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Gender Matrix In Lady Mottisfont

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Abstract: A study of how parental affection is seen as a selfish need easily gratified by replacement.

Index Terms – Adoptive Motherhood, Adoptive Love, Betrayal, Metamorphosis.

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 palpitating 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 Fourth, “Lady Mottisfont” is another tale juxtaposed with the previous “to make a pair of tales about unwanted children which reach opposing conclusions about the endurance of adoptive love” (Ray 109). The female characters seem at first to fall into stereotyped moulds and to correspond in type to Milly and Lady Caroline. Philippa, the gentle daughter of plain Squire Okehall, “is an amiable girl willing in her simplicity to love another woman’s child as her own.” The Italian Countess is a woman of great beauty and accomplishment who has given up her child for the sake of convention, but who still longs for the offspring of her passion. It appears at first sight that, as in “The Marchioness of Stonehenge” the adoptive mother has a more durable affection than the natural mother, but the two stories finally refute each other. The very moral which the preceding story had so dramatically pointed is contradicted by “Lady Mottisfont” in which parental affection is seen as a selfish need easily gratified by replacement.

In the romantic town of Wintoncester, Sir Ashley Mottisfont asked the plain looking Philippa to be his second wife. Attached to this proposal is her consent to mother a fifteen-month old infant. Philippa, an ecstatic, heart thumping maiden, could not understand how she has deserved to have sent to her such “an illustrious lover, such a travelled personage, such a handsome man” (135). The pair was soon married and till the middle of the story Philippa is reminiscent of Milly in “The Marchioness of Stonehenge”. Deeply and joyfully she took to the role of adoptive mother for the child—proving that at times motherhood is more of an emotional bond than a biological one. “She watched the little foundling as if she had been her own by nature, and Dorothy became a great solace to her when her husband was absent on pleasure or business... “Dear me—I forgot she is not mine!” (137)

The state of bliss and idyllic happiness was soon threatened by the arrival of the countess. Her apparent beauty of “the fully developed kind”, her continental manners and ready wit overwhelmed Lady Mottisfont. Sick at heart, she realized that Sir Ashley and herself were so rural on comparison but she possessively asserted that Dorothy belonged to her when the Countess intimated her interest in the little girl, “But you can’t! She’s mine!” (143)

It did not take long, however, for Philippa to trace Dorothy’s lineaments to the Countess and Sir Ashley: “She had seen there not only her husband’s traits, which she had often beheld before, but others, of the shade, shape and expression which characterized those of her new neighbor” (144).

Upon this discovery, Lady Mottisfont upbraided her short-sightedness, and miserably saw herself as an intruder between these two. The pain she felt was deep but she lacked the spiritedness of stronger women to confront her husband with the truth:

If there was a single direction in which the devoted and virtuous lady erred, it was in the direction of over—submissiveness. When all is said and done, and the truth told, men seldom show much self-sacrifice in their conduct as lords and masters to helpless women bound to them for life, and perhaps (though I say it with all certainty) if she had blazed up in his face like a furze—faggot, directly he came home, she might have helped herself a little. (144)

Lady Mottisfont suffered quietly and hoped that Dorothy would never be taken away from her. By degrees, the two families became friendly, with Lady Mottisfont secretly envying and admiring the beautiful Countess till she decided that she “did not mind the propinquity.” But the crisis was building up and it exploded, precipitated by accident. The countess saved Dorothy from serious harm when a wall under construction suddenly collapsed suddenly. Just before the incident Philippa had declared to her husband with conviction. “But she’s mine!” Afterwards, however, she seemed less certain about her claim. The conversation she had with Dorothy supported her new found conviction:

“Mamma—you are not so pretty as the Contessa, are you?” she said at length. “I am not, Dorothy.” “Why are you not, Mamma?” “Dorothy where would you rather live, always, with me or with her?” The little girl looked troubled. “I am sorry, Mamma; I don’t mean to be unkind; but I would rather live with her; I mean, if I might without trouble, and you did not mind and it could be just the same to us all, you know” (148).

This self – woman hid her broken heart from her husband and went about her duties in a woeful and pensive mood. Soon enough, “Dorothy changed her mother and her home” and left for London with the Countess. The loss affected Philippa deeply and even pushed her to take her own life by jumping into a pool. Sir Ashley rescued her from near death and she soon recovered. Her husband’s stern reproof was accepted in meekness by this woman who but for a brief glimpse initially, had nothing in common with the vital, spirited Milly. She changed her position completely only after she became pregnant. She could finally respond to the Countess as an equal, with whom she no longer needed to compete: “I am not a beggar any longer,” she said with proud mystery. Whereas Milly defied Lady Caroline’s power by clinging to her adopted child, Philippa responded to the Countess by forsaking the young Dorothy. Philippa’s rejection of Dorothy was prompted by the birth of a male heir who usurped her place by both his legitimacy and his sex. The birth of her son changed many things in Philippa’s view the most important “was that of no longer feeling Dorothy to be absolutely indispensable to her existence.” The Countess’ imminent re-marriage, made it impossible for her to keep Dorothy. The child was abandoned to her adoptive mother who in turn no longer had place for her. The Lady Mottisfont’s cold reason was ‘I cannot argue, dear Ashley. I should prefer not to have the responsibility of Dorothy again. Her place is filled now’ (153).

Almost as surprising as Philippa’s change of heart was the assertiveness of her tone. The over-submissive wife had been transformed into a woman of authority. She refused to acknowledge Ashley’s right to share in a decision concerning the future of his child and he accepted her dictum with an acquiescence that had formerly characterized her. “Philippa’s about – face is more believable if the early remarks about her character are regarded as a conscious glossing over of those aspects of her personality that later cause her to reject Dorothy so heartlessly. An “ecstatic” and “impulsive” temperament, after all, is quite capable of a complete transferral of affection” (Brady, 68).

It is illuminating to look at Philippa in terms of the aristocratic world into which she had married. In *A Group of Noble Dames*, the nobility regarded children as first and foremost inheritors of their parents’ titles and wealth. They were the “Little ambassadors of the familiar and the expected” (as one feminist described them late in the century). There is little room for illegitimate children in the scheme of things, and daughters were valued chiefly by the social and financial status they contracted through marriage. Philippa had entered this world unable to understand how a gentleman of Lord Mottisfont’s stature could deem her worthy enough to be his wife. Later, she was overwhelmed by the Countess’ and beauty, her graces and her knowledge of the world. Philippa’s lack of familiarity with the glamour of the aristocracy led her to assume too readily its most unattractive aspect: A callous disregard for the happiness of those of inferior rank. She became cold-hearted and even cruel, caught up like many others, in the artificial and superficial world that she had so warmly embraced. “The Sentimental Member tells a most unsentimental story with an ending that, far from romanticizing aristocratic values, exposes their failure to nurture normal human affections” (Brady, 69).

Dorothy was raised by a kind cottage-woman and finally married a respectable road-contractor and in the heart of this “worthy man of business” the poor girl found “the nest which had been denied by her by her own flesh and blood of higher degree” (155).

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