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Gallimard's Quest for Power

In David Henry Hwang's M. Butterfly, Rene Gallimard becomes a victim of bizarre and drawn-out circumstances. However, it is his own insecurity which propels him into those circumstances. Gallimard's desire for power makes him live out lies, and in the end he finds he never had any power at all. These lies come in the form of compromises of his wants, perpetuation of stereotypes, blindness to deception, and, of course, fantasies.

Gallimard is by nature very insecure about himself. He sees himself as unattractive, neither "witty [nor] clever (page 2)," and "socially inept (4)." His marriage with Helga compromised his need for love. Feeling he could never be wanted by an ideal enough woman, he decided to "settle for...practicality (14)," using Helga's ambassador father to advance his own career and gain political and occupational power. Even after the whole affair with Song, Helga admits that "the pretense...was very good indeed (75)," illustrating that the emotional compromise was mutual. His anti-love sentiments quickly waned, though, and he remained as empty as before, realizing that "all men want a beautiful woman, and the uglier the man, the greater the want (14)."

When he finally began to find love in Song Liling, he began his Butterfly experiment, incessantly ignoring her. He was compromising his desperate yearning to see her for the power he accrued as he kept her waiting. He was masochistic in keeping himself from that which he desired, yet with each passing letter from Song, his control grew. His sense of strength is evident in his

response to one of her letters. "When a woman calls a man her 'friend,' she's calling him a eunuch or a homosexual (35)." Gallimard cannot see men and women on the same level, i.e., as friends, and since he won't see himself as a "eunuch or a homosexual," he must feel that he is dominant. In the end, however, his "victory seemed hollow (36)." He realized that his actions had hurt himself as well as Song, and he loses his appreciation for the power trip.

When his productivity during the experiment earns him a promotion, Gallimard reacts by praising a "God who creates Eve to serve Adam (38)." He expresses his delight in newfound occupational power by attributing it to a being which allows men to dominate over women. His high position makes him more of a man, and thus occupational success interestingly affirms his masculinity now, while it failed to do so in his marriage to Helga. His compromise led to promotion, but his judgement will prove wrong and he will eventually lose his position, so in the end Gallimard gains nothing from his Butterfly experiment, since he would have been able to possess Song anyway.

Other elements in Gallimard's undoing are his perpetuation of stereotypes and his associated blindness to deception. Male/Female and West/East stereotypes are chief in his mind as he operates under his notions of dominance and submissiveness. In discussing American involvement in Vietnam with Toulon, Gallimard assesses the situation by saying that "Orientals will always submit to a greater force (46)." Of course, history proves him wrong, which is why he loses his job. Further and more importantly, this expression of his beliefs is emblematic of how he handles his relationship with Song, a relationship executed with the long-awaited possibility of power in mind, and his flawed judgment is even more evident in his mistaking her deceptive intentions and identity. Song Liling takes advantages of his stereotyping trait, using his specific stereotypes to lure him.

For Gallimard, the same things make Song exotic and submissive. Both Oriental and females are stereotyped as such for him. On two levels, she is potentially submissive. When he meets her at

the Chinese opera, she removes her costume, revealing baggy clothing beneath. There is, of course, no reason why Gallimard should think Song is a man, and her shedding of the costume makes it less thinkable that the clothes underneath are also a costume. This convincing disguise, coupled with the dual potential, make Gallimard simply play along when Song begins to take interest in him; he lets his stereotypes play themselves out. When she asks him to "Be a gentleman (21)" and light her cigarette, Gallimard fumbles for match, demonstrating his attempt to don a machismo which he does not possess. He fails in being a gentleman, i.e., in becoming a certain stereotype himself, an early indication of how his notions will consequently fail him. He doubts himself, even when faced with mutual interest, and must conjure his old friend Marc, the stereotypical swinger, in a dream to justify an affair for him.

The cigarette is just one example of Song's savvy in manipulating the beliefs she knows Gallimard holds. She emphasizes the differences between the West and the East by saying that an act as simple as pouring tea, which would be taken for granted in France, has "implications (30)." She then points out that, even though she wears a Western dress, her heart is still rooted in Eastern tradition. All of this keeps up the pretense of the submissive Oriental woman being won over by the virile, Western man that she knows Gallimard wants to be. When he first attempts to have sex with her, she claims that she hasn't ever done anything before, that she's "tried to appear experienced (40)." Naturally, this claim is all part of the masquerade and her "attempts" at seeming knowledgeable are likely not attempts at all, for that claim is probably the real lie. In saying this she takes the frailty of the Oriental woman to an extreme for Gallimard, who can now feel that he is the ultimate conqueror. Not only will he have won a "lotus blossom (46)," but he will be the only one to whom she has given in, an exaggerated but surefire tactic on Song's part which actually keeps Gallimard under *her* control.

In letting him buy her an apartment, Song allows Gallimard to cage her, a way of giving him the power he desires, and she unabatingly continues the facade. She suggests that he is not threatened by an educated woman, but he reveals his beliefs by responding, "I'm no saint, Butterfly (43)," implying that an intelligent woman does indeed pose a threat. However, in that very conversation, Song's facade helps her keep Gallimard so clueless that he doesn't realize how intelligent she indeed is, nor how traitorous his actions are. When he complains that he doesn't want to bring his work home with him by talking about politics with her, she flatters him by saying, "I want to...be impressed by my man (43)." She lets him think that, and hence gives him the sense that he has power over her, when the truth is actually the reverse. He once again gives into his notion of the submissive Oriental.

Later on, back in France, he is so blind, not just to her body but to her motives, that he photographs sensitive documents for Song, simply because he knew she needed them for some reason, "and that was enough (81)." Gallimard has reached this extreme because Song has always given him more love, understanding, and power than anyone else, though all may be false. A key example of her exceeding all else is the pregnancy. His real wife Helga subtly accuses him of impotence, literally a lack of power, one of the greatest possible blows to a male ego, especially one as already-tattered as Gallimard's. Song, on the other hand, says that she's willing to sacrifice her career to have a child with Rene, a fine example of her submissiveness. When she unquestioningly gives him a child, his ego receives a huge boost. Song gave him what Helga could not: reassured masculinity. Of course, the baby wasn't his, so one might assume that Gallimard actually was impotent, which would serve as a telling physiological comment to his insecure personality.

The above aspects of Gallimard's demise all play into the final overarching one, which is his attempting to live out fantasies in which he wields power. Even at a very young age, Gallimard had

fantasies about women in pornographic magazines. He openly admits that he received not a feeling of lust from them, but one of power. He had "women - a shelfful - who would do exactly as I wanted (10)." When he meets Renee at an embassy party and she asks him to fool around with her, he seizes the opportunity, because she "was picture perfect. With a body like those girls in the magazines (54)." The image of power from his childhood was still with him, and was strong enough to make him cheat not only on Helga, but on Song, the one who gave him so much love. His hunger for power impelled him now to exercise control over someone else simply because she would let him, any sense of faithfulness now dispelled by his insatiable hunger.

Renee's openness, however, made Gallimard wonder if it were "possible for a woman to be *too* uninhibited, *too* willing, so as to seem almost too... masculine (54)." In wondering this, he was unknowingly reinforcing his concept of Song's femininity and fragility. Renee's theories about penises made Gallimard insecure about his own masculinity. She says that "a guy with a small one (55)" will be driven to conquer something so others won't realize his inadequate endowment, but she says that this fails because people are "still wearing clothes, so there's no way to prove absolutely whose is bigger or smaller (55)." These thoughts threaten Gallimard, who questions his own masculinity enough already, without diatribes such as this. Of course, though Gallimard want to dominate over Song, he would never think to check if his is bigger than Song's, because Song ought not have one at all, so he simply humors Song's fake modesty, never questioning it. In the end, even though Renee might have been intimidating, he continued his affair with her simply because he knew Song would not confront him. "It was her tears and her silence that excited me, every time I visited Renee (56)." This disturbing thought shows that Gallimard gained more satisfaction from knowing that being with Renee weakened Song, rather than from being with Renee herself, truly a bizarre, power-hungry reason for continuing the affair.

Clearly, his entire affair with Song is a manifestation of his desire to live out a fantasy. He so desperately wanted the fantasy to become reality that he blinded himself from the extreme stereotypes and deceptive identity of Song. He lies to his wife about his initial meeting with her because he wants to keep his fantasy to himself. He feels he is not the kind of man who could have an affair, so when it finally happens, he is by turns possessive and obsessive of Song. Every time he thinks he gains power over his fantasy woman, however, he actually loses more to her. In reflection, he wonders if he ever knew "somewhere deep down, what I would find (60)." He denies the truth, in one instance by not stripping her, lying to himself to keep something he wanted to be real.

Referring to the brash Comrade Chin, Song at one point reflects aside, "What passes for a woman in modern China (49)." Blatantly ironic, this is also a jab at Gallimard for believing in Song's female identity. In the fantasy world, even a man can pass for a woman. Yet, as Song later explains, once he has revealed his male identity, stereotypes dictate that "being an Oriental, I could never completely be a man (83)," showing that Gallimard wasn't necessarily entirely crazy for falling for the disguise. The disguise's effectiveness is emphasized by Song's true personality as a male, which Gallimard abhors. The deception was complete.

Having been destroyed by the harsh realization of Song's true identity and by being thrown into jail for his traitorous activities, Gallimard continues fantasizing as a means to maintain power. It was the opera *Madame Butterfly* which influenced Gallimard so much in his actions, giving him the desire to be his own Pinkerton. It was that very opera which Song performed when he first saw her. A theatrical form, opera is by nature an untruth, a fantasy. Gallimard wanted to be in his own opera, and thus pursued Song. When that failed, he nevertheless turned to theatre, in the form of re-enacting his own story day after day, for solace. He fantasizes in hopes that he can someday gain control over his past.

In this fantasy which contains all other fantasies, however, he still cannot maintain full command. When Song refuses a request of his, he demands her, feeling that a product of his mind must obey him, but she responds, "I've never done what you said. Why should it be any different in your mind (78)?" Even when he is the only player, he cannot win the game. Later, the male Song calls Gallimard his "little one (86)," which Gallimard adamantly denies. He cannot deal with the truth, which is that Song always had power over him, and that their roles are the reverse of what he'd always thought in his fantasy. In this final runthrough, Song actually strips, against Gallimard's will, once again demonstrating Gallimard's weakness and inability to control himself, much less another. He realizes, though, that "all I loved was the lie (89)." Song's insistence on finally stripping, and Gallimard's subsequent revelation, make Gallimard realize that he doesn't and indeed never did wield power. He has lost, and thus does the one thing which is in his power, which is to take his own life. In his suicide, he admits defeat and becomes, through makeup, the weak Butterfly, the submissive Oriental woman, affirming the role reversal. This is the only way for him to keep his fantasy alive, and so his life ends, having been totally divested of power but not of his ability to maintain the fantasy.

In the end, Rene Gallimard's unquenched thirst for power is his undoing, his tragic flaw. He wants to be in control so badly that he is willing to let himself live lies, consciously or unconsciously. In compromising his wants, he settles for less than what he truly yearns for. He is willing to accept stereotypes of dominance and submissiveness which are blatantly handed to him, and he becomes blind to Song's extraordinary tactics of deception. Finally, his desire for power is so strong that he propels himself, via the above elements, into fantasies, which he desperately wants to be true, but discovers are in fact simply more lies that he has allowed himself to live. This revelation of his lifelong powerlessness brings about his ultimate demise in death.