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Patrick Buranicz
College of DuPage

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Patrick Buranicz

Prof. Robert Georgalas

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Gender Roles in Mrs. Doubtfire

Among the multitude of issues that affect us every day, Americans have long debated the effects of and reasons for differing gender roles, noting how our culture either embellishes or degrades them, and asking why, if at all, American society should or should not tamper with these roles. One major structure within society that is inevitably affected by gender roles is the family unit. People who agree on a view for family life, such as the conservative value of male breadwinners and female homemakers or the liberal view of either reversed roles or equal levels of these identities, will have a happier marriage and family life, but when their views differ or change, the marriage might not last long, leading to divorce. Mrs. Doubtfire, a story of a man who disguises himself as and plays the role of an elderly British nanny in an effort to spend more time with his children after a divorce-custody case limits his visitation rights, addresses gender roles as they adhere to or contradict cultural conventions. More importantly, however, the film examines the affect of these gender roles on families.

One gender identity the film observes is that of the modern, corporate, independent woman. In the scholarly essay "Becoming Members of Society: Learning the Social Meanings of Gender," sociologist professor Aaron H. Devor (born Holly Devor) discusses the socialization of gender roles in children and the conventions and tendencies of male and female attitudes and behaviors. Devor contends that masculinity is a social quality that comprises a predisposition toward aggression and dominance and that "persons of either gender tend to use influence tactics

and verbal styles usually associated with men and masculinity” (387) and vice versa for subordinate people (387-8). Therefore, the modern independent women of the film would employ masculine attitudes and behaviors, such as “emotional insensitivity to feelings...of others, and a measure of emotional insularity” and “stern or serious facial expressions that suggest minimal receptivity to the influence of others” (390). Every adult woman in this film expresses such a careless emotion. Whether it be the neighbor, the grandmother, the court liaison, or the mother’s attorney, each woman, with exception to Miranda, the mother, and Lydia, the elder daughter, who undergo a change of heart, looks completely stern, uncompassionate, and somewhat aggressive. The adult women stare disdainfully at Daniel, the father, whenever he jokes, and the attorney, the only professional woman to smile, only smiles cruelly when Daniel loses full custody of his children. When introduced to Mrs. Doubtfire, Lydia also stares skeptically at her and even acts verbally aggressive and angry to her at first, though later she has a change of heart. Traditionally, women are compassionate, caring, and lovingly expressive with gentle, smiling faces, but the women in this film, especially the professionals, show lack of any of those attributes, especially towards Daniel losing his children. In a sense, this film reinforces political science professor Harvey Mansfield’s claim that feminism with its goal for more independent women has subordinated and almost obliterated femininity (Mansfield 451).

In contrast, the men in the film hold the friendly, compassionate roles. First and foremost, Daniel epitomizes the loving parent. He places his children above everything else in his life. He leaves himself emotionally free and adaptable so that he can give his children a fun, happy world. He goes to all lengths, even dressing up as an old lady and breaking social conventions, to simply care and be with his children. Another example would be the bus driver. Although he might appear to have his own agenda, the bus driver warmly speaks kind and friendly words. He

expresses somewhat of a chivalric nature by complimenting Mrs. Doubtfire and by making sure she has a safe place to stay. Yet another example might be the judge who remarks that although most custody cases favor the mother, he understands that children also need a loving, caring father. The judge shows compassion in that he allows Daniel time to shape up and find a job so that he may reverse the verdict. Towards the end, although he still passes full custody to Miranda, the judge found Daniel's speech to be heartfelt and genuine. A final male figure that shows care would be Daniel's brother, Frank. When Daniel has no home, Frank offers that he may at his home as long as he may wish. Frank actually makes possible Daniel's transformation into Mrs. Doubtfire. Frank also portrays men as helpful, caring individuals.

The film also portrays the issue of differing male gender roles. A widely accepted convention maintains that men are competitive. While Stu, an old love interest of Miranda's from before her marriage who comes back to woo her, reflects the competitive stereotype, Daniel does not show a very competitive nature. Because of his competitive edge, Stu has risen up high in social status. He has wealth, expensive cars, a fit body, a sophisticated look, and many other features that express success. He finds the need to show off his success by taking Daniel's family out to a fancy, expensive restaurant, by taking them to an exclusive pool resort, and by showing off his physical prowess and skill when he dives off into the water. He even degrades Daniel when he tells his friend that Daniel is a loser. In every effect, Stu uses every effort to out shine everyone else for dominance. Daniel, on the other hand, does not display such egoistic, competitive qualities. He cannot keep a job, does not try to constantly show off his skills, and does not concern himself with being extremely rich or powerful. He simply loves his children and wants to be a caring, compassionate, fun man. In fact, unlike Stu, the film depicts Daniel as having some moral character when he quits a job because of its negative message of smoking to

children. Daniel values moral success over wealth or status dominance. Overall, Daniel displays the gender role of men as caring, emotional supporters while Stu portrays it as self-centered concern for power and dominance.

In addition, the film shows unconventional male and female gender roles in a marriage. In most cultures, society has expected men to be the breadwinners. Societies expect men to provide for their families at any cost. As previously mentioned, Daniel does not mirror this convention. He cannot keep a job, and in fact, none of his jobs were professional. He quits his job, which endangers his family's welfare. However, his wife Miranda takes the role of the family's provider. She holds the professional, high-paying occupation, and she sacrifices time away from her family to support it. Because Miranda works so much and spends so much time away from home, the children practically grew up with Daniel as the primary caretaker, a role conventionally linked with women (Devor 388). Also, due to her time-consuming, intensive work, Miranda is often stressed and angry. Daniel and Miranda have switched conventional marriage gender roles in that Miranda is the stern, stressed and workaholic mother whereas Daniel is the happy, loving caretaker of the children.

Furthermore, the film touches upon the homosexual and transsexual gender roles. The two homosexuals in the film, Uncle Frank and Aunt Jack, have feminine qualities. Devor asserts that feminine traits involve minimization of spatial use, use of hands and fingers in child-like fashions, speech with non-aggressive inflections and tones, and speech with sounds of higher pitch (389). Despite Frank's raspy voice, both men speak calmly, invitingly and friendly with higher pitched inflections and intonations. In regards to their bodies, they keep their hands and feet closer to their body, and they point child-like with their index fingers. The men are probably the most helpful characters in the movie because they made possible the disguise and character

of Mrs. Doubtfire. This film does not demoralize or degrade homosexuality, but instead makes it appear casual. Daniel's mother makes no implication that she rejects Frank's lifestyle and neither does Daniel. Both make homosexuality seem completely natural. Likewise, when Daniel tells his kids that Uncle Frank and Aunt Jack aided him, the children do not show any disregard for homosexuality. They also simply accept it.

In contrast to the arguably positive light given homosexuality, however, the film berates transsexuals. Whether it is when Daniel pretends over the phone to be a woman who had a sex change when Chris, the son, discovers Mrs. Doubtfire's male genitals, or when Daniel accidentally talks to his manager Mr. Lundy as Mrs. Doubtfire, the response is always negative. Miranda quickly hangs up the phone after hearing the transsexual nanny. Chris runs to Lydia who takes up a racket to defend them from the he-she Mrs. Doubtfire. Mr. Lundy stares disgustedly and confusedly at Daniel as Mrs. Doubtfire. When Daniel loses his Mrs. Doubtfire face but puts on the wig and sees himself in the mirror, he yells "Ah! Norman Bates!" This homage to Alfred Hitchcock's Pyscho shows that he disapproves of people dressing up as the other sex despite his doing the same. The only reason Frank and Jack did not disapprove of his transsexual dress was because they knew Daniel's intentions for his family. Also, the only reason Mr. Lundy approved of the Mrs. Doubtfire dress was because she was simply a made up character for a show, not how Daniel actually wanted to dress or portray himself as. While the film shows homosexuals as everyday commonalities that should be simply accepted, it actually does the opposite for transsexuals.

Although the film does not mention them very prominently, it shows another set of gender roles through the children characters. The kids, a boy and two girls, have been raised as stereotypically conventional children. Chris expresses traditional male qualities through focus

and interest in sports and graphic ideas. As a teenage adolescent, Chris jokingly asks his father twice if he hired strippers for his birthday party. That seems like something anyone might expect from a typical older adolescent male. When introduced to Mrs. Doubtfire, Chris' reacts to her by observing her broad build and saying that she could play for a football team. As expected of any typical adolescent male, Chris focuses heavily on sports, even in situations that are totally unrelated. When he watches television with his sisters, he reacts with a smile and with interest to a rather grotesque image. Also, he explains amebic dysentery to his younger sister with delight. Both examples provide another example of the typical male enjoyment of more graphic, disturbing ideas. Finally, after discovering Mrs. Doubtfire's true identity, Chris is reluctant to hug his father, to which his father responds, " It's cool. It's a guy thing" (Mrs. Doubtfire). In our culture, males learn to be emotionally detached, and so this exemplifies again a typical male attitude.

On the other hand, Chris' two sisters have been raised as typical young females. When they see the ugly image on the television, both sisters react with disgusted, disturbed faces. At the dinner table, Nattie, the younger sister, tells Daniel to call Miranda a princess. Lastly, both daughters discuss clothes with their mother, and when deciding which dress their mother should wear, they take interest in and agree on one that appears the most beautiful and fun to them. In all these cases, the girls present common feminine attitudes. Whether they find eerie images gross, enjoy fashion, or represent females as "princesses," the daughters in this film portray the typical girly girl gender role. Overall, the children in the film all followed common portrayals of their respective gender.

Another view of gender roles comes from a subtle aspect of the movie. The song selections for the film take on a character of their own to portray women as simply subordinates

for men. Daniel and the gay couple sing “Matchmaker,” which simply infers that women’s sole goal is to marry and become a man’s housewife. The nonsynchronous songs, “Walk Like a Man,” “Luck Be a Lady,” and “Dude (Looks Like a Lady),” portray women as simply objects for men’s use. “Walk Like a Man” expresses the view that women are worthless and should be ignored if they do not adhere to men’s wishes. In “Luck Be a Lady,” women are likened to an abstract, intangible idea that must serve men so that they can become successful. Finally, “Dude (Looks Like a Lady),” depicts the gender role that men are superficial about appearances. The song asserts that men are only focused on sexual attractiveness, and so women should reflect such a model to please them. Regardless of the songs’ topics and moods, each one expresses the gender role that women should work for men and should be sexually appealing.

Next, the film depicts the best ideal gender role for care taking through the character of Mrs. Doubtfire. To become the ideal nanny for his children, Daniel takes on the role of a traditionally feminine old lady. Daniel employs feminine traits as expressed by Devor, such as speaking with a gentle, caring manner and hunching his torso to appear less erect (389). Mrs. Doubtfire cleans, cooks, reads, and does very much any task associated with traditional female caretakers. Mrs. Doubtfire shows not only that such a gender role works best for taking care of children but also portrays it as one that brings happiness to everyone. When Mrs. Doubtfire took care of the children, they did better in life. They did better in school, and they were much, much happier with her around. Overall, Mrs. Doubtfire was the best role model for them. Mrs. Doubtfire also brought out the best in Miranda. Mrs. Doubtfire sparked a joy in Miranda that the children said they had not seen in a long time. While Mrs. Doubtfire was present, Miranda had more time to spend with her children, and she came home earlier from work to do so. Even Daniel benefited from Mrs. Doubtfire. According to Devor, members of a gender are expected to

perform poorly in activities dubbed appropriate for the other gender (388), and in fact, Daniel could not cook or houseclean very well. However, after becoming Mrs. Doubtfire, Daniel learned many skills and grew better at organizing his life. Most importantly, however, through Mrs. Doubtfire, Daniel could spend time with his children, and so, Mrs. Doubtfire brought joy for him. Despite the absurdity of dressing up as and playing the role of an old lady, Daniel's actions and ideology through the gender role of Mrs. Doubtfire brought the best out of everyone around him.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Mrs. Doubtfire points out the importance of men and women as parents and of family for children's happiness. The entire premise of the film revolved around a father doing whatever he could just to be with his kids. The children loved their father and were very happy every time he was with them, but after Daniel lost custody of his kids, the children were heartbroken. Until Mrs. Doubtfire showed up, the children were depressed, and after the court ruled against Daniel again, the children lost joy again (until their father came to be their nanny). During their time without their father, Mrs. Doubtfire became part of the children's family. However, despite their love for Mrs. Doubtfire, the children still needed a father. Daniel knew that his children needed him, and he needed them. He understood the utter importance for children to grow up with a father and a mother. Even though Miranda divorced Daniel because she did not want the children to grow up with a mother who became nasty and mean whenever she was with her husband, in the end, she realized that, despite Daniel's and her differences, the children's well being was more important. Finally, through Mrs. Doubtfire, the audience hears the message of focus for children and family. At the end of the film, Mrs. Doubtfire tells children of divorced parents never to blame themselves and that their parents love them even if they don't love each other. In the last words, she says, "There are all

sorts of families...and they may not see each other for days, weeks, months, or even years at a time. But if there's love dear, those are the ties that bind. And you'll have a family in your heart forever" (Mrs. Doubtfire). Through all of her actions and especially her final words, Mrs. Doubtfire portrayed the most important gender roles: being caring, loving parents for the young ones.

From independent women to homosexuals and transsexuals to parental units, Mrs. Doubtfire addresses a great deal of different gender roles. Although the film portrays some the roles negatively, it views many of them through a positive light. The movie depicts men and women as loving caretakers for their children to be the most important role of them all. Overall, the film expresses gender roles as powerful influencers that affect many different situations and impact our everyday lives.

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