

TOWARDS A FEMALE IDENTITY

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In England, all over the 17th century, some women contributed to the reshaping of the female identity. By means of literary and debating skills, they drew attention to their intellectual richness, in spite of their obvious lack of preparation in many fields. In this paper we propose to contrast the traditional, mainstream feminine view with new attitudes, from the women themselves. Francisco Manuel de Melo's *Carta de Guia de Casados*, translated into English at the close of the 17th century by Edgar Prestage under the title *The Government of a Wife*, will enable us to understand the prevalent ideas of women in general and their role within the family circle. Simultaneously, different female voices will be recalled. These voices question their own condition as opposed to the traditional feminine assignments they were attributed by men. Margaret Fell Fox's defence of women rights and Lady Mary Chudleigh's denouncement of masculine narrow-mindedness towards women will stand as examples of the new perspectives they held, both in the private and the public sphere. Far from the organized movements, which were to rise in time, these isolated gestures from 17th-century authoresses helped to build a new female identity.

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In this paper we propose to contrast the traditional, mainstream feminine point of view with new attitudes from the women themselves.

In accordance to the traditional roles society expected women to perform, they should circumscribe to the family circle and keep a discreet and supporting attitude in relation to the male figures of their domestic sphere, especially to their fathers and, later to their husbands. The only legitimate career for an adult woman being matrimony, they were carefully prepared for this secondary statute as wives, during all their infancy and adolescence (Proctor 1990: 1-5).

Man's superiority in every aspect justified the principle of obedience, which all of them were to respect no matter in what position they stood within the social hierarchy. Such principle found its reasons both in the biblical narrative and in the current biological conceptions. The feminine image derived from Eve concurred to the notion of a weaker mind, when compared with man's

(or Adam's), someone more easily prone to temptation, who, therefore, should receive some guidance during all her lifetime. From the biological perspective, women belonged to the more fragile part of humankind and should be protected from all possible physical dangers in order to secure the multiplication of the species (Stone 1990: 136; Proctor 1990: 3-6).

Francisco Manuel de Melo's *Carta de Guia De Casados*, is a quite good example of the current male expectations towards their female companions. Francisco Manuel de Melo's work was, furthermore, translated into English at the close of the seventeenth-century by John Stevens (or Stephens) under the title *The Government of a Wife* (the complete title being: *The Government of a Wife; or Wholsom and Pleasant Advice for Married Men; In a Letter to a Friend, Written in Portuguese, By Don Francisco Manuel, With Some Additions of the Translator. There is Also Added, A Letter upon the same Subject, Written in Spanish by Don Antonio de Guevara, Bishop of Mondoñedo; Preacher and Historiographer to Emperour Charles V*) (cf. Serra 1995).

Between the first edition of this moral treatise, 1651, and the publication of its English version only forty six years elapsed, during which several other editions had come forward, thus vouching its success. Edgar Prestage was one of the first, if not actually the first, to point out the importance of this translation regarding the diffusion of the Portuguese and the Spanish culture (Prestage 1905).

Francisco Manuel de Melo had dedicated his *Carta* to a cousin who was about to marry and had apparently asked for the former's advice on the matter, i. e., on the best ways to treat a wife in order to keep a happy marriage (de Melo 1996: 86).

Thus, Francisco Manuel de Melo's detailed answer to his cousin will enable us to understand the prevalent ideas on women in the several stations in life, as well as their role within the family circle. Throughout his moral treatise he peruses both the different types of women one may receive in wedlock, and whatever other female company present in a house, such as maids and impoverished friends or relatives (de Melo 1996: 100-109).

Within the walls of the domestic universe the most important rule to be acknowledged is the husband's supremacy as master of the whole property and of his wife's body and soul (de Melo 1996: 95-96).

In spite of the equality in fortune and social station between those who are about to be married, Francisco Manuel de Melo does not make the defence of conjugal equality. The proportioned conditions of husband and wife are just the basis for a harmonic social standard of living.

Furthermore, the marriage arrangements were carried out by the families, and not by those most directly interested. As Francisco Manuel de Melo states, property questions were not only of the utmost importance for both families, but would also reflect themselves on the newly married welfare (de Melo 1996: 93-94). Parents were also deeply concerned with the social standing of the prospective family members, and a similar station in life was considered most desirable.

However, from the very start of their married life, husbands must assert that they are the rulers in their private kingdom. Even simple seniority will help them to become their wives' worthy mentors. As far as women are concerned,

they should marry young in order to be more easily educated according to their husbands' notions of the ideal wife. A very close relationship with the woman's kin should be avoided to ensure that the only significant influence in her life comes from her husband (de Melo 1996: 97-98).

The stress laid on the spiritual and practical guidance of women, first by their fathers, and then by their husbands, derives from their intellectual and moral weakness, which may take different forms, in keeping with the dominant psychological features they exhibit. Thus, the author warns his reader against the irascibility and impertinence of women, which might be cause for serious inconveniences both at home, with family and servants, and in public, sometimes jeopardising their husbands' careers.

Foolish and prodigal women must also be dealt with harshly so the welfare of the family will not be endangered.

The subordinate role of women, even in their own homes is emphasised by the argument that, having no authority whatsoever to dismiss a servant, how could they be trusted to "send away" the family's assets? Curiously, Francisco Manuel de Melo adds that, should their husbands have the same defects, then it no longer matters, because men will just bear the consequences of their own ways (de Melo 1996: 104-105).

In matters of opinion the stubborn woman is not to be suffered. To acknowledge a difference of opinion would imply that husband and wife were on equal terms in judgement as well as in authority, something completely unacceptable:

Não venho em que com a mulher se litigue, que é conceder-lhe uma igualdade no juízo e império, coisa que devemos fugir. Faça-se-lhe certo que à sua conta não o está a entender, senão o obedecer e fazer executar, mas que não entenda. Mostre-se-lhe às vezes que, havendo quando se casou, entregado sua vontade ao marido, comete agora delito em querer usar daquilo que já não é seu. (Francisco Manuel de Melo 1996: 106)

Marriage implied that the woman had to renounce not only the management of her own property, be it her dowry or any other kind of legacy, but also her free will and judgement. Affection might lessen the strictness of home government. Nevertheless, this affection should also be measured. Too much love, or passion, would blind men, letting them live in an unruly, chaotic home. As for women, they should esteem their husbands with discretion, without the upheavals of jealous feats, or other embarrassing attitudes.

A paternal and condescending pattern of relationship also emerges when considering ugliness as a lesser evil, which might even be advantageous to feminine virtue. The same happens with the lack of health, or the impossibility of bearing children, misfortunes that must be endured with a Christian disposition (de Melo 1996: 101-102).

This tolerance should not extend to matters of honour, the most important feminine virtue. All the wife's relatives and servants have to be carefully examined in order to prevent the lady *offending* her husband. Again, her inability to judge defers to the husband the choice of servants and the avoidance of any friendly

relationship with any particular woman (not to mention men) who visits the house either in business or otherwise.

This notion of the male dominance in the family was not confined to the Portuguese conception of marital relations. On the contrary, it was vastly widespread throughout Europe and its foundation stems not only from custom and religious principle, but also from the political theories of well-known authors, namely Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1651) compared the familial domain to a commonwealth where there should be just one ruler:

Private Bodies regular, and Lawfull, are those that are constituted without Letters, or other written Authority, saving the Lawes common to all other Subjects. And because they be united in one Person Representative, they are held for Regular; such as are all Families, in which the Father, or Master ordereth the whole Family. For he obligeth his Children, and Servants, as farre as the Law permitteth, though not further, because none of them are bound to obedience in those actions, which the Law hath forbidden to be done. In all other actions, during the time they are under domestique government, they are subject to their Fathers, and Masters, as to their immediate Sovereigns. For the Father and Master being before the Institution of Common-wealth, absolute Sovereigns in their own Families, they lose afterward no more of their Authority, than the Law of the Commonwealth taketh from them. (Hobbes 1973: 124)

The omission of the female representative of this hobbesian private commonwealth is rather significant if compared with the recurrent reference to the “Father” or “Master” as the responsible for the whole. Moreover, the contractual dispositions which determine who holds the responsibility for the children are also referred by Hobbes as a means to overcome Nature’s rules. According to the natural laws the mother should be in charge of her offspring, because their need of her assistance is greater. Nonetheless, the whole matter changes in a commonwealth:

In Common-wealths, this controversie is decided by the Civil Law: and for the most part, (but not alwayes) the sentence is in favour of the father, because for the most part Common-wealths have been erected by the Fathers, not by the Mothers of families. (Thomas Hobbes 1973: 105)

Actually, Hobbes is here asserting the obvious facts. European societies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fully recognised the patriarchal principle both in the families and in the civic sphere. Thus the female figure is either completely ignored or considered from a natural and biological perspective.¹ However, such hindrances had already been overcome by the rational advancements in science and social organisation.

Sir Richard Brathwaite, for instance, in his treatise concerning the English noblewomen also subscribed the same kind of relation. He reiterated the authority

1. Concerning women’s legal status cf. Dickenson, Donna 1997: *Property, Women and Politics. Subjects or Objects*. Cambridge, Polity Press. On the biological arguments for women’s subordination cf. Ornter, Sherry B: “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” Ed. Joan Landes 1998. *Feminism, The Public and The Private*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

and superiority of the husband towards the wife and the latter's obedience towards him (1631, *The English Gentlewoman drawne out to the full Body: Expressing What Habilliments doe best attire her, What Ornaments doe best adorne her, What complements doe best accomplish her*).

Women writers, such as Hannah Woolley (1675, *The Gentlewoman's Companion, Or a Guide to the Female Sex*) would also stand by this most orthodox point of view, even when they claim for better educational opportunities to improve themselves.

In spite of the rigour of the law in restricting the status and rights of wives (and women in general) in the seventeenth century, one may wonder if it was matched by private reality.

Notwithstanding the acknowledgement of the male as the most powerful in the conjugal relationship, Francisco Manuel de Melo makes a subtle distinction between the subordinate standing of a married woman and that of a servant. He speaks of companionship instead of serfdom using a well-known simile of the husband as the sun and the wife as the moon, thus receiving a reflexive light (or power) from the former:

O marido tenha as vezes de sol, em sua casa, a mulher as de lua. Alumie com a luz que ele lhe der; e tenha também alguma claridade. A ele sustente o poder, a ela a estimação. Ela tema a ele, e ele faça que todos a temam a ela, serão ambos obedecidos. (de Melo 1996: 95).

Simultaneously, several female voices began questioning their own condition as opposed to the traditional feminine assignments and constraints they were attributed by men.²

Margaret Fell Fox (1614-1702), "the mother of Quakerism", as she was called, was also the wife of George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends. She dedicated most of her life to their cause, having been in jail as a religious activist. Meanwhile she published several treatises on polemic subjects, namely the vindication of religious freedom and equal rights for women.

Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed by the Scriptures (Augustan Reprint Society, 1979), a pamphlet that went to the press in 1666, argues for women's right to speak their mind in public about spiritual matters. Like Milton, she often supported her allegations with recourse to the Bible. There are, for instance, recurrent quotations of The Book of Genesis to emphasise the equal conditions of male and female creation: both man and woman were created at His own image. There were no signs of the discrimination men would later impose.

Years later John Locke would also find support in the Bible to forward his theory of a parental power, instead of a paternal one: "*Honour thy Father and thy Mother*, Exod. 20.12. *Whosoever curseth his Father or his Mother*, Lev. 20.9. *Ye shall fear every Man his Mother and his Father*, Lev. 19.4 *Children obey your Parents*, &c. Eph. 6.1" (Locke, 1988: 303).

Locke's aim was to demonstrate the groundless nature of absolute power. It did not originate in paternal power, because in the state of nature there should have prevailed the parental power, i. e., the shared power of father and mother

2. Regarding women's early vindications there is a very interesting article by Joan Kelly 1982. "Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des Femmes, 1400-1789". *Signs*, 8, 1: 4-28.

over their minor children.

In a similar manner Margaret Fell Fox used the sacred text to disprove a prejudice against women's capability of thought and expression. So, she uses, among others, the episode of the serpent, Eve's tempter. Consequently, God decided to create an antagonistic relationship between the serpent and the woman and between the serpent's seed and her seed. Thus she evokes God's words to justify female free speech:

[F]or he hath put enmity between the Woman and the Serpent, and if the seed of the Woman speak not, the Seed of the Serpent speaks; for God hath put enmity between the Two Seeds, and it is manifest, that those that speak against the Woman and her Seed's Speaking, peak out of enmity of the old Serpent's Seed. (Fox 1996: 310-311)

Margaret Fell Fox's rhetoric revolves in a syllogistic way, using biblical sentences, episodes or religious symbols and institutions (such as the Church being called a Daughter of Christ) to arrive at always the same conclusion: God created two equal human beings and only men's foolishness brought forth these unfair discriminations.

However, the more recurrent sermons stressed the moral and intellectual feebleness of women. As Lawrence Stone notes, since 1562 onwards the *Homily on Marriage* became very popular on account of the Crown's order to read it in church every Sunday:

It left the audience in no doubt about the inferior status, rights and character of a wife: 'the woman is a weak creature not endued with like strength and constancy of mind, therefore, they be the sooner disquieted, and they be the more prone to all weak affections and dispositions of mind, more than men be; and lighter they be, and more vain in their fantasies and opinions. (Stone 1982: 138)

Nonetheless, the charitable disposition of their male guardians and the desire for a peaceful home prevented the beating of wives as unchristian behaviour.

It was this kind of argument that infuriated Lady Mary Chudleigh, née Mary Lee (1656-1710). She was a learned woman who corresponded with John Norris, a religious controversialist. She also met Mary Astell, one firm defender of women's equality of rights.

Her first work was *The Ladies' Defence* (1701) which ran more than one edition at the time. Later she published a collection of poems and essays under the title *Poems on Several Occasions* (1703). She also translated from the classics, but that work is still waiting to go to the print.

The Ladies' Defence emerged as a reaction to a sermon from John Sprint entitled *The Bride-Woman's Counsellor*. So, Lady Mary Chudleigh begins with a preface attacking that sermon and then evolves to a poem with several voices, as the complete title elucidates: "*The Ladies' Defence: or The Bride-Woman's Counsellor Answered: A Poem in a Dialogue between Sir John Brute, Sir William Loveall, Melissa, and a Parson*".

Lady Mary Chudleigh, through Melissa's voice then denounces the masculine narrow-mindedness towards women and the constraints some of them force on

their wives. Like Margaret Fell Fox, the freedom of speech and thought is here claimed. Melissa also deplors the traditional anathema of women's feeble mind. She defends that its origin lies not in nature, but in the want of an adequate education:

To have us wise was never your Design:
 You'll keep us Fools, that we may be your Jest;
 They who know least, are ever treated best.
 If we do well, with Care it is concealed;
 But every Error, every Fault's revealed:
 While to each other you still partial prove,
 Can see no Failures, and even Vices love. (Chudleigh 1993 vv.715-721)

The deliberate action of keeping women ignorant so that they remain dependent on men's guidance and protection against the worldly dangers is already seen as a weapon. Marriage is, thus considered a relationship of power where the woman lives as her master's subject.

The image of birds living happily in a cage that D. Francisco Manuel de Melo graciously uses is quite strongly objected to by Lady Mary Chudleigh in a short poem addressed To The Ladies:

Wife and Servant are the same,
 But only differ in the Name:
 (...)
 Value your selves, and Men despise:
 You must be proud, if you'll be wise. (Chudleigh 1993 vv.1-2; 23-24)

Although these authoresses do not reject women's usual roles as wives, mothers, nurses and administrators of their homes, they are already aware of a wider world. The confinement to the domestic sphere is no longer sufficient to these new women. They wish to think for themselves, they wish to be taught serious (masculine) matters in order to contribute to their society.

The notion of angel of the house or of the nation becomes a ghostlike identity, which no longer satisfies them.

Margaret Fell Fox found in religion the means to express herself as a complete human being, whereas Lady Mary Chudleigh, at the close of the century, proved through her writings the ability to judge and criticise the reality she knew.

Far from the organised movements, which were to rise in time, these isolated gestures stand as examples of the new perspectives these women writers held both in the private and the public sphere.

Their apology for education and serious consideration for their social status clearly reveals that a new female identity was afoot.

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