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Gender Matrix In The Marchioness Of Stonehenge

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Abstract: A study of the women, Caroline and Milly, and their unique interactions in a tale of deceit and disguise set against the backdrop of a society bound by position and power.

Index Terms – Rigidity in Social Prejudices and Divisions, Shrewdness, Unity, Unrequited 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 Third, “The Marchioness of Stonehenge” is a story which “afforded an instance of the latter and better kind of feeling his heroine being also a lady who had married beneath her” (113). So rigid were the social prejudices and social divisions in those days, as pointed out earlier, that to dare to love below one’s status was tantamount to a blatant violation of the law of the land. Hardy’s deep understanding of the predicament of his female characters is acutely felt in each line of his tale.

Caroline, the lady of the tale, possessed unparalleled beauty: “... a lady whose personal charms were so rare and unparalleled that she was courted, flattered and spoilt by almost all the young noblemen and gentlemen in the part of Wessex.” (114)

After the novelty of these attentions had worn-off, Caroline soon grew bored and turned her regard “netherward, socially speaking” (114). She centered her passionate affections on the clerk’s son—a plain-looking young man with humble birth and no position at all. Spurring her on, was the knowledge that Milly, the village lass, already loved this young man although he returned her attentions in a good natured and harmless manner. It did not take long for the young man to reciprocate the advances made by the lady who had all the art of love at her fingertips. Throwing caution to the winds, they could no longer disguise their growing attachment to each other. Caroline knew she would never be allowed to marry him but to renounce him altogether was equally painful to her. They decided to marry in secret. The private ceremony over, they became lovers although their meetings were covert and unknown to the outside world. So they continued, for a while, lost in the golden glow of sexual love. The young man’s reverence and love for the lady grew but she soon experienced the first stirrings of discontent.

To be sure, towards the latter part of that month, when the first wild warmth of her love had gone off, the lady Caroline sometimes wondered within herself how she, who might have chosen a peer of the realm, baronet, knight; or if serious minded, a bishop or judge of the more gallant sort who prefer young wives, could have brought herself to do to a thing so rash as to make this marriage, particularly when, in their private meetings, she perceived that though her young husband was full of ideas and fairly well read, they had not a single social experience in common. (116)

The relationship soon ended abruptly. One night after a serious altercation, the agitated young man, in a moment of clarity, realized that “cold reason had come to his lofty wife.” His weak heart succumbed to a severe cardiac arrest and was instantly cold and dead. She tried to revive him but failed. Faced with the bizarre situation, the affrighted lady’s first thought was self-preservation. So she dragged his stiff body back to his cottage:

“Oh, why, why, my unfortunate husband, did you die in my chamber at this hour!” She said piteously to the corpse. “Why not have died in your own cottage if you would die! Then nobody would know of our imprudent union and no syllable would have been breathed of how I mismated myself for love of you.” (118)

A riot of feelings played havoc with Caroline's heart and mind at this juncture—much as she grieved for her dead husband she also felt a sense of freedom—“This thought of immunity from the social consequences of her rash act, of renewed freedom, was indubitably a relief to her, for, as has been said, the constraint and riskiness of her position had begun to tell upon the Lady Caroline's nerves” (118). She had loved the young man but after the first warmth of passion had worn off, cold common sense reinstated itself in her heart and her love became “mean and shamefaced under the frost” of social conventions. Had he lived on, what had appeared to be strong and sturdy would have deteriorated to pain and bitterness. Caroline lacked the moral fibre to stand up defiantly against a society that forbade an earl's daughter to love and marry the son of a clerk. Hence, her relief on his timely demise, which in many ways released Caroline from the ultimate confrontation with the inevitable—the system that was definitely more powerful than she could ever be. But, Caroline's woes did not end so favourably or painlessly.

The young man's corpse was discovered and the cause of death certified as cardiac arrest. But after the funeral, “it was rumoured that some man who had been returning late from a distant horse-fair had seen in the gloom of the night a person, apparently a woman, dragging a heavy body of some sort towards the cottage-gate...” (120). The beautiful and ingenious Caroline had to adopt a new strategy toward concealment and regretted that she had not been forthright from the start. So using the considerable influence she had over her father's estate she sought out Milly, the village lass, in furtherance of her plan to protect her reputation. By then, she was ashamed of her mad passion for her late husband and even wished she had never met him.

The first meeting between Caroline and Milly underscores not only the social differences between two women who had loved the Clerk's son but also the difference in the way they had loved him. One had won him in secret and was ashamed of their brief interlude, the other had never had him for her own but no longer wished to live because he was gone. As the lofty Caroline stood beside the humble Milly vividly etched before us is the contrast between them. Society has successfully clipped the wings of one beautiful creature and maimed her for life, but is, simultaneously, defeated by a humble plain-looking village lass whose liberty to love enhances her intrinsic beauty and clothes her with a power that title and wealth can neither eclipse nor take away. Caroline outlined her plan to the simple Milly, and with the right amount of pressure as lady of the estates, was able to transfer her own position to the latter. The transformation that came over Milly as she placed Caroline's wedding ring on her own finger is poetically narrated in the Tale: “But from that moment the maiden was heart and soul in the substitution. A blissful repose came over her spirit. It seemed to her that she had secured in death him whom in life she had vainly idolized; and she was almost content” (123).

Milly's “so-called confession” was declared and as the news of her little romance spread, there was not a single soul who doubted her story. Clothed in her widow's garb, Milly took to her new role with little consideration to the fact that her young life could be tarnished forever by her assumed widowhood. She seemed so possessed, psychologically, with a spirit of ecstasy at her position that her state was almost envied by many young girls of the village. Lovingly she attended the graveyard of the man she had loved and lost and won again in death by subterfuge. In witnessing Milly at the graveyard one day, Caroline could not still the sharp pain that had shot through her, at the scene, and Hardy comments: “...it showed that a slumbering affection for her husband still had a life in Lady Caroline, obscured and stifled as it was by social consideration” (125).

This smooth arrangement however did not last long. One day in the graveyard, Caroline, pale and agitated confronts Milly. The confrontation reemphasizes the obvious disparity in character between the strength of the “impressionable and complaisant” village girl and the weakness of the lofty lady abiding by the rules of an inflexible system.

Caroline attempts to forcibly snatch back all that she had willingly transferred to Milly in another bid to protect her fragile reputation. If in the first meeting Milly is coerced into assuming the title of a widow, this time she will not part with it simply because Caroline is carrying the unassuming villager's child:

But there is a limit to the flexibility of gentle-souled women. Milly by this time had grown to the idea of being one flesh with the young man, of having the right to bear his name as she bore it; had so thoroughly come to regard him as her husband, to speak of him as her husband, that, she could not relinquish him at a moment's peremptory notice (126).

She speaks out, against this haughty, presumptuous lady and all that she represents, in a voice that is clear and honest:

“No, no,” she said desperately, “I cannot I will not give him up! Your ladyship took him away from me alive, and gave him back only when he was dead. Now I will keep him! I am truly his widow. More truly than you, my lady! For I love him and mourn for him and call myself by his dear name, and your ladyship does neither” (126).

Unprepared for this remarkable force of conviction and strength in a girl she had always disdained as her inferior, Lady Caroline made one last attempt to plead her questionable cause: “Oh, this precipitancy—it is the ruin of women! Why did I not consider and wait! Come give me back all that I have given you, and assure me you will support me in confessing the truth!” (127).

The metamorphosis of the village lass is perfected at this point in the narrative. Faithful in love, free, and fearless, she is the author's celebration of the essence of femininity at its most brilliant. She reminds the reader of all the true Hardyian heroines who refuse to be intimidated by rank or wealth and reasserting her freedom as a woman who chooses who to love, Milly soars head and shoulders over her privileged counterpart who lives constantly in fear of social censure. Trapped and fettered, the Lady Caroline becomes another willing victim to the conventions of her time. While Lady Caroline sinks into nothingness, Milly rises higher and higher—and so, she declares convincingly and passionately:

“Never, never!” persisted Milly, with woe-begone passionateness, “look at this headstone! Look at my gown and bonnet of crape—this ring: listen to the name they call me by! My character is worth as much to me as yours is to you! After declaring my love mine, myself his, taking his name, making his death my own particular sorrow, how can I say it was not so? No such dishonor for me! I will outswear you, my lady; and I shall be believed, my story is so much likely that yours will be thought false” (127).

The two women who had nothing in common and who would have never come together because of the great social divide between them were once again united to address the new problem—since union at this point was their greatest strength. Lady Caroline disappeared and Milly followed her only to return a year later with an infant in her arms. A comfortable little allowance settled on her and her child for life by a seemingly kind and generous benefactress enable Milly to move away from her village into a cottage of her own.

Lady Caroline, once reassured that her scandalous past would never resurface to haunt her, lost interest in Milly and her little boy. She married a nobleman, many years her senior, and led a placid, childless life until his death. Milly, on the other hand, with no increase in the allowance from Caroline slaved and labored hard to raise the young boy into a fine gentleman. She became extremely ambitious on the boy’s account and made many material sacrifices to give him a good education. So the boy became a young man and soon enlisted in a cavalry regiment. His “exceptional attainments, his manly bearing, his steady conduct, speedily won him promotion which was furthered by the serious war in which this country was at the time engaged” (129).

Milly, is Hardy’s image of an ideal wife and mother. Her “imagined marriage becomes for her a living truth” (Brady) and her faithfulness to the memory of her beloved reveals the depth of feeling she is capable of. Hence, her devotion to the son she did not give birth to, drew consistency from the same spring that fed her love for his dead father. As she nursed, tended and cared for her son the reality of her love increases as she directs it to a living object. Caroline’s love, on the other hand, remained sterile, stemming as it did from self-absorption and self-gratification. So, when the young man’s unaided advancement came to his corporeal mother’s attention her maternal instincts and maternal pride were immediately reawakened. One day when the troops passed her in marching order, she saw her son—“in the finest of the horsemen, [she] recognized her son from his likeness to her first husband” (130). The sight of the fine young man intensified the maternal instincts that had lain dormant in her for so long and “she repented of her pride in disclaiming her first husband more bitterly than she had ever repented of her infatuation in marrying him” (130).

She resolved, as she had done twice before in the past, to confront the woman, whom she regarded jealously as a usurper of her son’s affection. With fierce determination she set out to meet Milly and reclaim her son. She felt confident that as a peeress of the realm, a mere cottager could afford little competition to her son’s affection. A great irony lies in her “continued inability to recognize the failure of social position to win human affection” (Brady). She blindly surmised that her title and position could easily win her son away from Milly as she had done his father many years before. The excerpt given below brings out in one brilliant stroke the triumph of genuine, warm, human love over the power of cold sterile conventions:

“Flesh and blood’s nothing!” said Milly flashing with as much scorn as a cottager could show to a peeress, which in this case, was not so little as may be supposed. “But I will agree to put to him and let him settle it for himself.” “That’s all I require,” said Lady Stonehenge. “You must ask him to come and I will meet him here.”

The soldier was written to, and the meeting took place. He was not so much astonished at the disclosure of his parentage as Lady Stonehenge had been led to expect, having known for years that there was a little mystery about his birth. His manner towards the Marchioness, though respectful, was less warm that she could have hoped. The alternatives as to his choice of a mother were put before him. His answer amazed and stupefied her.

“No, my Lady,” he said, “Thank you much, but I prefer to let things be as they have been. My father’s name is mine in any case. You see, my Lady, you cared little for me when I was weak and helpless; why should I come to you now I am strong? She, dear devoted soul [pointing to Milly], tended me from my birth, watched over me, nursed me when I was ill, and deprived herself of so little comfort to push me on. I cannot love another mother as I love her. She is my mother and I am her son.” As he spoke he put his manly arm around her neck with the tenderest affection.

The agony of the poor Marchioness was pitiable. “You kill me!” she said, between her shaking sobs. “Cannot you—love—me—too?” “No, my Lady. If I must say it, you were ashamed of my poor father, who was a sincere and honest man, therefore I am ashamed of you.”

Nothing would move him; and the suffering woman at last gasped, “Cannot—oh, cannot you give one kiss to me—as you did her? It is not much—it is all I ask—all!” “Certainly,” he replied.

He kissed her coldly, and the painful scene came to an end.” [131-132]

So, the Marchioness of Stonehenge died of a broken heart—a heart that till the end felt the pain of rejection but not the logic or truth behind that rejection. The denial of her son’s love made her crave, all the more, for it. She died embittered, broken and lonely—a product of the social system she had given everything up to please, and, in the bargain lost everything else that mattered.

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