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Gender Matrix In The First Countess Of Wessex

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Abstract: A study of the dame, Betty Dornell, and how she was the silent sufferer of her mother's ambition and her father's staunch protectiveness.

Index Terms – Arranged Marriage, Forced Matrimonial Union, Conflicting Parental Views, Love.

A Group of Noble Dames (1891), is a collection of short stories that portrays the lives of ten Women as narrated by members of a Wessex Field and Antiquarian club, who are ensconced at an inn after a rainstorm delayed their outing. Thomas Hardy described the contents of *A Group of Noble Dames* as “I may say it is to be a Tale of Tales—a series of linked stories—of a somewhat different kind from the mass of my work of late” (Letters VII, 113). These stories are placed in “a contrapuntal structure” so that “with a few exceptions, each story can be seen as a re-patterning or ironic refutation of the ostensible moral of the one preceding it.” (Brady, 53)

In his Preface, dated June 1896, Thomas Hardy elucidates that the narratives contained in this collection have been derived from “the diagrams on pages of county histories” of the “pedigrees of country families.” By transforming “this dryness as of dust” into a palpating drama through a careful comparison of dates alone, the frame work of the motives, passions and personal qualities of these extraordinary Dames, most of the stories have “arisen and taken shape.” These “curious tales of fair dames, of their loves and hates, their joys and misfortunes, their beauty and their fate” offer a rich quarry for a study of the gender matrix in Hardy's shorter fiction.

Dame the First, “the First Countess of Wessex” is a tale narrated by the local Historian. The dame, Betty Dornell, was married off at the tender age of twelve, in a little White Frock, which was carefully preserved at King's Hintock Court as “a testimony to the small count taken of the happiness of an innocent child in the social strategy of those days, which might have led, but providentially did not lead, to great unhappiness” (*Noble Dames*, 9).

The marital disquiet that existed in the Dornell household, centred on more than one occasion, upon the future of Betty. While his wife desired to unite Betty, at a very young age in matrimony to a man of over thirty, Squire Dornell, rightfully so, resisted her as vociferously as he could. The battle of wills that ensued, between the Squire and his wife, springs from a relationship that had deteriorated over the years due to the differences in their social background. Embittered by the constant reminder of his humbler roots and tired of her “air and graces” (11), Dornell regularly leaves his wife's house to stay in the countryside in his own ancestral home, Falls Park, whiling his time in gambling and drinking – He was unhappy when near his wife, he was unhappy when away from his little girl; and from this dilemma there was no practicable escape (12). The predicament of the Squire reflects, to a certain degree the turmoil that inevitably arises out of unequal marriages, regardless of gender, in the rigid Victorian society. The inferior partner always suffers from an emotional vacuum which corrodes all attempts to fill it outside the domestic life. The unavailability of divorce stretches the pain and the frustration infinitely and the individual is left hollow and drained of the “joie de vivre”. What heightens the tragedy of such marital incompatibility is the interminable suffering of the innocent off springs.

Betty, as is usually the case, becomes the silent sufferer torn between her mother's ambitions and her father's fierce protectiveness. She often “cried herself to sleep”. Though Betty was marriageable, in the views of those days, she was too young to fall in love. Not with standing this, though “a child not yet thirteen,” she is married off to Stephen Reynard, a man in all likelihood to have a title granted to him before long. Due consideration must have been given to this fact by Mrs. Dornell, hence, prompting her to consent to this “premature union” behind her husband's back. It was however, agreed upon, that the couple was in no way to meet until five to six years have passed. Heartbroken for his child and embittered by this wife's actions, Dornell hereafter, adopted the life of a recluse in Falls Park. Meanwhile, Betty left school at the age of seventeen and returned to King's Hintock. Her marriage to Reynard, which had taken place on a cold, clear March day, was like a dream to her:

...the London church with its gorgeous pews and green-biaze linings, and the great organ in the west gallery—so different from their own little church in the shrubbery of King's Hintock Court—the man of thirty, to whose face she had looked up with so much awe, and with a sense that he was rather ugly and formidable: the man whom, though they corresponded politely, she had never seen since: one

to whose existence she was now so indifferent that if informed about his death, and that she would never see him more, she would merely have replied, 'Indeed!' Betty's passions as yet still slept (23)

These "passions however were soon awakened by her father's free views and constant animadversions (especially the ones about Charley Phelipson, "a lad a couple of years her senior"). Untutored in love and still fleetingly aware of romance Betty's imagination started to wander in the direction of Phelipson blissfully ignorant about the social ramifications of such an attraction towards someone other than the vague shadow of a man she was actually married to.

"Did you see how the sound of his name frightened her?" he presently added. "If you didn't, I did, Zounds! What a future is in store for that poor little unfortunate wench o' mine! I tell 'ee Sue, 'twas not a marriage at all, in morality and if I were a woman in such a position, I shouldn't feel it as one. She might, without a sign of sin, love a man of her choice as well as now as if she were chained up to no other at all. There, that's my mind, and I can't help it. Ah, Sue, my man was best! He'd have suited her."
 "I don't believe it," she replied incredulously—"You should see him; then you would. He's growing up a fine fellow, I can tell 'ee".
 "Hush! Not so loud!" she answered, rising from her seat and going to the door of the next room, whither her daughter had betaken herself. To Mrs. Dornell's alarm, there sat Betty in a reverie, her round eyes fixed on vacancy, musing so deeply that she had not perceived her mother's entrance. She had heard every word, and was digesting the new knowledge (23).

As the adults continued warring, Betty was growing up, soon, Dornell noticed Betty stealing, interested glances at Phelipson during dinner and mistook it for obedience to his earlier directive to her: "Sting your mother's conscience, my maid!" he whispered. "Sting her conscience by pretending you are struck with Phelipson and would ha! Loved him, as your old father's choice, much more than him she has forced upon 'ee!" (25).

Betty's interest in young Phelipson grew and the so-called "counterfeit love" became real—she was as love struck as any Rosalind. However, a letter arrived from Reynard, intimating a proposed visit. The news hit Betty hard and she cries out brokenly: "Oh, I wish—my dear father were here! I will send to him instantly!" She broke off abruptly, and falling upon her mother's neck burst into tears, saying "O my mother, have mercy upon me—I do not love this man my husband!" (31). Betty's cry is a sinister reminder of the plight of every young woman in nineteenth century Britain—young girls who have been compelled into early marriages with complete strangers who were older but titled and socially desirable. Feelings of love and sexual attraction were suppressed by the force of parental authority and little consideration was given to the emotional, mental and physical well-being of the daughter. She was as worthy as the man she was married to and any disobedience inadvertently led to shame and dishonor upon her household, a burden too horrifying to be taken lightly. Submission, therefore, became the easier way out. But not so with Betty. The desperate measure she adopted to thwart Reynard's claim upon her, reveals a strength of character that is admirable as well as piteous in its futility. She kisses Nanny Priddle, a convalescent from small-pox, a dreaded disease in those days, so that, "I might take it, and now I shall have it, and he (Reynard) won't be able to come near me" (35). Left to herself, in quarantine, Betty brooded on her misfortunes until young Charley Phelipson came to her rescue. Stealing away from her room, she rides off with him "for Reynard's on the way."

The effects of Betty's rebellion on Dornell is electrical—he revives momentarily from his illness, to shout in triumph: - "What—Betty—a trump after all? Hurrah!" (55) Whereupon, exhausted he falls back in his bed and dies before dawn.

Betty's reckless and desperate ride with Charley ends disastrously. She discovers that Charley's love is "skin deep," too shallow to withstand the horrors of smallpox. His horror foils all pretenses of a romantic elopement and Betty, staunch and chastened returns home only to be confronted by the very man she was running away from. Sixteen years her senior, Reynard is mature enough to be compassionate about her sickness and daring enough to claim "a deliberate kiss full on her mouth," with total disregard to his own health. Reynard's kiss arouses in Betty an awe of the man and an excitement at his hardiness. She

...could not deny that Stephen had shown her kindness, forbearance even magnanimity; had forgiven her for an errant passion which he might with some reason have denounced, notwithstanding her cruel position as a child entrapped into marriage 'ere able to understand its bearings (57).

Betty had "sprung from girl to woman in one bound." Mrs. Dornell however, on the death of her husband suddenly awoke to his many virtues and set about "delaying Betty's union with her husband which she had formerly combated."

This remorseful, perhaps selfish, volte-face by her mother led Betty to meet with her lawful husband clandestinely until the intimacy of those meetings could no longer be hidden when her figure became noticeably different. Owing to her rebuffs, Reynard had grown to be truly in love with Betty in his "mild, placid, durable way," in a way which: ...upon the whole, tends most generally to the woman's comfort under the institution of marriage, if not particularly to her ecstasy. (59)

Mrs. Dornell was appalled by the obvious result of her daughter's trysts with Stephen but Betty's spirited reply to her admonitions is: But, my dearest Mama, you made me marry him! And of course I've to obey him more than you now." (63)

Providentially, for Betty, her married life was happy. They settled down, had numerous children and Betty became the countess of Wessex. Hardy ends the tale with: "Such is woman; or rather (not to give offence by so sweeping an assertion) such was Betty Dornell." (66)

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