

"I LIKE MY WIUES DEUISE WELL": RESOURCEFUL WOMEN IN DELONEY'S FICTION

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It is hardly surprising that a country which had been successfully ruled over for more than forty years by a shrewd, witty, intelligent and resourceful woman, should produce a series of writers at the end of her reign willing to incorporate into their fiction or drama a number of heroines and female characters distinguished precisely by their possession of these selfsame qualities, qualities which not infrequently permit them, representatives of the supposedly weaker sex though they may be, to contribute to their menfolk's success, to get them out of some difficulty or, indeed, to outwit them, if need be: where would Antonio (and, indeed, Bassanio) be without Portia? Would the Forest of Arden really be "as we like it" were it not for Rosalind? Who take revenge on the outrageous Sir John Falstaff? Not the spineless Windsor husbands, but their merry wives. Indeed, would Macbeth have ever occupied the Scottish throne, had it not been for his "dearest partner of greatness"?

Similarly, in the four lively, popular, middle-class novels of Thomas Deloney, written between 1597 and 1600, novels which offer a contrast and indeed constitute an antidote to the aristocratic "Arcadian" and "Euphuistic" fiction of the period, and distinguished by their vivid portraits of a host of characters, principally artisans, with here and there a sprinkling of aristocrats, acting and, above all, speaking with great realism (the varieties of English were no secret for Deloney), we likewise find a group of decisive, energetic and enterprising women who are not only responsible for the success of their menfolk, but also, in a large measure, for that of the novels themselves.

Deloney, a successful ballad writer, and himself a silk-weaver, wrote his novels, he insists in his prefaces, to the greater glory of the cloth-making community in the cases of *Jack of Newbury*, 1597, and *Thomas of Reading*, 1599, and of the shoe-making trade in those of the two parts of *The Gentle Craft*, 1598,¹ the heroes being members of one or other of these professions, and the stories being set in well-defined historical periods: *Jack of Newbury* in

the reign of Henry VIII, *The Gentle Craft* in the Middle Ages and the fifteenth century, and *Thomas of Reading* in the time of Henry I, their realism in this sense being vouched for by the incorporation into the texts of authentic historical characters, such as Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey, Will Summers, Henry I, etc., and a series of half-historical, half-legendary characters, such as Jack of Newbury himself, and Saint Hugh or Simon Eyre in *The Gentle Craft*. They are, however, only historical by convention, for what Deloney really presents us with is a colourful and fascinating portrait-gallery of his fellow-Elizabethans.

Now, although the common denominator which holds together the series of, frequently disconnected, picaresque and jest-book type episodes so characteristic of Deloney's fiction, is in each case a man, Jack, Thomas, or, in *The Gentle Craft*, Saint Hugh, Crispine and Simon Eyre, and in spite of the fact that, for example, in the preface to the second part of *The Gentle Craft*, he suggests that the pranks of his comic *male* characters may help to drive away his readers' melancholy, the women in these stories are in many cases cast in more lively, more amusing and frequently more enterprising rôles than any of these men he singles out for special notice. Men do tend to occupy the centre of the stage in Elizabethan fiction (*Menaphon*, *Pandosto*, *Euphues*, *Tom a Lincoln*, *Palmerin of England*, Jack Wilton in *The Unfortunate Traveller*, etc.), and it is rather as if Deloney set out to conform to this literary convention, but, precisely, because he had such a gift for representing the realities of everyday life, found himself, almost involuntarily, including portraits of the type of dynamic women with whom he himself undoubtedly came into contact in his daily Elizabethan life.

What sort of things, then, do these resourceful women get up to in Deloney's fiction? Well, to start with, contrary to what occurs in the Arcadian and Euphuistic novels of the time, but very much in consonance with the earlier jest-book and fabliau tradition, they are quite willing to take the initiative in amorous affairs, and to go a-wooing themselves, rather than wait to be wooed. Thus, the rather strait-laced, not to say, sanctimonious apprentice, Jack of Newbury, is assiduously courted and cunningly tricked into marriage by his former master's widow, a Wife of Bath-like character in certain respects, who, finding her cloth-making business prosper under Jack's guidance, begins to "cast very good countenance" on him. Although she tries to awaken his interest

by telling him about her many suitors, and by dropping hints about liking "better of one nearer at hand", Jack who has caught her drift, considering her age and the fact that as his former mistress she might prove a recalcitrant wife, decides not to pursue the matter, assuring her, however, that he will never hinder her in any way, should she wish to get married. Undeterred, this "comely, auncient dame", one cold Christmas night, puts Jack to bed in her former husband's room, where she later suggests she join him, being frozen and unwilling "to hazard her health". Jack has not the heart to refuse her! The following morning, she gets him to accompany her to a chapel where, she says, she is to be married. No bridegroom, of course, turns up, and she tells the priest to marry her to "my man John"; this latter, having promised not to hinder any marriage she may want to make, accepts the situation with good grace.² Her resourcefulness has permitted her both to outwit Jack, and get a husband to her liking!

The same occurs at a much higher social level, in the case of Ursula, the daughter of the Roman Emperor, in *The Gentle Craft*, when she becomes smitten with Crispine, her shoemaker (really a prince in disguise, for this is Deloney using his aristocratic register). Euphuistic her discourse may be, but there is no doubt about her intentions: he is to help her personally to try on her new shoes, which entails her "[...] lifting up her well proportioned leg upon his gentle knee" (p. 122), in a scene which, after much talk of love, and many hints on her part, ends with her declaring roundly: "Then liue faire friend [...] enjoy my loue, for I will die rather than liue without thee" (p. 123), a secret marriage taking place forthwith!

Descending the social scale again, we find another lucky shoemaker in the person of Richard Casteler, in *The Gentle Craft*, the object of amorous attention on the part of many a maid in Westminster, and above all, of the two "wily and witty" rivals for his hand, Long Meg (a jest-book character, similar in type to Middleton's *Roaring Girl*) and Gillian. Richard, in fact, eventually marries a disdainful Dutchwoman, but much fun is had in the interim at the expense of the courting strategies devised by Meg and Gillian to awaken Richard's interest. Indeed, Deloney offers us a lively picture of the effect produced by Richard on the female population in general when he goes to church on Sundays:

[...] the Maides eyes were so firmly fixed on him, that hee could neither looke forward, backward, nor on any side, but that he should be sure to haue a winke of one, a smile of another, the third would give a nod: (p. 175).

Gillian refers several times to the unseemliness of a woman's taking the initiative in such cases: "it becommeth not maidens to be woers, though willingly they could wish to wed where they best fancie" (p. 180), she observes, but both she and Meg are constantly carrying presents of food and drink to Richard and his man, that is, wooing him with presents as a male suitor might do, and Meg, sister under the skin to the aristocratic Ursula, likewise has recourse to the shoe-trying stratagem, to encourage Richard: "let me see thy foote", says Richard, and Meg answers:

There is both my foote and leg [...], I am not ashamed to shew either of them, for I am not legged like a Crane, nor footed like a Flie, and therewith lift vp her cloathes to the knee. (p. 181).

These "wily and witty maidens" would no doubt make good wives, and Deloney offers us a number of examples of supportive wives and mothers, responsible in great measure for the success, or indeed, the salvation, of their menfolk: in fact, Jack of Newbury's successful career -from poor apprentice to wealthy burgess- is due exclusively to the widow's having married him, as Deloney clearly points out at the end of the first chapter: "[...] in the end she died, leaving her husband wondrous wealthy". This wealth, coupled with Jack's diligence, is what allows him to rise in the social scale. Diligent *wives*, however, are of a price above rubies, and Deloney pays tribute to such in some of his stories: thus, in *The Gentle Craft*, the situation of a merry, but spendthrift shoemaker, known as the Green King, is saved exclusively by his wife. Whilst he, depressed by the decline in his fortunes, sets off to see the world, she is left "to look well" to his business, which she does to such good effect that, when he eventually comes home, he "found his estate so good, that he had great cause to praise God for the same", but also, one feels inclined to add, to praise his wife who:

[...] became so carefull in her businesse, and governed her selfe with such wisdom in all her affaires, that during her husbands absence she did not onely pay many of his debts, but also got into her house everything that was necessary to be had and her gaines [...] came [...] flowing in [...] (p. 259).

Outstanding in this context of supportive wives is the contribution made by Mrs Eyre to Simon Eyre's meteoric career from log-cabin to White House, as it were, (he becomes Lord Mayor of London), in Part I of *The Gentle Craft*. As a young wife, we hear, she was never idle, but always busy spinning in her spare time. When her husband learns of the possibility of doing a commercial deal, which would immediately make them rich (and perhaps eventually make him Lord Mayor), but for which he does not possess the necessary capital, rather like Lady Macbeth in a not totally dissimilar situation, she is quick to see "the nearest way", and willing to persuade him to "catch it". By a series of slightly shady stratagems of her devising, involving some disguise and a great deal of bluffing, Simon is able to give the impression that he is worth thousands of pounds and thus bring off a commercial *coup* which then, in a perfectly honest way, allows him to go on to amass a real fortune and finally become Lord Mayor of London. Already, before she realises the magnitude of the capital needed, Mrs Eyre shows herself to be confident of getting a loan, and even reveals that she has herself a little nest-egg of two crowns laid by! Interesting in this episode are the ways in which she encourages her husband not to lose this opportunity. A man is not *always* to be blamed for taking counsel of his wife, she says, thus implicitly challenging the whole mediaeval and patristic tradition concerning Eve's advice to Adam ("Wommannes conseil broghte us first to wo", says Chaucer's Nun's Priest) for, she adds diplomatically, "though womens wits are not able to comprehend the/ greatest things, yet in doubtfull matters they often/ helpe on a sudden" (p. 144).

When asked to be more explicit, she echoes, or rather, announces Lady Macbeth: "[...] I would haue you plucke vp a mans heart, and/ speedily chop vp a bargain for these goods you speake of." (p. 144).

By dint of her skilfully eliminating all his objections to the scheme she has devised, sometimes with impatience: "Iesus haue mercy vpon us [...] you say women are fooles, but me seemeth men haue need to be taught sometimes."

(p. 144). He is finally convinced, declaring with admiration: "Enough Wife [...] thou hast said enough, and by the grace of God Ile follow thy counsell, and I doubt not but to haue good fortune." (p. 146).

Which he does! More outspoken than the Green King's wife, Mrs Eyre is willing to challenge even God's right to gratitude: on hearing Simon mentioned as a wealthy man, she tells Simon, she thought "[...] he may thank his wife for that": "Nay, said *Simon*, I thanke God for it./ Yea, and next him, you may thanke me (quoth she)." (p. 149).

The rather slender analogies with Lady Macbeth which have been established with respect to Mrs Eyre, acquire more substance in the case of another supportive wife -supportive, this time, in evil- that is to say, the Hostess of the inn at Colebrook, where in an impressively sombre episode, Thomas of Reading is finally murdered. She and her husband, the innkeeper, a couple of gruesome accomplices, have taken to murdering their customers for their money, being guilty of some sixty deaths when finally brought to justice. This they do, by assigning to their wealthier patrons, such as Thomas, a rich clothier from Reading, a bed in a room over the kitchen, under which there is a hidden trap-door. At dead of night, and after placing a cauldron of boiling water directly underneath (shades of *The Jew of Malta!*), they release the mechanism of the trap-door, the victim thus falling suddenly and quickly into the cauldron. When justice finally catches up with them, the Host confesses that "he being a carpenter made that false falling floor, and how his wife deuised it" (p. 327). A resourceful woman with a vengeance! Like Lady Macbeth, the Hostess is a good dissembler ("look like the innocent flower,/ but be the serpent under it."), and hypocritically pretends to cheer Thomas up when, in what can only be called an access of gloomy premonition, he ingenuously describes to the evil couple the feelings of melancholy with which he is suddenly assailed, melancholy so great that he calls for pen and paper to draw up his will. Shakespeare was probably familiar with Deloney's work, for he was very popular; there certainly exists a great similarity in the atmosphere of the two murder scenes, that of the clothier and that of the king. Just as Macbeth sees the dagger, so Thomas suddenly sees, as in a vision, the faces of the innkeepers, "like pale death" and their hands all "bloody", a fact which, together with the screeching of an owl and the croaking of a raven at Thomas's window ("The raven himself is hoarse,/ That croaks the fatal entrance of

Duncan/ Under my battlements."), unnerve the Host to such an extent that he decides to desist from the crime:

What man (quoth she) faint you now? haue you done so many, and do you shrink at this?

Then shewing him a great deale of gold which (Thomas) had left with her, she said, Would it not grieue a bodie's heart to loose this? hang the old churle, what should he do liuing any longer? he hath too much, and we haue too little: tut husband, let the thing be done and then this is our own. (pp. 325-6).³

The Host presumably goes to hell through his wife's *deuising*, but in the euphuistic saint's legend which opens the first part of *The Gentle Craft*, the rigidly virtuous Winifred is responsible for the going to heaven of her faithful but unrequited lover, Hugh, a nobleman turned shoemaker, and hence for his becoming the patron saint of shoemakers! Despising earthly love, it is Winifred's constancy in her faith, which eventually converts Hugh and leads him to be executed with her, thus gaining a martyr's crown.

Apart from these more remarkable stories, there are likewise a number of minor episodes in Deloney's novels which testify to the resourcefulness of his women: it is the "counsell" of their mother, who suggests that the aristocratic Crispine and Crispianus leave home in humble disguise, that saves them from a tyrant's hand in Part I of *The Gentle Craft*, and it is a shoemaker's wife who gives them shelter and employment in their need. It is, indeed, this same woman who *deuises* the ingenious plan whereby the pregnant Princess Ursula, Crispine's secret wife, may escape from the despotic Emperor's palace, and take refuge with these good people. "I like my wiues deuice well", says her admiring husband, the master shoemaker. Similarly, it is the wife of old Gray, the clothier, in *Thomas of Reading*, in an episode concerning the loves of the dispossessed Lady Margaret and Duke Robert of Normandy, who saves the unfortunate couple from death, by taking the initiative (like Jeanie Deans in Scott's *Heart of Midlothian*) of personally appealing to Henry I on their behalf, kneeling before the king, and beseeching his clemency with many a tear.

Given the nature of Deloney's fiction, many of the episodes of which stem, as has been mentioned, from the jest-books of the previous century, it is

hardly surprising that the resourcefulness, as we have been seeing, of many of his women is made manifest in the ingeniousness of their *deuices*, or, to put it more plainly, *tricks*, some of which have already been alluded to: "the false falling floor" in the Colebrook inn, the verbal trick by which Jack of Newbury is inveigled into marriage, the disguise assumed by Simon Eyre to deceive the Greek merchant, and in Crispine's story, the trick invented by the shoemaker's wife to get Ursula out of her father's palace under cover of the hue and cry raised by a false report of invasion.

There are, however, other examples of ingenious tricks by which Deloney's women use their resourcefulness to outwit their menfolk, rather than help them: Jack of Newbury's old wife does at first prove recalcitrant, and finding herself locked out one night by her indignant young husband, soon finds a way of turning the tables upon him: after much petitioning, he finally lets her in:

The doore being opened, in shee went quaking, and as hee was about to locke it againe, in very sorrowful manner she said:

'lacke husband, what hap haue I? My wedding Ring was euen now in my hand, and I haue let it fall about the doore, good sweet *Iohn* come forth with the Candle and help mee to seeke it.'

The man incontinent did so, and while hee sought for that which was not there to bee found, shee whipt into the house, and quickly clapping to the doore, she lockt her husband out.
(p. 23).

Another witty innkeeper's wife "as wily as she was wanton", burdened with a jealous husband, manages to conduct an illicit love-affair with Cuthbert the clothier, by dint of having this latter, on her suggestion, continually criticise her before her husband, in order to allay any possible suspicions he may have. By this *deuice*, she even manages to find herself forced by her husband to shake hands amicably with the man who is, in fact, her lover! Another provincial clothier's wife, finding, after a trip to London, that the metropolitan clothiers' wives are better dressed than those in the provinces, feigns illness and takes to

her bed, until she has wrung a promise out of him that he will buy her better clothes. Even the aristocratic Margaret, daughter of an Earl, has recourse to a trick to relieve herself of the presence of an unwanted suitor: this she does by convincing him that she finds his "ill-favoured great nose" loathsome: in fact, he has a nose "as comely as any mans", but is so impressed by her remarks on the subject, that not until he is supposedly operated on by a wily physician, can he go back to leading a normal life, so great is his obsession! In an episode more crude, but similar in spirit to the Falstaff in the dirty-linen basket scene in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the maidens working as weavers in Jack of Newbury's house, take revenge on Will Summers, Henry VIII's jester (a real-life character), for interfering with their weaving and for his over-impertinent tongue: since the punishment they devise for him, entails tying him up, gagging him, soaking him in liquefied dog droppings, and making him feed the hogs, it is hardly surprising that he ends up begging for mercy!

This is, of course, true jest-book stuff, but all these examples do seem to show, surely, how important a rôle resourceful women play in Deloney's fiction, fiction which, it is generally agreed, is realistic in the sense that these novels undoubtedly reflected a number of truths concerning the Elizabethan society of his age and social class, one of these truths being, evidently, the contribution made by dynamic, enterprising women to the well-being of the increasingly opulent middle-classes: more than one solid Elizabethan burgess, one suspects, may have had cause to say with Simon Eyre: "Enough Wife [...] Ile follow thy counsell, and I doubt not to haue good fortune"!

NOTES

1.- This work was to be successfully dramatised in 1600 by Thomas Dekker, under the title of *The Shoemaker's Holiday*.

2.- All references and quotations (page numbers in the text) are taken from: *The Novels of Thomas Deloney*, Edited by Merritt E. Lawlis, Greenwood Press, Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1978, a reprint of the 1961 edition published by Indiana University Press. This reference, p. 21.

3.- Compare, for example, Lady Macbeth: "Was the hope drunk,/ Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since/ And wakes it now, to look so green and pale/ At what it did so freely?"