

Female Relationships in Mary Pix's *The Beau Defeated*

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In 1700 *The Beau Defeated* was first performed. It was one of the last years of William III's reign, a period characterized by a strict morality that almost made drama disappear. The bourgeoisie was getting an increasing power both in Court and in the political and economic fields. Mobility upwards was sometimes accomplished through marriages with the aristocracy. This new middle-class also became the moral and social judge which determined the social modes of behaviour for women and confined them to the family and domesticity. As far as women are concerned, and according to Keeble's, there concurred two opposing ideas: on the one hand, women were considered as the mirror of all vices, on the other, the paragon of virtue. However, for the first time, women were granted "access to the stage, as managers, actresses, and playwrights" although it meant nothing else regarding "equality for the sexes" (Lyons and Morgan vii). In addition, Lyons and Morgan maintain that the ideal of the one-breadwinner family had not yet become dominant. Though the sexes were far from equal in legal standing, labour relations were not by then so heavily differentiated across gender lines as they would become in the eighteenth-century. (ix)

If we admit this, then, it would have meant that women could gain access to the stage as playwrights, and it would explain as well how their plays, even though women-authored, could be and were successful. According to Paula R. Backscheider, the female playwrights also benefited from the great competition of the two existing companies (Backscheider 71-72). On the other hand, these women suffered the criticism of their male counterparts advocating female inferiority as Howe explains. Mary Pix's problems with her literary circle makes this point graphically. Maybe this is why her work can be perceived as an attempt to improve the current female situation, in a literary context, as well as to destruct traditional female stereotypes which defined women as inferior to men in body, mind and soul and as recipient of all the vices, as Keeble points out in a recent study of the cultural tradition of seventeenth-century woman (Keeble 73). Perhaps her work tried to highlight those characteristics that helped women achieve strategical positions.

The Beau Defeated tells how Mrs Rich, a rich widow of the bourgeoisie, wants to marry an upper class mate to get "quality and a great name". Mr Rich, her brother-in-law, plots, together with Betty, Lady Landsworth and Mrs Clerimont, how to marry her to an appropriate mate. Meanwhile, Mrs Rich has time enough to make friends with a group of gamblers and to fall in love with a such Sir John Roverhead, a man who also courts Mrs Rich's niece, Lucinda. Lucinda, influenced by her aunt's acts, tries to elope with Lord Fourbind, Sir John in disguise. In the end, when both disasters have been settled, Mrs Clerimont and Lady Landsworth finally help Mrs Rich to marry Elder Clerimont, a simple squire looking for a wife, yet an appropriate upper-class mate. Besides, they also get married with their chosen mates.

My objective is, thus, to define to what extent Mary Pix tries to portray the improvement of cross-gender relationships through female solidarity, that is, through the idea of women helping each other in a society that is against them. In McLaren's words: "In *The Beau Defeated* (...) she (Mary Pix) describes women who learn from other women how best to arrange their lives and their prospects of marriage" (Messenger 96). In short, Mary Pix's main idea seems to be that women's situation can be improved in marriage if they accept other women's solidarity. The play is, therefore, didactic. Its primary objective is to teach that, even though social exogamy is appropriate and economically

positive, a bourgeois woman should not set her expectations too high, i. e., marriages between the upper aristocracy and the upper middle-class are not desirable, since the difference in their respective social status and background is much too large. Secondly, it teaches that young women need an education which will teach them the end and means of marriage, since, as it will be shown, there are patterns of behavior that threaten the social structure because they disclose unacceptable views concerning the meaning of marriage. And lastly, it seeks to demonstrate that women can, and have to, educate other women to achieve their social roles successfully, an idea widely expressed in the character of Mrs Rich and the women that surround her. However, the last one to speak in the play is a man. Taking into account that the last speech of a play conveys the moral, this suggests that the purpose of the play is not so radical a demonstration of women's willpower as it seemed at first.

To analyse if Mary Pix actually teaches in her play that female relationships of mutual help can help advance women's place in society and also men's judgement, I will study several aspects, namely the inversion of female and male stereotypes, the topic of the education for marriage, the social relationships between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy and the moral of the play.

McLaren maintains that female characters in Mary Pix differ from the traditional stereotypes. It is true that those characters intended to be the models for the audience do not conform to this pattern. Lady Landsworth, Mrs Clerimont and Betty try on every occasion to help Mrs Rich to achieve her objectives of a higher rank marriage within the social limits. So, the traditional assumptions of women fighting against women to obtain privileges do not operate here. However, there are exceptions. Therefore, I would reinterpret McLaren's point saying that the parameters of gender and class are different from other traditional models. There is a difference of social status among these women, which contributes to women's solidarity. The distinction is relevant for it shows female solidarity across social boundaries and regards women as a constituency in need of cooperation. Another implication of this is that solidarity can come from anywhere, even from the most unlikely of sources, i. e., even from these women occupying subaltern positions who are not usually given the chance to speak their minds.

This applies to Betty, Mrs Rich's maid. Betty is a symbol of the loyalty of the lower classes. Yet this loyalty can be threatened by Mrs Rich's attitude. For Betty, in the first moments of the play, cannot feel but disapproval and scorn towards her mistress. The attitude is provoked by Mr Rich's lack of vision and her intention of improving her social status whatever the means, and the costs. In one of their first conversations, concerning an episode where Mrs Rich has been humiliated in public, Betty makes clear her feelings towards her mistress:

BETTY: Well, well, madam, you have no great reason to complain; and though you are not as yet a woman of quality, you are at least very rich; and *you know, that with money you may buy quality, but birth very often brings no estate.*

MRS RICH: That's nothing; there is something very charming in quality, and a great name.

BETTY: Yet sure you'd think yourself in a worse condition, madam, were you, as many great ladies in the world are, who want everything; and, in spite of their great name, are known, but by the great number of creditors, that are bawling at their doors from morning till night. (164, my italics)

Betty hereby proves to be more intelligent than her mistress and by doing so, she also points out her contempt concerning her mistress's doings. Mrs Rich's only concern with quality "and a great name" prevents her perception of the unscrupulous people she has invited to be her guides towards quality. Betty is aware of the social transgression Mrs Rich intends to commit in order to marry a higher aristocratic male, actually out of her reach. Consequently, she turns her loyalty to the true woman of quality living beside her, that is, Lady Landsworth. This lady, as it has already been pointed out, best represents the appropriate lower upper class woman. But, in addition, Betty also seeks for the appropriate male to become her patron, and the one chosen is no other than Mrs Rich's brother-in-law, the man whose views on the behavior of women dominates in the end. However, Betty will accept her mistress as an appropriate superior at the end of the play, once that her mistress is deceived

into carrying out her duty, that is, once she has married to a social superior that is within her reach, a simple squire with no money but a title.

On the next social level, we find two ladies that are concerned with the protagonist's welfare and well-doing although they despise her: Lady Landsworth and Mrs Clerimont. Both ladies' function is to help Mrs Rich to achieve her objectives within the social norms. Even though both ladies dislike Mrs Rich's greediness, they want to help her if necessary. On the one hand, we have Lady Landsworth, a young widow looking for a second husband, who is the recipient of Betty's loyalty. Her feelings about her host are a mixture of scorn and pity, as it is pictured throughout the play:

LADY LANDSWORTH: ... Where's thy impertinent mistress?

BETTY: Gone to learn *ombre*, with a hundred guineas in her pocket.

LADY LANDSWORTH: Ha, ha, ha, her pride, ill-nature, and self-opinion, makes her follies unpitied. I'd fain be rid of the nauseous conversation this house abounds with. (167)

Lady Landsworth is the play's counterpart to Mrs Rich. And, in this role, she is seen as the exemplary widow: the woman that looks for a convenient partner within her social sphere, who pays attention to the nature and disposition of the man chosen and who does not think of marriage in terms of money and position. This is why, after the logical plot delay, she is awarded the perfect husband and the necessary freedom to get her purposes.

On the other hand, there is Mrs Clerimont, yet another widow in search of a husband, the example of another woman whose devices and plots are conceived as necessary stratagems to fulfil her objectives and her purpose in life. To Mrs Clerimont, Mrs Rich just seems at first another middle-class woman trying to climb up the social ladder without modesty. In a visit to our protagonist she tells her: "charms and perfections lose their signification, when applied to any, where Mrs Rich is by" (212). The irony implicit in the comment leaves no doubt of her feelings toward her. However, she will accept her duty in leading Mrs Rich along the right path to social climbing. Thus, from the very first moment, these three women are understood as the exemplary characters the audience should feel identified with. Insofar as this is true, it also implies that these three women subvert the traditional female stereotypes of the moment. Mary Pix has therefore broken the traditional female stereotype in favour of the idea of female social and gender improvement.

Paradoxical though it may seem, there are two women that certainly fulfil the traditional female stereotypes: Lady Basset and Mrs Trickwell. It is Betty who defines these characters for the audience:

BETTY: Indeed my City Lady turning courtier has a hopeful flock of teachers: mistresses grown old and then forsaken, who, in the tatters of her prosperity pass upon her for decayed quality, female gamblers, and fools in abundance. (168)

These two women function as the antithesis of the exemplary characters presented above. Besides, they are used as the prototypes of false quality and deceit, since their deceit is meant to benefit only themselves and not others. Furthermore, we learn at the end that their pretended social quality and upbringing is another invention to come nearer Mrs Rich and her money. Their real danger resides in the fact that as pretended prototypes of quality Mrs Rich is not aware of the deceit. In fact, Mrs Rich cannot perceive the difference in quality of any other character, which makes the notion of quality very elusive in the play. In addition, she sets these two women as the guardians of her social life and even her niece's.

This is evidence that Mrs Rich is in need of education for marriage, which is the second topic under discussion here. Mrs Rich's influence is dangerous not only for herself but for other women who can learn from her bad example,

MRS RICH: (...)

My niece, and I, will the example lead,

Teach city-dames the way to mend their breed,

choose for ourselves; let our dull parents pray;
 Devoutly cheat; each other's lives betray:
 And whilst they drudge, we'll briskly throw away. (201)

Taking into account that this topic of education for marriage is the link to the idea of female solidarity, education for marriage aims at the didactic purpose of the play. This education consists of a set of female patterns of social behavior which are explicit here such as: obedience, thriftiness or modesty. There are two examples of education for marriage: Mrs Rich and her niece Lucinda. Since Mrs Rich's education is the result of a plot against her, the obvious conclusion is that she is too old to be educated. Young Lucinda, on the other hand, has acquired her aunt's ideas and has decided to follow her aunt's steps

To marry as soon as 'tis possible, if you please aunt, the gentleman you love, that it may countenance my marriage with him I love; that when my father would chide me, I may answer him, I have not done worse than my aunt. (200)

A process which culminates in her trying to elope with Lord Fourbind. Consequently, Lucinda must be educated if she is to achieve those features that will make her a woman of quality, and an exemplary wife and mother in the bargain. From the moment her father agrees to give her the education she needs, the author demonstrates that education is indeed necessary to prevent a social disaster such as the one Mrs Rich is to bring about. Lucinda is young enough, and most of all, pliable enough to assimilate and submit to all the precepts she has intended to break. But it is also interesting that this only happens after the disaster has been stopped and after her aunt has been married. This should lead us to draw two conclusions, on the one hand, Lucinda is going to receive an education. Mr Rich has come to realize how much she needs it, and her aunt's new life and connections promise an opportunity for her that she (...) has never had. (Messenger 99).

On the other hand, the education has to be considered as a life-lasting process. Lucinda has learnt her lessons, yet her aunt has shown that this process is also necessary after marriage for deviation can occur anytime, even during marriage or widowhood. Thus, women have to be kept in check, guided and counselled all their lives in case deviation appears. Lucinda was looking for freedom in marriage, not money nor love/position. This erroneous assumption is what initially led her to disobey her father's precepts and to follow her aunt's. She tells Sir John

Do you see I am not furiously in love; as my aunt says, I run away only for more pleasure, more liberty, etc. I will go every day to the play, or else to to the park; and every time I go to the park, to the lodge, to Chelsey: in fine, where I please, or as I run away with you, I'll run away from you, sue for my own fortune again, and live as I please: what I have heard how ladies with fortunes do. (223)

And just a moment later she says, "that you must expect ... for had I loved obedience I had still obeyed my father: and she that begins with her father generally makes an end with her husband ..." (223). Hence, the process of education must prevent this type of acts that endanger both female and male relationships and social modes of behavior. And there is no best way to achieve the right patterns of behavior than to make women accomplices of their own subordination to male rules

MR RICH: Now, sister, and daughter, to you I chiefly speak, let this day's adventure make ye forever cautious of your conversarion; you see how near these pretenders to quality had brought you to ruin: the truly great of a quite different character. (234)

Furthermore, for Mrs Rich the only possible solution is to be deceived by those friends of her she has got. To be deceived in order to achieve a marriage above her social rank, as she wishes, but not too high as to become a shame. And, in a machiavellic *mise-en-scene*, the author confirms that even Mrs Rich needs a type of education that seemed only apt for the girl. Besides, Mrs Rich's marriage achieves two objectives at the same time. On the one hand, it shows the need of the aristocracy, at least of the lower aristocracy, to celebrate this kind of marriages for money. On the other, it justifies the needs of the bourgeoisie to enter, socially speaking, in a closed social class--as it is the aristocracy--in which she has already entered economically. These kind of unions are no other thing

that a business to get both money and name, something that the author makes clear from the very beginning of the play.

One of the most striking features of the play is the portrait of the increasing power the bourgeoisie which is exemplified by Mr Rich and his influence in the domestic sphere. His influence is distinctly marked by his sister-in-law's rebellion and in his daughter's obedience. Mr Rich is a clear exponent of the social changes regarding women taking place at the turn of the century. He is besides, and unexpectedly, the character who closes the play with a moral about appearances and women's greediness

Now, sister, and daughter, to you chiefly speak, let this day's adventure make ye
forever cautious of your conversation; you see how near these pretenders to quality
had brought you to ruin: the truly great of a quite different character.

The glory of the world our British nobles are,
The ladies too renowned, and chaste and fair:
But to our City, Augusta's sons,
The conquering wealth of both the Indians runs;
Though less in name, of greater power by far,
Honours alone, but empty 'scrutcheons are;
Mixed with their coin, the title sweetly sounds,
Not such allay as twenty thousand pounds. 233-34

To grasp the author's intentions, it is crucial to discuss the role of Mr Rich. He represents Mrs Rich's class-consciousness, Lucinda's virtue, the bourgeois moral sense and thriftiness, in short, he judges female patterns of behavior throughout the play. This leads us to think that, after all, Mary Pix is encouraging women to submit themselves to male predominance. Mr Rich is the traditional "paterfamilias" of earlier plays, that is, the superior male intellect able to see through social appearances the characters' intentions. Consequently, the author sets women's solidarity under men's power destroying, thus, any possibility for women to become autonomous. McLaren maintains, rather naively, that Mr Rich is the only sympathetic middle-class character in the plays of the period since he favours female autonomy, but from the very beginning what he does is to constrict Mrs Rich's actions for unchecked widowhood is a danger to the economic goals of the bourgeoisie.

A number of key issues arise from this analysis. As far as women's solidarity is concerned there appears to be an important restriction, that is, even though the play asserts the benefits that can be gained from female solidarity, women should not forget that they are ultimately subordinated to men. Consequently, Mary Pix offers no other solution than to conform to male patterns of behavior. As for the analysis of traditional female stereotypes one may observe that there is an obvious intention on the part of the writer to reformulate them on more realistic grounds. Similarly, there is an intention to display both positive and negative female prototypes. A single, but striking example is the deceit Mrs Rich suffers firstly by Mrs Trickwell and Lady Basset, lastly by Lady Landsworth, Mrs Clerimont and Betty. Therefore, it would be naive to suppose that the play lacks a didactic purpose only because it is written in a humorous tone, as McLaren claims. Its didacticism ranges from women's ultimate subordination to men, their education to conform with social male-oriented patterns of behavior, to men's counselling, guiding female acts. In actual fact, Mary Pix's characters anticipate the bourgeois "angel in the house" of later plays. As regards marriage, the play manifests the inevitable cross-class marriages between the upper middle-class and the lower aristocracy under the appropriate conditions of social background and upbringing.

All these factors are not mutually exclusive and reformulate the consideration of a feminist authorship. Surely, the lesson to be learned is not "radical ideas about the nature of women and their relation between men and women" (Messenger 78) but women's required patterns of behavior to comply with society's needs. To sum up, I maintain that since all the directions given always lead to a predominant male figure, *The Beau Defeated* should not be considered a proto-feministic play.

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