JACQUES OU LA SOUMISSION : A QUEST FOR SEXUAL LIBERATION

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Abstract

For theatre lovers and scholars worldwide, Eugen Ionesco's name is indubitably associated with the Theatre of the Absurd or the Anti-Theatre, as the playwright himself names his dramaturgic works. Traditionally, a vast majority of Ionesco's scholars and critics focus on such topics as his depiction of the human condition and political statements, while also concentrating on the playwright's metaphysical approach of intellectual exile and the philosophy of death. However, the idea of the omnipresence of gender identity issues, the very source of Ionesco's dramatic works, earned by far less interest. As this article argues, Jacques ou la soumission, a play in which the sexual element becomes direct, dominant, and omnipresent, represents a struggle against identity reprogramming and a quest for sexual liberation.

Keywords: Sexuality, identity, family, gender, individuality, patriarchal power-play, marriage.

Contrary to Ionesco's previous plays spiced with rather discreet sexual connotations, *Jacques ou la soumission* no longer gives just hints and clues. Instead, the sexual element becomes direct, dominant, and omnipresent. *Jacques ou la soumission*, "a surrealist depiction of family drama,"[2] is the story of an attempt to sexual liberation. Placed under the scrutiny of a family driven by an obsessive desire of proliferation of their kin, Jack must undergo a process of identity reprogramming.

The opening scene places the audience in the midst of a family quarrel, in which the participants use a whole arsenal of persuasive methods, from

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[2] Rosette C. Lamont, *Ionesco's Imperatives: The Politics of Culture*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993, p. 59.

reproach and treats, from begging to cunning, in order to control a situation gone haywire. Jacques, their only male heir, confesses his dislike for "hashed brown potatoes", an unpardonable breach of family values. Surrounded by his parents, his grandparents and his sister, Jacques has "a sullen, ill-natured expression", and wears "clothes that are too small for him". Jacques's description suggests discomfort. Although we are yet to know the reason for his uneasiness, we can easily suspect his status: Jacques is obviously a misfit.

The maternal weeping voice makes its first appearance in a dramatic flood of reproaches directed toward the ungrateful son. Jacques' mère claims to have done more than humanly imaginable for her son's proper and successful upbringing. She proudly enumerates her great sacrifices in the name of motherhood, drawing a self-portrait of affection and kindness, enriched with hues of ignorance and cruelty. "It was I, my son, who kissed you, cared for you, who carried in socks goodies for you to eat] (my translation), pleads Jacques mère. She is equally proud of ignoring to change his diapers and tearing off his toe nails "so as to make you bawl like an adorable little calf". Her son's lack of validation and obedience brings a sad conclusion to Jacques mère's maternal experience: "I've brought a monster into the world" (81), she desperately exclaims, completely unaware of any of her own wrongdoings and oblivious to the landscape of proper motherhood. Her contribution to her son's upbringing fulfills an array of roles, some of which hide sexual undertones. Convinced of her zealous contribution to Jacques's upbringing, Jacques mère acknowledges: "I have been more than a mother to you, I've been a true sweetheart, a husband, a sailor, a buddy, a goose" (81).

A failed attempt to persuasion by the two demented Jacques grandparents, one "octogeneric," another a "centagenet, dirty old man", creates the opportunity for a sisterly intervention. Jacqueline, Jacques's sibling, states that "In spite of all the immense love I have for you, which swells my heart to the breaking point, I detest you, I execrate you" (82). Jacqueline's strategy includes a treat alluding, once again, to sexuality. She threatens to eliminate the source of pleasure which feeds his voyeurism: "I'm going to punish you. Never again will I bring over my little playmates so that you can watch them make peepee" (82). Jacqueline's declared love/hate goes obviously beyond the boundaries of a traditional brother-sister relationship, branching out into a status of provider and facilitator of sexual pleasure.

Jacques père's intervention comes with a firm declaration of disownment. His blame for Jacques's failure falls on his wife's shoulders. Her inabilities and the unworthiness of her bloodline are the obvious cause of all evil. "You resemble your mother and the idiots and imbeciles in her family" (83), exclaims Jack père angrily. Jacques's obstinacy breaches the expected proliferation of sound male values, which characterize the paternal ancestors.

His alleviation from the traditional homo-social bonding dishonors "the name of the father" and alters the permanence of male domination. Jacques père tailors his intervention as an intimate appeal to his son's manhood, which invokes a pure masculine connection, beyond a woman's understanding. Referring to his wife, he states, "This doesn't matter to her, for she's only a woman" (83). In the very same sentence, while he dismisses her intelligence and undermines her understanding, Jacques père praises her womanhood. As if the simple enunciation of word "woman" stimulates his senses, he exclaims admiringly, "and what a woman!" (83), while concluding his sentence. This statement clearly alludes to Jacques mère's sexuality, the driving force of their relationship, which in her husband's mind compensates for her lack of intelligence. Since he perceives raising children as an exclusively feminine task, Jacques père finds it only natural to cast the entire blame for the failure on his wife. "This is all your fault" (83), he shouts accusingly. Jacques's entire shameful existence is the unfortunate product of his mother's reproductive ability, just another one of the "stupid female tricks (83).

Jacques's disobedience causes a serious conjugal disturbance. While his mother accuses him of triggering Jacques père's abusive behavior, the latter threatens to bear farewell to his family, in order to maintain the sanctity of the tradition and to remain worthy of his ancestors. Jacques grand-père's idiotic cheers to the announcement earn him not only a verbal admonishment, but also a couple of hits and smashes, courtesy of his equally demented wife.

Jacques père's idea of independence and drastic separation from the family goes as far as seclusion in his own bedroom, with appearances limited to mealtimes and snacks. Following the paternal lead, the remaining family members make their dramatic exit with an outpour of insults and threats.

Left alone and astonished, Jacques reveals his dilemma: "Let's pretend that I've said nothing, and anyway, what they want from me?" (85)

The final attempt to alter Jack's behavior comes from the persuasive and cunning Jacqueline, who reminds him that he is "chronométrable." As Lamont suggests, "There is no escape from this existential situation; Jacques is caught on the treadmill of time and history."[3] Under severe scrutiny and monitored by his family, Jacques is ready to proclaim at last, "I adore hashed brown potatoes!" (87) The first step of Jacques's submission ends with a reluctant denial of his lack of interest in the traditional French peasant dish and an acceptance of the imposed rules. His rejection of tradition clearly symbolizes his lack of attraction to the opposite sex. Jacques's homosexuality must be reprogrammed, and his indifference toward a female partner must be amended. According to Lamont, "It is assumed that were his sexual, reproductive

[3] Ibid. , 59.

instincts awakened, the young man might be saved, that is, reclaimed by the bourgeois order."[4] Once reprogrammed, Jacques is to regain all his privileges; he will earns the reintegration with his ancestors, " for the profits of our familial and national endeavors", as his father now proudly states. Jacques père is now "generously" willing to pardon his son's non-conformism, which he classifies as "youthful faults."

Fearful of a reverse in their son's sexuality, the Jacques clan initiates almost instantly the second step in the process of submission, matrimony. Once reprogrammed and willing to make "honorable amends," Jacques faces his next stage of initiation. As Jacques mère, the master-minder of her son's transformation, says, "Jacques, all is under control, the plan foreseen at the beginning is already realized, the engagement is completely prepared, your fiancée is here" (89). Satisfied with his resignation, the Jacques clan eagerly begins the examination of their soon-to-be-acquired property, their daughter-in-law.

Roberte makes her fashion runway-like entrance, accompanied by her parents, the "big, fat majestic Robert père, and the "round ball, very heavy" Robert mère. Fully prepared for an immediate commitment, she wears her wedding gown, and a white veil that conceals her face. Encouraged by her parents with reassuring gestures, the Jacques clan proceeds to a careful examination of the merchandise; they touch, sniff and smell Roberte, while the Jacques clan cheers them on with indecent gestures. Jacqueline lifts up her dress to confirm her sexual identity. Indifferent and unimpressed, Jacques manages a single utterance, "Hill billy!" (90) Roberte makes the first steps toward Jacques only when led, almost dragged and pushed by the Robert family and the Jacques clan, anxious to complete their transaction. In front of a motionless and still uninterested Jacques, Robert père "catalogs" the merchandise: Roberte's inventory contains "truffled" feet, a hand for scouring pots and pans, toes, armpits and hips. But these are only some of her attributes; Roberta also has "green pimples on her beige skin, red breasts on a mauve background, an illuminated navel, a tongue the color of tomato sauce, pan-browned square shoulders, and all the meat needed to merit the highest commendation" (91-92). In other words, Roberte establishes new standards of feminine aesthetics as "the perfect Pop art housewife/courtesan, a modern icon worthy of being painted by Picasso, or even Andy Warhol."[5]

In the midst of this foreplay-like display of excited hands and noses, Jacques grand-mère begins to doubt her husband's loyalty and attempts to publicly seduce him. Threatened by the younger Roberte, Jacques grand-mère pleads: "Come on, make love to me, you're my husband" (91).

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[4] Ibid. , 58.
[5] Ibid.. , 59.

As the "bargains" approaches an end, Jacques père, completely oblivious to his son's indifference, proudly congratulates him for his wise choice: "Your heart has chosen in spite of yourself" (93). But in order to seal the deal, the Jacques clan find imperative to uncover the bride's face. General cheers of contentment, and even a quick outburst of envy, accompany Roberte's unveiling. To everyone's excitement, she has two noses. But minutes before the proverbial hand shake, after receiving his sister's congratulations for the recovery of his manhood, Jacques has a change of heart. Complaining that Roberte's two noses are not sufficient, he shouts: "No! no! She hasn't got enough! What I want is one with three noses. I tell you: three noses, at least" (95). Clearly, Jacques's demand centers on the hope that his request would be exaggerated enough to stop the search for another woman.

Despite the atmosphere of general stupefaction and consternation, the Robert family recovers rapidly from Jacques's rejection, and jovially upgrades their offer. Roberte I's place is quickly taken by their second only daughter, Roberte II, a pinnacle of sexuality and seduction, a woman "trinary in everything, for everything", and thus a perfect match for Jacques's "special tastes." But, hélas! To everyone's surprise and disappointment, Jacques's reprogramming seems to have failed; he is once again unhappy and picky, as he shouts, "No, I dont want her. She's not ugly enough! She's passable. There are others that are uglier. I want a much uglier one" (97). This latest attempt to escape from this forceful reshaping of his sexual identity is "intolerable" and "inadmissible." Jacques mère's outburst cannot contain her distress and anger: "If I had known I'd strangled you in your last cradle, yes, with my maternal hands. Or I'd have aborted you! Or not have conceived you!" (97) Offended and hurt, the respectable Robert père demands "reparations, excuses, explanations, and a total cleansing of this stain on our honor, which, however, will never be completely erased!" (97) Equally frustrated, Jacques père throws the final blow, the ultimate insult in his son's direction: "He doesn't know a thing about women" (99). Jacques's credibility and honor are now in question. As Jacques père pontificates, "This was nothing but a mean trick, unworthy of the respect that we all have borne you in this house with its noble traditions, since your infancy" (100).

When the moment of truth finally arrives, Jacques makes a straightforward confession about his sexuality, after agonizing pressure and humiliation:

> "Whether this serves you as a revelation or not…and if it could serve you as a revelation: so much the better for you. There's nothing I can do about it, I was born like this…I've done all that was in my power! I am what I am!"(100)

In an atmosphere of restrained horror, with questioning glances at each other and extreme caution, the Jacques clan and the Robert family tiptoe away

from the "monster" Jacques. Unsure of her position in this newly reveled scenario, Roberte II attempts to join her parents. Her father, however, is quick to define her role by saying: "You …chin up and do your duty!" (101) Is she expected to come to term with Jack's homosexuality and remain on his side, or to seduce him in order to change his identity?

Roberte's mind is by now made, and her strategy is clear: she chooses the seduction game. As she begins to approach and touch Jacques, she takes the previously failed negotiations into her own hands. She sings her own praise in a brand new, seductive and provocative tone:

> "In all the world there's no other like me.
> I'm light, frivolous, I'm very serious.
> I'm not so serious, nor very frivolous,
> I know all about making hay,
> And there are other kinds of work I can do
> Less well, as well, or even better
> I'm just the tonic for you.
> I'm honest, but don't trust me,
> With me your life will be a ball.
> I can play the piano,
> I can arch my back,
> I've been properly housebroke,
> I've had a solid bringing up…"(102)

It would be naïve to think that Roberte "[the daughter to whom I have given such a complicated education", as her father proudly claims, and a bourgeois groomed-to-be-wife, would have anything to do with hay making or, for that matter, with any other kind of work in which she declares such high proficiency. The sexual symbolism of her self-descriptive poem is quite obvious. But Roberte's first attempt at seduction leads to a dead end; Jacques is bored and wishes to change the subject.

For the first time since the beginning of his ordeal, Jacques sees a sparkle of validation as Roberte, who claims to be on his side, states: "I understand you, you're not like the others. You're a superior being" (102). With the discovery of Jacques's uniqueness among the other men, Roberte finds a comfort zone, in which she is able to share a most intimate experience: an encounter, in the bathtub, with a white guinea-pig. Lamont deciphers this first fable as follows: "Roberta's fearful attitude is obviously a virgin's fear of sexual initiation, followed by procreation. The watery element suggests amniotic fluid."[6] While this might be a highly pertinent interpretation, I suggest an alternate perspective: the privacy of the bathtub, associated with the known shyness of the above mentioned animal that prefers to live in hiding, and the

[6] Ibid. , 60.

specific use of the adjective white, the color of the Immaculate and thus exclusive of sexual intercourse, could very well suggest masturbation. By initiating this step toward sharing intimate experiences, Roberte earns Jacques's confidence. "Oh, listen, I feel I can trust you" (103), confesses Jacques.

Encouraged by Roberte's openness, Jacques is finally able to give an account of his homosexuality and his struggles to repress it:

> "When I was born, I was almost fourteen year sold. That's when I was able to understand more easily than most what it was all about. […] I hadn't wanted to accept the situation. But it wasn't to these people you know, who were here a little while ago, that I said this. It was to the others."(103)

Jacques's metaphorical birth at puberty symbolizes the discovery and understanding of his homosexuality. Unable to share his sexual orientation with his bourgeois family, he turns to strangers for validation. As the following quote indicates, the parental authority promised, and failed, to work toward finding a rehabilitative solution. Jacques recalls:

> "Those people you know, they don't understand very well …no…no…but they felt it…they assured me that someone would devise a remedy. They promised me some decorations, some derogations, some decors, some new flowers, some new wallpaper, new profundities […] They swore they would give me satisfaction."(103)

As Jacques confesses, his family's attempts to reprogram their son's sexuality included different strategies and "useful measures," from emotionally charged appeals to his values to distractions from the quotidian. As Jacques acknowledges,

> ["In order to coax me, they showed me assorted prairies, assorted mountains, assorted oceans…maritime, naturally…one star, two cathedrals chosen from among the most successful."] (104)

Designed as a gastronomic-like display, this abundance and variety of entertainment suggest Jacques's imposed exposure to different other sexual experiences. "But everything was a fake" (104), confesses Jacques. Despite a brief acceptance of the given situation described more like a trap than a voluntary submission, he struggles to maintain his individuality. Misunderstood and betrayed, Jacques attempts to protest and plans to escape. Jacques's planed departure, a threat to the proliferation of his family's bloodline, triggers drastic preventive measures from his family. Filled with anxiety, Jacques recalls that

> "They've boarded up the doors, the windows, with nothing, they've taken away the stairs…one can't get out through the attic anymore, there's no way out up there." (104)

Imprisoned in his own house, unable to openly express his sexuality, Jacques finds seclusion unbearable and keeps searching for a way out: " According to what I was told, they've left a few trapdoors all over the place…If I should find them…I absolutely want to go away" (104).

Since an escape through the attic seems impossible, Jacques considers an alternate plan. Hopeful to find an underground exit through the cellar, he shares his plan with Roberte II. "If one can't exit through the attic," he tells her, "there's always the cellar, yes the cellar. It would be better to go down there than to be here. Anything is preferable to my present situation. Even a new one" (104).

Fully aware of his family's unwillingness to understand and accept his individuality, and of their unquestionable determination to reshape his sexuality, Jacques enlists Roberte's complicity to his escape. A brief and encoded exchange of replicas seals their deal:

> Roberte: "Oh yes, the cellar…I know all the trapdoors."
> Jacques: "We can understand each other." (104)

In order to achieve Jacques's liberation and to conceal their agreement, the two accomplices must prove their sexual compatibility. Roberte initiates the foreplay, by stimulating Jacques's imagination. "Listen, I have some horses, some stallions, some brood mares, I have only those, would you like them?" (104) says Roberte in a provocative tone. Crafted with the ultimate symbols of masculine sexuality, Roberte's words lead to a scene that reveals Jack's sudden receptivity, manifested by his complicity in the fantasy. In the center of the fantasy, a stallion, the symbol of the alpha male, gallops freely and at full speed. As the excitement grows, the ever potent stallion, dominated by an internal "fire," is consumed by fear and pain. As Roberte describes the scene, "The more he [the stallion] gallops, the more the flame spreads. He is mad, he's terrified, he's in pain, he's sick, he's afraid, he's in pain…it flames up, it spreads all over his body" (107).

As Roberte continues to feed Jacques's fantasy, one cannot stop wondering about Roberte's commitment to this arrangement, especially when in the midst of their lovemaking she whispers aside: "Oh…he called me by my first name…He's going to love me!] Is she still pursuing the master plan of reprogramming Jacques's sexuality? Will she succeed?

Suddenly, with screams of pain and fear, consumed by flames, the stallion "is turning all pink," as Roberte's description illustrates:

> "He's a living torch … He's only a handful of ciders…He's no more, but we hear still in the distance the echo of his cries reverberating and weakening…like the whinnyings of another horse in the empty streets."(107)

Roberte's plan seems to be working. From this lifeless image of male sexuality, she now shifts Jacques's attention to her own arousal:

> "Come on…don't be afraid…I'm moist…My necklace is made of mud, my breast are dissolving, my pelvis is wet, I've got water in my crevasses, I'm sinking down. In my belly, there are pools, swamps…I've got a house of clay. I'm always cool…There's moss…big flies, cockroaches, sowbugs, toads. Under the wet covers they make love…they're swollen with happiness! I wrap my arms around you like sneaks; with my soft thighs …you plunge down and you dissolve…in my locks with drizzle, drizzle, rain. My mouth trickles down, my legs trickle, my naked shoulders trickle, my hair trickles, everything trickles down, runs, everything trickles, the sky trickles down, the stars run, trickle down, trickle…"(107-108)

With this triumphant chant of female wetness, Roberte achieves her goal. As Jack exclaims in ecstasy, "Cha-a-armant!" (125), one is left to wonder if "charming" might not be a rather mild qualifier for what seems to have been the ultimate sexual intercourse.

In a pedagogical manner, Roberte sets Jacques straight: "All we need to designate things is one single word: cat. It's easier to talk that way…" (109). Now that the male stimuli have been incinerated, Jacques's mind should only respond to one blinking red light: the female. Roberte reassures Jacques of her sexual resourcefulness: "My Jack. With me, you'll be in your element. I have some, I have as many as you want, quantities!" (109) Submissive and obedient, the successfully converted Jacques accepts his new reality in a robot-like manner. "Everything is cat" (109), repeats Jacques obediently.

The final sight of Roberte's nine fingered hand rings decisive wedding bells into Jack's mind. "Oh, You've got nine fingers on your left hand? You're rich, I'll marry you…" (109), Jack decides. His marriage proposal is determined neither by her tentative to gain emotional closeness nor by the just consumed sexual act, but by his awareness of Roberta's own uniqueness.

As the newlyweds embrace "awkwardly" and Jack kisses each of Roberta's three noses, his saving grace, the two triumphant families perform an animalistic dance. In the final scene, Ionesco expects that the audience would be overwhelmed by "a feeling of embarrassment, awkwardness, and shame."

In a gradually increased darkness, fading moans and sights echo the stage. Ionesco's stage directions for the final scene are as follows:

> All the characters have disappeared, except Roberta, who is lying down, or rather squatting down, buried beneath her gown. We see only her pale face, with its three noses quivering, and the nine fingers moving like snakes.(110)

Abandoned by the finally liberated Jacques, Roberte pays the price for her own submission. She is an instrument of seduction at the discretion of the

patriarchal power-play, perceived as merchandise, marketable and exchangeable property at the discretion of the parental authority. Her nine snake-like remind the audience of the Serpent-Goddess, the frightening Medusa. With her face still covered by the wedding veil, Roberte's image suggests the mythological beheading of Medusa, as the ultimate act of silencing the feminine expression.