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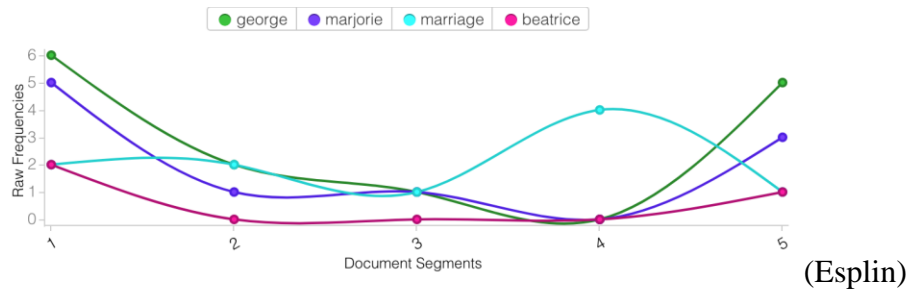
Male Presence and Indecision In “Tête à Tête, à la Femme”

The short “Tête à Tête, à la Femme” is unremarkable at first glance much like its author Beatrice Hastings (writing under the name Beatrice Tina). Just a conversation between friends Marjorie and Beatrice about the merits of free marriage (“not [marrying] at all”) versus a legal marriage. Beatrice, a forward-thinking woman in the eyes of Marjorie surprises her friend by adamantly opposing Marjorie entering a free marriage with her beau, George. She gives extensive examples of free marriages that have failed and generally talks over Marjorie’s attempt to rebut the grim perspective Beatrice presents. It all seemed very straightforward until I began to look closely at the text in Voyant software. What immediately stood out was the number of times “George” was used. Within the story Beatrice was used 4 times, Marjorie 10, and George 14. The only other word that appears as much as George is free. This immediately flipped the story from a simple conversation between two friends to a commentary on the power and presence of men over women, even when they are supposedly having a private discussion. Marjorie suffers the most as she struggles with the strong ideologies George follows and Beatrice’s own forceful opinions that pull her in different directions. In the end Marjorie is not only unaccustomed to making decisions but unwilling to do so and is more comfortable to let others make them for her.

George may never be physically present in the story, but he is very much present in the discussion and lives of the women. As Marjorie first comes to Beatrice, crying, she is asked “is it something awful?” as one would when a friend cries. However, Marjorie avoids the question and

answers by saying “Well, it's this. George wants me to marry him freely” which, at the very least, implies that she isn't sure. Her tears add to the impression that she might feel that the situation is awful. This is the first instance where Marjorie holds back her opinion in favor of discovering Beatrice's perspective or voicing what George would say. Hastings is able to work in some understanding of what Marjorie is truly feeling in her emotional response to parts of the conversation, but from the beginning through the end Marjorie is a largely unknown character. When Beatrice initially scoffs at the idea of Marjorie entering into a free marriage and asks why she would even consider it, Marjorie responds “[well]-George-you know” and Beatrice responds with a knowing “I know-the Superman George is cracked on eugenics. That idea is all very well for George to play with; but it mightn't be play for the superman when he grew up and wanted to hold his own with the rest of the world” which gives the reader the first brush stroke in an image Beatrice is going to paint of George. This exchange demonstrates a mutual understanding of George's character, that there is something distinctive and perhaps predictable about his behavior.

Beatrice does not seem to like George's philosophy on life. She is frustrated when she hears his thoughts and opinions repeated by Marjorie rather than Marjorie giving her own thoughts and responds “if you've only come out here to repeat scraps from George, I must tell you I'm impatient, and not inclined to waste my time. If you choose to act woman to woman, I'll talk.” Repeatedly, we see Marjorie using George as a source of authority for her responses to Beatrice and Marjorie's own personality is hidden behind his. Beatrice cannot even address her directly without somehow referencing George in some way as well. When looking at Voyant there is a strong correlation between the appearance of Marjorie and George in the story.



In the chart above one can clearly see the correlation play out. This creates a visual of what we see happening in the text; that Marjorie does not speak for herself and is not spoken to as an independent person. When Beatrice is addressing Marjorie she has to take into account what she knows of George and his many opinions. When Marjorie speaks, it is to bring up some other defense that George has used to convince her into a free marriage. One gets the impression that George must go around like a priest giving sermons about the correct way of living and caring little about the opinion of others. In the midst of this, Marjorie has completely lost her own identity.

One of the most prevalent of George's opinions reoccurring consistently throughout their chat is the topic of Nietzsche's superman. It is a philosophy used to define "the superior man" and describe a man who emerges fully formed and independent of moral inhibitions (Brittanica). When Beatrice first acknowledges his love of the idea she derisively calls him a superman, something we gather from later conversation, would have flattered him. If he sees himself as a superman, then there are certain characteristics that are associated with the trope that could be problematic in a relationship. An interesting aspect in the definition is the etymology of the term "superman" from "superior man" which is fitting and foreboding considering the topic. Marjorie, while possibly not fully subscribing to this idea, is allowing herself to be subject to a man who believes himself to be superior. This superiority gives him the right, in his eyes, to assign Marjorie her life. Beatrice once mentions Georges name as if he were a philosopher alongside Forel, a major proponent of eugenics, and criticizes the idea that he would sacrifice their future child for an ideal. Eugenics,

the belief that human breeding could bring about a superior race, in our day is associated with Nazi ideas and is generally rejected (Origins). However, the ideas of the superman and eugenics deal with this idea of attaining superiority and power. To a man like George, in the midst of women gaining more political and social freedom, these philosophies are understandably attractive. Marjorie, caught up in the middle of his ego and unsure of herself is susceptible to these beliefs as well. When Beatrice is contradicting George, she is fighting against the idea of inherent or obtained superiority in favor of the protection law and society provides. She even goes as far as to say “An illegitimate person must act Ishmael, and it's the ' must' which resolves bastards usually into the most conventional of all people” or that without some semblance of legitimacy, “bastards” must spend their lives fighting their way into acceptance by society and are condemned to be entirely ordinary. Something that George obviously does not like.

If George is set on becoming a superman figure, he seems to be failing. If the superman is above social influence and Christian morals while George tends to base his decisions on appearance rather than actually living the principles he believes then he has a lot less in common with the philosophical giant than he pretends. Like a modern social media post where a girl might put on a cute top and leave her sweatpants on for a picture, George wants to announce their not-marriage-but-almost in the paper. This is revealed after Beatrice concedes “The only reason [she] can allow at present for embracing free marriage is that one need not live in the same house with one's lover all the time, and that one gets rid of all the horrible publicity” which is comical in its timing as well as telling. George doesn't want to enter into a free marriage in order to enjoy its benefits, he wants to prove that he is superior to society, that he has beat the system. He gains no satisfaction unless others are aware of his shocking lifestyle. Beatrice does not see this coming to a happy conclusion and ices over her zeal in order to make the point that “every workable idea has

two ends. At one end is the fire, the burning principle by which the artist who creates the idea is inspired; at the other end is the cold advantage for the average person” logically removing the emotion from the situation. There is the philosophy and then there is a practical application and they are often dissimilar as reality is imperfect and does not allow for perfect philosophy. She then beautifully illustrates the tension between society and ideals when she explains:

“Between the artist and the average person is a living permeation-tube held by the people who discuss every new idea as it springs forth. If this tube leaks and lets the flame splutter out, the crowd runs away and gets a hose, and the idea is quenched perhaps forever and a day. No use to tell the crowd that the persons burning like their martyrdom. The crowd does not like martyrdom; and it ...abandons any idea which gorges on martyrs. That is what has happened to Christianity: after seeing all the burnings, the crowd doesn't think it worthwhile... Now, our crowd is only just beginning to understand what is destroying it- that is, the over-pressure of its numbers.”

This story within a story is at the exact center of the text. Until this moment Beatrice has simply responded to George’s ideas and attempted to dissuade Marjorie from entering into a free marriage. Here, she begins to present her own philosophy. She essentially takes over the conversation. Beatrice is not interested in principle, she is interested in living. Later she shares an example of two little boys who have every advantage in the world including food and toys. However, with all do the food and toys, there is still a necessity for a room. Beatrice is acknowledging that while one might want to throw off the constraints of society, it provides a necessary security so that individuals can grow and explore. With her calculated view of the world, this is a moment in which Beatrice becomes more of a superman than George. His disruption of society is dependent on gaining a response from his peers. His protest of their morals is direct acknowledgement of barriers

of society and gives them credence. Beatrice takes the opposite stance. She manipulates society and uses their rules to achieve her own ends. The philosophy and the moral behind it is irrelevant as long as she is able to live happily. She is not a martyr, because, in her opinion, martyrs accomplish nothing but bringing suffering upon themselves and condemnation for their cause. She simply exists as she pleases and that reads truer as a superior human.

At the conclusion of Beatrice's long section of philosophizing Marjorie reenters the conversation. Her concern over "getting the superman" is still prevalent, but then she asks the question that Beatrice has not answered in all of her criticism of the situation "well, would you, [Beatrice], free marry?" Marjorie is once again looking to base her decision on the actions of someone else. She has heard all of Beatrice's reasons for Marjorie not to enter into a free marriage, perhaps she wants Beatrice to admit that while it may not be for Marjorie, Beatrice would not mind a free marriage. A hopeful reading of this question might conclude that Marjorie is taking a stance for once and challenging Beatrice's convictions. She could be searching for hypocrisy or a weakness in her stance that she can use to rationalize still following George into an uncertain future. Beatrice pragmatically stops the question because "It's impossible that [Marjorie] should settle your case by anyone else's." Here is the moment when Marjorie must decide. She has heard two very different perspectives from individuals she seems to trust. She also voices her fear that George might not want to marry her "on principle." Here is another small indication that Marjorie does not favor the idea of a free marriage. This is the beginning of her voicing a conclusion when Beatrice says "That is what a woman risks... Mind you, I believe George would marry. I believe all his eugenics would be flung to the winds, and the two of you would be seen trotting off sharp' to the registrar" revealing the lack of choice truly present. George, at least the George portrayed by Beatrice, is more subject to society than he is willing to admit, and the moment a

child is involved in the relationship Beatrice is guessing that he will marry Marjorie immediately. The question, in Beatrice's opinion, is whether to marry first or to wait until Marjorie is pregnant.

"So, do I!" Marjorie burst out laughing. "I don't think it's worth setting dad's hair on end."

The final line of the story, while delivered with a laugh, is shocking on closer inspection. Marjorie is delighted that she doesn't have to make a true decision because the end result will be the same. While one is sympathetic to the fear and uncertainty she displays, there is also a hope that she might form her own conclusion and stand up to Beatrice or George or both. Marriage and motherhood is not a minor event in anyone's life and handing over the decision making to others is dangerous. She also reinforces her joy with the thought of avoiding her father's distress. She can't even be fully happy for herself, the emotion is contingent on pleasing her father. The moment when Marjorie has the most potential for independence, she introduces a new figure on whom she relies to shape her life.

Marjorie is the only character that has an opportunity to change throughout the course of the story and when that potential is taken from her in the conclusion the powerlessness of a woman in her circumstances is contrasted with a character like Beatrice who has demanded her right to choose. Over the course of the story Marjorie is caught between two strong characters. She is overpowered and scared. She is never asked questions because her opinion doesn't matter. Marjorie is a tragic figure in this story as she looks at everyone but herself for answers, and in a world obsessed with being new, there are many individuals happy to supply what they believe she should do. The outlook for her future is bleak, if she marries George or not, it is clear that she will never live her own life or insist on her happiness while handing over her agency.

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