd of one: “Maggie looked bewildered for a moment, and Tom enjoyed that moment keenly” (150). In that moment, Tom believes that his “manhood” has been recognized, which was part of the implied mission in his performance. Tom is trying to overcome his femininity and he requires some sort of acknowledgment of his power in Maggie's reaction. Consequently, Tom expects Maggie to perform her role of being the scared little girl that he can dominate. In order for the patriarchy to function, both parties have to play their role as the man or woman respectively. This idea recurs throughout the novel, as Tom expects Maggie to “perform” and be a good girl just as he has learned to play the part of the man. For a single moment, Tom thinks that

Maggie is playing her part by looking bewildered, but he soon realizes that she will not cooperate.

The issue with Maggie's initial reaction is that it only lasts for a single moment and in the next "She laughed. . . . and said, 'O Tom, you've made yourself like Bluebeard at the show'" (Eliot 150). In making this analogy, Maggie is peering behind the patriarchal curtain and noting the illusion involved in gender construction. Most importantly, Maggie specifically connects Tom with Bluebeard. Bluebeard is the story of a man that marries women, gives them a key to his castle, and tells them never to go into a specific room in the castle; the women disobey, and Bluebeard punishes them by taking away their lives (Kiesel 117-8). Tom tries to be more masculine and ends up becoming more Oriental when he does so. Any deviation from English qualities would be considered negative just as being an effeminate man would be looked down upon. Corrie Kiesel points out that both Tom and Bluebeard take "amiable qualities too far" (119). Thus, Tom fairly quickly goes from being too feminine to too masculine. Tom's pendulum-like performance highlights the "unstable" aspects of gender—especially when it is based on the "imitation and parody" of others (Jagger 3). Tom's unstable gender will eventually be stuck on the most extreme that his body will allow without donning a costume again.

A performance hinges on its believability, which is precisely why Tom adjusts his performance when Maggie laughs at him. At this point, Tom's sword is pointed towards the ground and has gone unnoticed by Maggie. Tom must subconsciously associate the sword specifically with his masculinity because he notes that Maggie "had not been struck with the presence of the sword—it was not unsheathed" (150). To give Maggie "a more direct appeal," Tom takes out his sword and points it at her (150). The sword is a phallic symbol, but that does not necessarily have sexual connotations for the relationship between Maggie and Tom. It likely means that Tom is trying to use a symbol of power to give the illusion of masculinity so he might be recognized as a man by Maggie.

After all of Tom's effort, preparation, and on-stage adjustment, he finally gets the frightful reaction he wants from Maggie. Tom is excited at his ability to incite a reaction and momentarily comes out of character; he corrects himself when he realizes that it is not

masculine of him: “The corners of Tom’s mouth showed an inclination to a smile of complacency that was immediately checked as inconsistent with the severity of a great warrior” (Eliot 150). The societal pressures put on Tom are evident when the corners of his mouth simply show an *inclination* to smile and Tom has to “check” himself (150). Tom is only a boy but he still feels the pressure to perform when even the smallest smile is considered feminine. His masculinity must be as severe as “a great warrior” or it is unacceptable (150). When Tom becomes an adult, he continues to be formidable, and this eventually becomes a part of Tom’s character. Even though this is the only moment the narrator notes that Tom checks himself, this would be an example of “ritualized repetition of conventions” eventually becoming second nature to Tom (Jagger 21). If Tom as a child thinks that smiling is unacceptable, then it makes sense that Tom as an adult would be limited in his ability to express emotion. Hence, Tom is emotionally limited by his compulsion to perform masculinity.

Finally, Tom has his moment to shine on the stage when he shouts, “I’m the Duke of Wellington! March!” (Eliot 150). At this juncture, the reader may be confused because Tom is dressed in an Orientalized costume, but somehow identifies himself as an English military leader. Corrie Kiesel resolves this contrast by declaring that “Tom fears that his typical English attributes are not manly enough to project strength” (126). Tom’s choice of character and costume calls into question the effectiveness of English masculinity; he wants to be masculine but he must “borrow foreign power to achieve the desired result” (Kiesel 127). In any case, the identity confused Tom begins marching towards his sister in a gait that is unlike his own; Tom likely thinks that military leaders “stamp forward with the right leg a little bent,” which all adds to his elaborate illusion of being masculine himself (Eliot 150). Unfortunately for Maggie, Tom’s illusion is convincing enough that she nearly has a panic attack trying to widen the space between them.

In this next short paragraph, Tom once again illustrates the performativity of his masculinity:

Tom, happy in this spectator of his military performances, even though the spectator was only Maggie, proceeded, with the utmost exertion of his force,

to such an exhibition of the cut and thrust as would necessarily be expected of the Duke of Wellington. (Eliot 150)

The narrator directly alludes to this scene as a “performance” with Maggie as the spectator. Once again, it is extremely important to Tom that Maggie performs her role in his performance by being scared; Tom is only mentioned to be happy when Maggie is nearly in tears at his overly violent display. Eliot subtly critiques gender roles by caricaturing Tom and Maggie in this way that illustrates the societal expectations of women as being rooted in male insecurity. Tom’s insecurity at filling his masculine role could be why he condemns Maggie throughout the novel as a bad girl; he is displacing his own insecurities onto Maggie. Nonetheless, Tom’s performance continues as he finally feels that he is performing in a manner “expected of the Duke of Wellington” (150). Again, the narrator focuses on expectations and performativity rather than natural power. The reader is given insight into how difficult it is for Tom to mimic the military leader because it takes “the utmost exertion of his force” (150). He achieves, if only for a moment, the societal expectations assigned to him as a male.

Previously, it was mentioned in passing that Judith Butler considers gender roles and heterosexuality “unstable” because they are based on mimicry (Jagger 3). This instability is exemplified in the concluding part of the scene when Tom’s illusion shatters. Maggie realizes that Tom will harm himself but there is nothing she can do to stop him. Tom counts to three while he thrusts the sword about the room, but with each second his illusion loses its tenacity; his hand begins to tremble, and the sword gives in to gravity and swings downward. It must have taken all of Tom’s strength to keep up with his performance even for a few seconds. Not only is Tom too weak to sustain the illusion of masculinity, but he also ends up harming himself just as Maggie predicted: “The sword had fallen, with its edge on Tom’s foot, and in a moment after, he had fallen too (150). His performance is painted in a negative light and ultimately uncovers the young vulnerable boy underneath the mask he puts on. When the sword swings down and lands on Tom’s foot, his first reaction is not a composed and calculating one, but is instead a more feminine one; Tom faints as a woman would be expected to do. Underneath his artifice, Tom is just as vulnerable as Maggie is; they both do

not inherently possess the traits that society expects them to have, and they both suffer for it. They both suffer in this scene as well as in the end of the novel when both Tulliver children must pay the ultimate price for not naturally fitting into their gender roles.

This particular scene provides interesting insight into the performative aspects of masculinity and spoils any attempt to label Tom as patriarchal—at least when he is young. Tom is a great example of how flawed and unfavorable patriarchal expectations were to even men; he is just a boy but he still feels societal pressure to be more masculine. Eliot may have been using young Tom's performative scene to undermine the foundation for the patriarchy. The implication of Eliot's critique would be that if men are not born masculine, and women feminine, then the entire basis for the patriarchy has been built on an unstable foundation just as Judith Butler's theory implies. This unstable and hypocritical foundation shrouds Tom's thinking in a world of black and white expectations, limiting his ability to relate to Maggie. This scene demonstrates Tom's humanity and vulnerability and allows the reader to see the human underneath an elaborate mask put up by a child who is afraid of not fitting in. Readers should keep that vulnerable boy in their minds when they read over his cold and calculating patriarchal actions in the latter part of the novel, as those actions are a product of the patriarchal culture and are not necessarily done out of malice. Tom's performative scene ultimately challenges the patriarchal ideologies of the time by highlighting the mimicry and constraint that is required to achieve a masculine status.

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