

The Cycle of the Butterfly:  
The Gender Condition within David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*

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### Introduction

Did Puccini understand gender constructs? Does society still function on old notions of the male and female? In an age where progress is abundant in technology and commerce, gender stereotypes are plentiful. Within *M. Butterfly*, David Henry Hwang's initial response was to expose the true story of a French Ambassador who aided in treasonous acts by having an affair with a Chinese spy. Through the lenses of Masculine and Gender theory, this paper looks to analyze the creation of gender roles within the play as a means of Gallimard's demise. Gallimard's attempt to become the ultimate masculine, powerful man only leads him to become a feminine butterfly.

### Creating his own Fantasy

In the opening scene, we find Gallimard, our protagonist, in a prison cell. He is in a dream-like state exclaiming, "Butterfly, Butterfly" to a figure who the audience, through lighting, realizes is a fantasy (Hwang 1). Breaking away, Gallimard begins as our narrator and asks the audience to join him on the journey to where he is now. Our initial understanding of Gallimard's character is his lack of masculinity.

**Gallimard:** You see, I make people laugh. I never dreamed this day would arrive. I've never been considered witty or clever. In fact, as a young boy, in an informal poll among my grammar school classmates, I was voted 'least likely to be invited to a party'. It's a title I managed to hold for many years. (Hwang 2)

He was mocked and ridiculed which aided in his lack of confidence over time. Gallimard did not fit into the hegemony of the male construct. Hegemonic masculinity is encompassed within the overarching ideals of masculinity. It is defined by John Beynon as "successful ways of 'being a man' in a particular place at a specific time. It is established either through consensual negotiation or through power and achievement" (16). Since he was little, Gallimard has been hindered from the hegemony created by society. Hwang immediately juxtaposes Gallimard with the character of Marc, his best friend and 'ladies man'. Hwang even orchestrates the character looking into the audience for women to hit on during the performance. Marc puts the pressure on Gallimard to claim his manhood in anyway that he can. Marc, at one point, proposes a weekend away at a cabin. The problem: it's filled with college girls.

**Gallimard:** Marc, I can't...I'm afraid they'll say no-the girls. So I never ask.

**Marc:** Hey Rene- it doesn't matter that you're clumsy and got zits- they're not looking! (Hwang 9)

Marc, as the model of hegemonic masculinity, puts down and scrutinizes anything against the norm of what a man 'should be' without realizing he is being condescending. This

causes Gallimard to search for any form of power in his emasculated world. It is only when he discovers *Playboy* magazines that he feels power.

**Gallimard:** The first time I saw them in his closet...all lined up-my body shook. Not with lust - no, with power. Here women - a shelf-full who would do exactly as I wanted. (10)

What does this say about his view of women? In this statement, he has begun his search for a woman who would make him king in a world in which he already falls short.

### **Becoming the Butterfly**

Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* is an integral part of this story. It is what enables Gallimard's fantasy to become his own reality. The opera premiered in 1904 at La Scala in Milan and Gallimard's attraction to the Opera allows him to seem in his own mind the dominant man over the submissive Asian woman. Gallimard describes the Opera for the audience initially in case they are unaware of the story.

**Gallimard:** Its heroine, Cio-Cio-San, also known as Butterfly, is a feminine ideal, beautiful and brave. And its hero, the man for who she gives up everything, is - not very good looking, not too bright, and pretty much a wimp: Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton of the U. S. Navy. As the curtain rises, he's just closed on two great bargains: one on a house, the other on a woman-call it a package deal. (5)

The Opera is the story of a foreign masculine power overtaking the feminine power from the West. Gallimard came to China with his wife, Helga, as a diplomat for France not knowing what the future of his marriage or life held. He describes his marriage not of love but of convenience.

**Gallimard:** ...I took a vow renouncing love. No fantasy woman would ever want me, so, yea, I would settle for a quick leap in the career ladder. Passion, I banish, and in its place- practicality! (Hwang 14)

It is not until their first encounter that Song Liling considers the possibility of changing Gallimard's practical fate. Song sings an aria from *Madame Butterfly* and Gallimard is mesmerized. Song is our antagonist. Throughout the course of the play, the audience begins to understand that Song is much more than the innocent butterfly she pretends to be: Song is in fact a spy for the Chinese government, but more importantly she is a he. Song's gender is the driving force throughout the play. Gallimard is reluctant to begin his affair with Song but with a push from Marc in a dream, Gallimard decides to take the bait in what he learns is Song's elaborate plan.

**Marc:** All your life you've waited for a beautiful girl who would lay down for you. All your life you've smiled like a saint when it's happened to every other man you know. And you see them in magazines and you see them in movies. And you wonder, what's wrong with me? Will anyone beautiful ever want me? As the years pass, you hair thins and you struggle to hold onto even your hopes. Stop struggling, Rene. The wait is over. (Hwang 25)

As their relationship begins, it fills Gallimard with a confidence he had never experienced before and a confidence he carries through the course of the play until his death.

**Gallimard:** I've become patron saint of the socially inept. Can they really be so foolish? Men like that - they should be scratching at my door, begging to learn my secrets! For I, Rene Gallimard, you see, I have known, and been loved by...the Perfect Woman. (Hwang 4)

Though things seem to be going well with Song, Gallimard still searches for something more, something completely different. He was getting bored with the gentle butterfly. He meets Renee, a foreign exchange student from Denmark, and begins another affair that shakes him at his core because of her boldness.

**Gallimard:** And so, I embarked on my first extra-extramarital affair. Renee was picture perfect. With a body like those girls in the magazines. If I put a tissue paper over my eyes, I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. And it was exciting to be with someone who wasn't afraid to be seen completely naked. But is it possible for a woman to be too uninhibited, too willing, so as to be seen almost too...masculine? (Hwang 54)

Renee appears feminine but tends to be forward and speak her mind, which makes her behaviors and mannerisms 'masculine'. She is uninhibited, openly discussing Gallimard's penis, which makes him uncomfortable and nervous. Renee even hypothesizes that wars are started because of penis envy throughout their 'unfeminine' conversation.

**Renee:** Like, I think the reason we fight wars is because we wear clothes. Because no one knows - between men, I mean - who has the bigger...weenie. So, if I'm a guy with a small one, I'm going to build a really big building or take over a really big piece of land or write a really long book so the other men won't know, right? But, see, it never really works, that's the problem. I mean, you conquer the country, or whatever, but you're still wearing clothes, so there's no way to prove absolutely whose is bigger or smaller. And that's what we call a civilized society. The whole world run by a bunch of men with pricks the size of pins. (56)

She exposes the notion that men feel they must justify their masculinity by flaunting the "size" of their private parts.

Within R.W Connell's book, *Masculinities*, he explores what constitutes the term 'masculinity' and its many facets. He defines masculinity "as the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in the bodily experience, personality and culture" (71). An essential part of this definition is the exploration of gender as a social practice. Connell created a provisional model by which he believes gender is separated in three distinguishing relations: Power, Production, and Cathexis.

Power relations within gender are described as the "overall subordination of women and dominance of men" (Connell 74). This power struggle between men and women is a constant and "has great importance for the politics of masculinity" (Connell

74). Song initially brings Power relations to the forefront in the play by discussing the nature of the *Madame Butterfly* in reverse terms with Gallimard.

**Song:** Consider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years, during which she prays to his picture and turns down a marriage to a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an Oriental who kills herself for a Westerner- Ah- you find it beautiful. (Hwang 17)

The woman is supposed to be submissive and weak no matter the race. The white woman is considered an idiot when killing herself but then the Asian woman, though considered beautiful, is still submissive to the patriarchy of the Western man.

Production relations are the “gender divisions of labour” (Connell 74). Still today, the stereotype that women stay home with the children and men go out to make the ‘dough’ exists. When women go out into the workforce, they must face the pay gap because of their gender. Connell explains, “So it is not a statistical accident, but a part of the social construction of masculinity, that men and not women control the major corporations and the great private fortunes. Implausible as it sounds, the accumulation of wealth has become firmly linked to the reproductive areas, through the social relations of gender” (74).

Renee goes against this classical notion of Production relations. She indicates in an earlier part of the scene that she has come to China to learn the language because she knows that “it’ll be important someday” (Hwang 52). Even her father, who remarks that she’s a “complete weirdo” (Hwang 53) for going to China in the first place, continues to scrutinize her for her educational endeavors. Her ambition is frowned upon by the idea of Production relations within the gender model that Connell explains. In terms of what is expected, Renee should not even be in China in the first place. This adds another element of masculinity to her character, which stumps Gallimard.

Cathexis concerns sexual desire. From the Freudian theory, desire can be described as “emotional energy attached to an object” which in turn creates a clear “gendered character” (Connell 74). He continues to describe that these practices of determining sexual desires are essential to gender order. It is a pillar of what it means to be gendered. Connell also notes the feminist argument with desire stating, “In the feminist analysis of sexuality these have become sharp questions about the connection of heterosexuality with men’s position of social dominance” (75). Renee’s sexual charge distinguishes her from Song. Gallimard says he is not used to something being completely naked and Renee is confident with her body and sexuality as a woman. His own sexual charge is questioned when he in turn does not want to be with someone more masculine than he is which gives her the social dominance that is integral to feminist theory.

Gallimard consistently questioning his own masculinity continues as he experiences moments of complete masculinity and moments where he ‘falls short’. When with Renee, he feels emasculated because of her confidence in her own femininity. Within this relationship, Renee immediately takes the power role, which is an opposition to Gallimard’s traditional view of how a woman should act. Her actions and audacity enable Gallimard to begin this relationship but also eventually end it. It is also interesting to

look at how Hwang has named Renee. She shares her name with Gallimard but in reality is the complete opposite of him. It was a clever tactic by Hwang to demonstrate how Renee is the masculinity that Gallimard can never have. She is his polar opposite.

### **Metamorphosis**

Song gives Gallimard a fake sense of masculinity in her existence alone. Song, as a spy, creates the ideal image of woman that Gallimard cannot escape. Within the stage directions of the play, Hwang indicates that Song breaks away from the crowd to initially interact with Gallimard. Why would Song pick Gallimard? Did he already know who Gallimard was? Song must have because he knew that he needed to infiltrate French intelligence. At first, Song had to get a sense of what he was dealing with as an actor with his main improvisation partner.

When Gallimard went to see Song for the first time at the Opera house, Song was very bold and flirtatious in his actions around him. He immediately calls out to him after his performance.

**Song:** Yes. You. White man. I'm looking straight at you.

**Gallimard:** Me?

**Song:** You see any other white men? It was too easy to spot you. How often does a man in my audience come in a tie? (Hwang 20)

His rough and tough tactic is what initially draws Gallimard into his web. He knows exactly how to make this insecure man perplexed enough that he will think about 'her' for days after this first interaction.

**Gallimard:** What was that? What did she mean, 'Sometimes...it is mutual?' Women do not flirt with me. And I normally can't talk to them. But tonight, I held up my end of the conversation. (22)

But soon after, Song changes his tactics. He realizes that in order to fully draw Gallimard in, he must become the Butterfly that Renee dreams of and wishes for as the Western Man. Song creates the feminine oriental butterfly.

**Song:** Hard as I try to be modern, to speak like a man, to hold a Western woman's strong face up to my own...in the end, I fail. A small frightened heart beats too quickly and gives me away. Monsieur Gallimard, I'm a Chinese girl. I've never...never invited man up to my flat before. The forwardness of my actions makes me skin burn. (31)

The irony of this quote is that Song says to Gallimard that she cannot speak like a man but in reality she is a man. This is a perfect creation of what Gallimard wants to hear from fragile Oriental woman. This only drives Gallimard's every move and motivation to reel her into his creation of *Madame Butterfly*.

**Gallimard:** Over the next five weeks, I worked like a dynamo. I stopped going to the opera, I didn't phone or write her. I knew this little flower was waiting for me

to call and as I wickedly refused to do so, I felt for the first time that rush of power- the absolute power of a man. (32)

This is exactly what Song wanted Gallimard to feel- that he was in complete control of the situation even though his own story was beginning to dissolve.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* examines Feminism and Subversion of Identity within society. She dives deeply into the ideals of gender construction and what it means to be male or female. In the case of Song and Gallimard's relationship, it is interesting to observe the characteristics of what is being presented and what is reality. Judith Butler writes,

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequences that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (6)

Because of the floating nature of gender within the play, Song can create a female gender though biologically a man. Song's choice to become the 'Butterfly' was questioned but in order for Song to be successful in his mission he must comply with Gallimard's fantasy. He must create the ultimate Asian female gender construction. Song proclaims, "only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (Hwang 63) and as we see through the course of the play, Song is very successful in creating this fantasy.

Judith Butler's studies on drag are highly insightful when thinking about gender performance and creation. Song uses these tactics in order to fulfill his mission. Butler's in depth analysis of drag states,

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But actually we are in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of a "woman" (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency.* (137)

In order for Song to successfully trick Gallimard into believing he is a woman, Song must imitate what society has dictated. He must become the soft, fragile, elegant, naïve, Oriental woman. During Gallimard's trial, Song explains to the Judge:

**Song:** Okay, Rule One is: Men always believe what they want to hear. So a girl can tell the most obnoxious lies and the guys will believe them every time- "This is my first time"- "That's the biggest I've ever seen" or both, which, if you really think about it, is not possible in a single lifetime.

**Judge:** Go on.

**Song:** Rule Two: As soon as a Western man comes into contact with the East - he's already confused. (Hwang 82)

Song's understanding of gender performance and his understanding of Western culture allowed for him to succeed as the Butterfly. In order to create a character, an actor must think about their body movements, their character's thoughts, their character's background, and how they interact with others as well as many more attributes that make up a human being. As a person of the theatre, these are notions that I innately know, but for an outsider what might seem like minor details help bring a character to life. Song honed his craft as an actor in order to make 'Butterfly' work and it is evident that all those elements combined aid in our perceptions of people and their gender. Judith Butler agrees with this notion. She states,

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the 'integrity' of the subject. (136)

Song has mastered what it means to create a character and in this case create gender based upon a social discourse of what it means to be a female in China from the eyes of a Westerner. This element is important because it would be one thing for Song to create Butterfly as just a Chinese woman, but it is crucial that he becomes the quintessential view of a woman of the Orient in terms of what the West believes. Butler discusses how the redescription of gender can aid in the creation of fantasy, which is exactly what Song aims for. Butler writes,

The redescription of intrapsychic processes in terms of the surface politics of the body implies a corollary redescription of gender as the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy through the play of gender of body through a series of exclusions and denials, signifying absences. (135)

Song, through his creation of the female gender, is able to set the stage for his mission and goal of attaining information for the Chinese government. As Butterfly, he creates a power over Gallimard that only a fantasy driven man could follow.

What does it mean to hold power over a person, especially when it involves two countries that are relying on two individuals for information? Gallimard, as a diplomat, came to China on assignment and throughout the course of the play receives a promotion.

As a spy, Song needed to infiltrate French intelligence and knew Gallimard was the way to get it. Song used gender as a means of attaining power.

Michael Foucault's work with power relations is extremely relevant to *M. Butterfly*. Foucault states "power is everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Rouse 109). Song enables Gallimard with his use of gender performance to gain Gallimard's trust and love in order to then gain access to the secret materials that he needs. During the trial, Song described how he was able to continue to spy for China.

**Song:** Rene lost all his high-level contacts. Comrade Chin wasn't very interested in parking-ticket statistics. But finally, at my urging, Rene got a job as a courier, handling sensitive documents. He'd photograph them for me, and I'd pass them on to the Chinese embassy.

**Judge:** Did he understand the extent of his activity?

**Song:** He didn't ask. He knew that I needed those documents, and that was enough. (Hwang 81)

Foucault would consider this to be a part of the nature of power and gaining information. He explains how our society has changed:

We have become a singularly confessing society...[The confession] plays a part in the justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, in the most solemn rites: one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell...One confesses - or is forced to confess. (Rouse 99)

This exact tactic is what Song uses to get his information. He pushes and pushes as Butterfly in order to get what he needs. Gallimard was going to confess; it was only a matter of someone coaxing him. It is that easy when you find a person's weakness and for Song it was changing his gender to gain information. Song created the relationship with their initial greeting which gave him the upper hand the entire time. Foucault would define this as power relations, similar to Connell's earlier definition. Both Song and Gallimard rely on each other for some source of power but in the end only one source can be successful. Foucault writes,

The configuration of power relations emerges instead from the support which force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunction and contradictions which isolate them from one another...infinitesimal mechanisms of power have been- and continue to be- invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination. (Rouse 110)

Song and Gallimard's relationship is a constant power struggle in which each individual thinks they are in charge. It is only when Song fulfills Gallimard's fantasy and becomes the Ultimate Butterfly that the power shift changes. Song becomes the driving force in the power relation by using gender and is able to eventually destroy Gallimard. Song destroys



the fantasy and takes the power along with any remnants of Gallimard's masculinity. Gallimard, finally, confronts Song about his fantasy, but Song retaliates.

**Song:** Let's just say...I'm disappointed in you, Rene. In the crush of your adoration, I thought you'd become something more. More like...a woman. But no. Men. You're like the rest of them. It's all in the way we dress, and make up our faces, and bat our eyelashes. You really have so little imagination. (Hwang 90)

Gallimard is completely shattered at the end of this interaction leaving him to dissolve into the Butterfly.

**Gallimard:** I am a man who loved a woman created by a man. Everything else - simply falls short...Love warped my judgment, blinded my eyes, rearranged the very lines on my face...until I could look into the mirror and see nothing but...a woman. (Hwang 92)

This is the ultimate transformation of Gallimard into the Butterfly he cannot escape from because of the constant battle of power relations within gender.

## Conclusion

Overall, Gallimard was destined to fail. In this fantasy world he created, based upon Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, he was bound to a narrative that Song was in control of:

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

**Song:** Rene, I've never done what you've said. Why should it be any different in your mind? (Hwang 78)

Song was in control by using her ability to shift genders as a power tool. Like Song says above, he never did what Gallimard thought he would do because Song was in charge. Gallimard would never become the masculine man he believed he was with Song but rather become more emasculated than before. At the end, Song throws this power in his face:

**Song:** Who's to say? And what's the shame? In pride? You think I could've pulled this off if I wasn't already full of pride when we met? No, not just pride. Arrogance. It takes arrogance, really- to believe you can will, with your eyes and your lips, the destiny of another. (Hwang 85)

And Song did change Rene Gallimard's destiny forever. It left him where we, the audience, first meet him: in prison. His prison cell, where he is in solitude and alone with only his thoughts, allows him to constantly retell the story of his Butterfly. But in this retelling, he was at a point where he had to face his own fantasy. Song was really a man and he finally confronted this reality but this became too painful, too real.

Still that brings to question, could Gallimard have known that Song was a woman? Yes, he must have, but to admit that would mean to destroy everything he believed in and

would continue to emasculate him even more. His repression of the truth allows him to escape into the world where he is the hero and champion.

**Gallimard:** Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find? Perhaps. Happiness is so rare that our mind can turn somersaults to protect it. At the time, I only knew that I was seeing Pinkerton stalking towards his Butterfly, ready to reward her love with his lecherous hands. The image sickened me, pulled me to my knees, so I was crawling towards her like a worm. By the time I reached her, Pinkerton... had vanished from my heart. To be replaced by something new, something unnatural, that flew in the face of all I'd learned in the world - something very close to love. (Hwang 60)

Gallimard loved Song in a way he had not experienced before and whether or not that love fit into his own Opera, it was genuine. In the end, Gallimard is reckoned to reality and must kill himself to remain in the fantasy. Gallimard's death marks the end of the battle and in the process creates the liminal space of gender. In the final moments of his life, he is in the dream-like state as in the beginning of the piece, surrounded by dancers. The dancers then hand him a knife to perform a ritualized Seppuku death. This is a Japanese ritual suicide that is a part of Puccini's Opera. As he prepares, Gallimard talks to the audience.

**Gallimard:** Death with honor is better than life...life with dishonor. (*He sets himself center stage, in a seppuku position*) The love of a Butterfly can withstand many things - unfaithfulness, loss, even abandonment. But how can it face the one sin that implies all others? The devastating knowledge that, underneath it all, the object of her love was nothing more, nothing less than...a man. (*He sets the tip of the knife against his body*) It is 19\_\_\_. And I have found her at last. In a prison on the outskirts of Paris. My name is Rene Gallimard-also known as Madame Butterfly. (Hwang 92)

Gallimard refers to himself as "her" and calls himself "Madame Butterfly" within the final moments of his life. This is the moment where Gallimard accepts the feminine and releases the masculine tensions he has held throughout his life. He escaped the constructs of gender, which allowed him to transcend into the butterfly.

Gender constructs dictate our lives and can destroy our essential essence as human beings by leading people into a false sense of reality of what it means to be male or female. Hwang's *M. Butterfly* demonstrates that there is a problem with how we create our human existence and how we gender our bodies throughout the course of our lives. The discourse on gender creates a 'black and white' semiotic where you either fit the norm or you fall short. Both criteria are the problem; there is no model because every human being is different. In the end, what's wrong with being a butterfly?

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