International Journal on Arts, Management and Humanities **3**(1): 53-61(2014)

ISSN No. (Online): 2319 – 5231

The Changing Pattern of the Family in Comedy of Shakespear

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(Received 05 May, 2014 Accepted 30 May, 2014)

The treatment of the relationship between parents and children in Restoration comedy offers a sharp contrast to that of Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's attempt was to reconcile the points of view of parents and children. There were, of course, conflicts - sometimes leading to tragedy - but Shakespeare's consistent. Attempt was to restore the affection between parents and children and thus to work for family solidarity. In Restoration drama, the position is completely changed. The comedy of the period especial1y, espouses the point of view of youth, and by and large treats the old with contempt.

The writers of 'conduct-books' in the period were still as conservative in their outlook as their predecessors in tile earlier period. They preached total obedience to parents in all matters, and especially in the matter of marriage. In The Whole Duty of Man –a very popular moral guide of the period- we are told: 'of all the acts of disobedience, that of marrying against the consent of the Parents is one of the highest. Children are soured the goods, the Possessions of the Parent, that they cannot,. Without a kind of theft, give away themselves without the allowance of those that have the right in them' (p.291).The maxim um concession that the moralists made was that both parents and children be allowed the right of veto in the choice DC a spouse. We may notice that evens this is quite an advance on the position taken by King James I when he declared that 'parents may forbid their children an unfit marriage, but they may not force their consciences to a fit.' King James seems to give the right of veto only to the. Parents, though he does reject forced marriages. Mary Astell was wholly dissatisfied with the position of daughters in the seventeenth century and complained in: Some Reflections on Marriage that the power of veto granted to a daughter hardly gave her the right to choose a husband: 'all that is allowed her is to Refuse or Accept what is offered.' But even this right placed her in a much happier position than her counterpart in the Elizabethan age...

Whatever the limitations of Restoration comedy, it is only fair to say that this comedy does make a spirited attempt to challenge orthodox views on the question of the children's right to choose their spouses. In Shakespearean comedy daughters did finally slackened in marrying the men of their choice, but we should not forget that in Shakespeare's world parental authority was a fact of light, and children were expected not to ignore it.

One of typical situations occurs in The Winter's Tale when Flolzetis about to offer his hand to Perdita in a formal 'contract' before witnesses. Florizel's father, Polixenes, who is in disguise, feels compelled to intervene at this stage and asks Florizel whether he has a farther. When Florizel replies in the affirmative, he asks him whether he knows about his proposed marriage. When Florize! Says: 'He neither does nor shall' (IV.iv.385), Polixenes replies:

Methinks a father
Is at the nuptial of his son a guest
That best becomes the table.

Moreover, the mere fact that most comedies in the period often present the conflict between parents and children over love and marriage as their most prominent theme, must surely have some social significance.

The assertion by children of their right to choose their spouses must have been encouraged by the relaxed cultural climate of the period. How else can we explain the sudden decline - and almost disappearance - of the flogging of children both at school and at home after 1660? Stone's finding is that 'Flogging at the universities certainly died out altogether after 1660s- the last known case at Cambridge was in 1667.'43 Much before Locke came to condemn logging and all other kinds of physical punishment given to children, an anonymous pamphlet of 1669 put these words into the mouth of boys: 'our sufferings are of that nature as makes our schools to be not merely houses of correction, but of prostitution, in this vile way of castigation in lies, wherein our secret pans ... must be the anvil exposed to the immodest and filthy blows of the smiter.

It seems strange that the question of corporal punishment in schools should have been raised in this somewhat indi¬rect .way by some of the contemporary writers. But even this showed a new awareness of the role of children in families. Most Puritan homes clearly believed that it was necessary to break the spirit of rebellion in the child by inflicting physical punishment, and thereby making him a suitable Christian. This naturally meant harsh treatment, often leading to physical torture. After the Restoration the situation seems to have changed quite radically, and people start frowning upon such treatment.

It seems clear that many parents in the later seventeenth century started showing greater concern for their children's welfare. One effect of this seems to have been a new tendency amongst affluent patents to withdraw their children from school and to educate them at home. There may also have been other reasons for this development. Stone, for instance, has said that the 'main cause for the withdrawal of the elite from the grammar school to the home was the same one as that which caused the withdrawal from the University, namely the fear of moral contamination from other boys, especially boys of lower social status.

The almost brutal treatment meted out to children in many schools must also have been a powerful motive with some parents. In any case, it seems clear that many upper-class parents in the period started taking greater interest in the education of their children. This must have led to a more companionate relationship between parents and children, leading naturally to a greater assertion of independence by children, especially in the matter of the choice of their spouse. During the later years of the century there was the clear advice of John Locke to his contemporaries: 'he that would have his Son have a Respect for him, and his Orders, must himself have a great Reverence for his Son.

The kind of affectionate relationship recommended by Locke, however, reflected the thinking of the rising middle classes after 1688 and has hardly much relevance for the restored aristocracy after 1660. It is this aristocracy which set the tone of Restoration comedy. In their case the assertion of individuality by children tended not to cement but to disrupt family solidarity. Indeed the younger generation of this class was clearly in open rebellion against the older generation, and it is this rebellion that is depicted in Restoration comedy. This comedy is essentially subversives of conventional moral values, and shows youth in revolt against all traditional modes of behavior. Though Congreve's The Old Bachelor comes very late in the period, its first few lines reflect most accurately the temper of the younger generation of the earlier period: 'Come, come, leave business to idlers, and wisdom to fools; they have need of 'me: wit, be my faculty, and pleasure my occupation; and let Father Time shake his glass. Let low and earthly souls grovel till they have worked themselves six foot deep into a grave. Business is not my element I roll in higher orb.' Bellmour, the speaker of these lines, rejects more than he mentions. He not only rejects II that made England great in the two succeeding centuries, but also all that makes for a civilized life. Congreve did not, of course, accept BeIImour as a model. His own Mirabel (in The Way of the World) would have found him boring, and MiIIamant might have taken him for a distend cousin of Anthony Witwoud.

The attitude of young men like Bellmour - and the havoc that they can play with normal social life - is perhaps best seen in Thackeray's comments on Congreve:

Fathers, husbands, usurers are the foes these champions contend with. They are merciless in old age, invariably, and an old man plays the part in the dramas which the wicked enchanter or the great

blundering giant performs in the chivalry tales, who threatens and grumbles and resists _ a huge stupid obstacle always overcome by the knight. It is an old man with a money-box: Sir Belmour his son or nephew spends his money and laughs at him. It is an old man with a young wife whom he locks up: Sir Mirabel robs him of his wife, trips up his gouty old heels, and leaves the old hunks. The old fool, what business has he to hoard his money, or to lock up blushing eighteen? Money is for youth, love is for youth, away with the old people.

When Mirabel is sixty, having of course divorced the first. Lady Millarnant, and married his friend Forecourt's granddaughter out of the nursery - it will be his turn and young Belmour will make a fool of him.Thackeray is, of course: wrong about Mirabel, but his general point about the attitude of the young towards the old is well made.

In a situation where most marriages are arranged, conflict between parents and children is inevitable. In this period the situation becomes particularly. Difficult owing to the declining fortunes of the aristocracy and the landed gentry. The Restoration was only a political arrangement bringing no appreciable economic advantage to members of this class. In such a situation, parents are naturally anxious to improve the status of their family, or to prevent its decline, by a prudently arranged marriage, in total disregard of their child's happiness. Indeed if any child demanded that his or her wishes be consulted, parents are often outraged.

Perhaps the most notorious example of' a father planning to push .his daughter into a hellish marriage purely for reasons of Personal gain, occurs in Vanbrugh's Aesop. Aesop is old and ugly but he is the prince's favorite and so the father, Learchus, Govemer of Cyzicus, wants to exploit the match to achieve a higher position for himself. His daughter makes it dear that she does not accept Aesop as a husband but the father is determined) that she should not only marry him but also love him. His atti¬tude is best expressed here: 'we wise parents usually weigh our children's happiness in the scale of our own indignations'(I.e.). He is also confident that his daughter will obey him: 'my daugh¬ter will be governed; she's bred up to obedience' (I.e.). Since the daughter is not able to oppose the designs of her father stoutly, her cause is taken up by her nurse, Doris. She reminds the father that such marriages lead inevitably to adultery. This, however, .stings the 'father and the following conversation takes place between them:

LUR: How, strumpet! Would anything be able to debauch my daughterly DOR: Your daughter? Yes, your daughter, and myself into the bargain: a woman's but a woman; and I'll lay a hundred pound on nature's side. Come, sir, few words dispatch business. Let who will be the wife of Aesop,

She's a fool, or he's a cuckold. But you'll never have a true notion of this matter till you suppose yourself in your daughter's place. As thus: You are a pretty, software, wishing young lady: I'm a straight, proper, handsome, vigorous, young fellow. You have a peevish, positive, covetous, old father, and he forces you to marry a little, lean, crooked, dry, sapless husband. This husband's gone abroad. You are left at home. I make you a visit; find you all alone; pulls to the door; the devil comes in at the window.

The daughter, of course, escapes this fate owing to Aesop's generosity, for he has only been testing the father. He arranges her marriage with the man she loves and denounces the father:

Who's such a tyrant o'er his children.

To sacrifice their peace to his ambition.

The point that Vanbrugh - and indeed Restoration comedy in geranial makes is that daughters are perfectly justified in rebel¬ling against such parents. Not to do so would, in fact, be 'one continued Sin' (MrsBehn's The Town-Fop, II!i).

There is another very interesting reason in this period why children should rebel against their parents' wishes on the issue of marriage. Arranged marriages were coming under attack owing to a special feature of the new feminine culture emerging in the later seventeenth century. Women were becoming much more conscious of their figures as they were realizing that personal beauty and deportment played no mean part in the marriage market. If this were not so, playwrights and others - from Ethe¬rege to Addison - would not have found women's fashions such an interesting subject for ridicule. Etherege puts this satirical description in the mouth of Medley in The Man of Mode:

Then there is the Art of Affectation, written by a late beauty of quality, teaching you how to draw up your breasts, stretch up your neck, to thrust out your breech, to play with your head, to toss up your nose, to

bite your lips, to turn up your eyes, to speak in a silly soft ton~ of a voice, and use all the foolish French words that will infallibly make your person and conversation charming, with a short apology at the latter end, in the behalf of young ladies, who notoriously wash, and paint, though they have naturally good complexions. (H,i)

Daughters fed on treatises like the Art of Affectation - we cannot be too sure that Harriet herself had not mastered some of these¬ were not likely to be deterred from insisting 'on the personal cho¬ice of a spouse. Harriet herself is an excellent example of this kind of assertive daughter. She has no father, and her mother is not very difficult to handle. But the point to note about he's is her declaration: 'Shall I be paid down by a covetous parent for a purchase? I need no land; no, I'll lay myself out all in love' (III.i). Such women could be fully depended upon to find some way to assert their independence.

The protest of children against parental authority on the issue of marriage is such a common theme in the contemporary drama that it is perhaps best to choose only a few examples. A typical example happens to be Thomas Porter's The French Conjuror (1678). Porter's heroine, Clorinia, wishes to marry her lover, Dorido. In order to save himself a portion, however, her father Avaritia intends to send her off to a nunnery. There is only one course available to her and this is how her maid, Scintillia, per¬suades her to take it:

Madam, Love was never subject to any law, nor did ever call to its counsel Duly or Reason; and if so, why should you bring your Obedience to a dealing old Father, in competition with the love and preservation of Yourself and Dorido? Let the sacred knot be tied, Madam, and then farewell air dispute. Whether would you sacrifice yourself to a peevish old Father, or make yourself happy in accomplished loving Husband" Come, be rued be me; steer the nearer course to your bliss.

The heroine gratefully accepts the advice and enters into a clan¬destine marriage.

This conflict between parental wish and the child's urge for personal fulfillment is seen at its best in Wycherley's The Gentle¬man Dancing-Master' (1673). Hippolita is a prisoner in her father's house and we hear her protest in the very first scene: 'To confine a Woman just in her rambling Age take away her liberty at the very time she should use it barbarous Aunt! Unnatural Father!' She talks of her conflict with her aunt as between 'crabbed age and Youth' (Li) and disagrees with her on almost every point, more particularly in her attitude to contemporary culture. The aunt regards fashionable society as dangerous for young girls and warns her niece of 'the fatal Liberty of this mas¬querading Age'. The niece, however, finds it 'a pleasant-well-bred-complacent-free-frolic-good-natured pretty Age.' (Ij).

Hippolita's father wants her to marry her foolish cousin, a rich city-heir, but she is determined not to accept his choice. 'Fathers seldom choose well', she declares to her maid I will no more take my Father's choice in a Husband, than I would in a Gown or a Suit of Knots' (Li). It is Clearly an indicator of the temper of the younger generation when we find another girl on the English stage in the same year, Hillarie in Ravens croft's The Careless Lovers (1673), making a telling retort to her uncle: 'Do you think, Uncle, I haunt as much Wit to choose a Husband as you?' Wycher¬ley is a much more consistent champion of the right of children to choose their spouses, and he therefore condemns contemporary mercenary marriages in the sharpest possible language. In The Gentleman Dancing-Master itself, he attacks 'the obstinacy and covetousness of Parents' (Li) who marry off their daughters for their jointure:

For She whom Jointure can obtain-
To let a Fop her Bed enjoy,
Is but a lawful Wench for gain.

Such marriages never prosper, and Hippolita is perfectly justified. in saying that in such cases, the daughter exchanges her father's 'slavery' for her husband's (1I.i). Hippolita's clandestine marriage with the man of her choice shows her rejection of the mercenary and sordid values of her society.

The play ends with this couplet spoken by Hippolita:

When Children marry, Parents should obey,
Since Love claims more Obedience far than they.

In at least three of his plays Wycherley's main concern seems to be the conduct of parents and its impact on the conduct of children. In his first play, Love in a Wood, he shows us the consequences of a father locking up his daughter. Gripe - a 'seemingly precise, but a covetous, lecherous, old Usurer of the City', as

the list of characters describes him - forbids Dapperwit, the man his daughter loves, from entering his house. The effect of this treatment is just the opposite of what is intended. The daughter meets him secretly and ultimately leaves home and marries him; Dapper wit is hardly an ideal husband but, as she confesses, because of her father's 'hard usage' of her, and 'to avoid slavery under him', she had agreed to 'stoop to [Dapper wit's] yoke' Perhaps she does not know that her marriage with Dapperwit can become a real yoke. After all he is marrying her largely for her father's money and in case her father himself marries Lucy, as he has threatened, she may lose her importance in dapper wit's eyes. And if it is also true, as she confesses to her father, that she is 'six Months gone with Child' (V), then what choice has she? But that does not seem to concern anyone. The point that Wycherley makes is that a healthy approach to sex and marriage can develop only when parents trust their children and give them the-freedom to choose their spouses. Where they deny them these rights, they run.

The parents of Margery in The Country Wife have wrecked her life by pushing her into a mercenary marriage with Pine wife, a lecherous old man of London. Pinch wife, who could 'never keep a Whore to [him] self' (I), believes that the only Margery faithful to him is to keep her under lock and key. So he treats herblike a prisoner and Margery becomes a 'sullen Bird in a cage' (III). We know what happens to this marriage, but the best comment on the situation comes from Pinch wife's sister, Althea: 'Brother, you are my only Censurer; and the honor of your Fam¬ily shall sooner suffer in your Wife there, than in me, though I take the innocent liberty of the Town' (II).

In the end, we find Althea covering up for Margery (for whom she has sympathy): 'Come Brother your Wife is yet innocent you see, but have a case of too strong an imagination .... Women and Fortune are honest still to those that trust 'me' (V). Lucy's comment is equally perti¬nent: 'And any wild thing grows but the more fierce and hungry for being kept up, and more dangerous to the Keeper' (V). Althea calls Lucy's statement 'a doctrine far all Husbands' (V). It is surely also a doctrine for all parents.

Another playwright with a similar doctrine to preach is MrsBehn. Unfortunately, critics have tended to dismiss her plays as a compound of indecency and farce, and have failed to give her credit: for highlighting some of the social evils of her times; there-is no doubt that being a woman she is more acutely conscious of the crisis that daughters and wives face in her society than most of her contemporaries. She consistently condemns parents and guardians who force their children or wards to marry against their wishes. The theme of her first play, The Forc'd Marriage (1671), continues to haunt her almost throughout her career. The heroine of one of her later plays, The Lucky Chance (1687), laments:

0, how fatal are forced Marriages!
How many Ruins one such Match pulls on!
Had I but kept my Sacred Vow to Gayman,
How happy had I been - how prosperous he!
Whilst now I languish in a loathed embrace,
Pine out my• life with Age-consumptions, coughs.

It is clear that, it is the mercenary and often totally understanding attitude of parents and guardians which is respon¬sible for such' marriages. There is, for instance, the case of Bellmour, the nephew of Lord Plotwell, in The Town-Fop (1677). Lord Plotwell wants Bellmour to marry Diana, his niece. But Bellmour is already 'contracted to Celinda'. He pleads with his uncle that he may be allowed to marry Celinda:

Oh pity me, my Lord, pity my Youth;
It is no Beggar, not one basely born,
That. I have given my Heart to, but a Maid,
Who's Birth, who's Beauty, and whose. Education
Merits the best of Men.

But the uncle is not prepared to hear his pleas and threatens: 'Very fine! Where is the Priest that durst dispose of you without my Order? Sirrah, you are my Slave - at least your whole Estate is at my mercy - and besides, I'll charge with an Action of 5000 £ for your ten Years Maintenance: Do you know that this

is in my power too?' (II.iii). the nephew's revolt is natural in such cir¬cumstances, though in the process Diana suffers most.

There is another Diana, a daughter in The Lucky Chance (1687), who revolts against a tyrannical father and speaks the following couplet before she leaves his house to enter into a sandstone marriage with Bredwell, a 'Prentice' to him:

Father farewell - if you dislike my course,
Blame the old rigid Customs of your Force.

These 'rigid customs' are again attacked in The Rover (1677). Florinda does not want to marry a man who has been chosen for her by her father. When her brother tries to pursuade her to accept their father's choice, she tells him: 'I hate Vincentia, and I would not have a Man so dear to me as my Brother follow the ill Cus¬toms of our Country, and make a Slave of his Sister' (Li). Her younger sister, Hellena, is bolder still and encourages her to rebel against both father and brother. Their father is away but their brother is in the house and Florinda is nervous. But Hellena tells her: 'We'll outwit twenty Brothers if you'll be ruled by me' (I.i). In the end both sisters marry the men of their choice.

Almost everywhere in MrsBehn's plays, daughters take a stand, and though they do not always succeed and there is much suffer¬ing, the point made very well by the playwright is that this is a problem that society must resolve to prevent women leading a life of adultery. Most marriages in the period were arranged mar¬riages, as we are told by Clarinda in The Dutch Lover (1673):

But as it most times happens
We marry where our Parents like, not we.

0ften these are mercenary marriages. Hence children are forced to protest. This is what a daughter says in The Dutch Lover: 'I am contracted to a Man I never saw, nor I am sure shall not like when I do see, he having more Vice and Folly than his Fortune will excuse, though' a great one; and I had rather die than marry him.

Etherege is not too concerned with the fate of such sons and daughters, and therefore he does not have any specific doctrine to preach regarding the parent-child relationship. He does, how¬ever, believe that children have a right to choose their spouses. The only play where this question is raised is The Man of Mode. Harriet has great affection for her mother - 'a great admirer of the forms and civility of the last age' (1.1) and consequently very conservative in outlook - but, as we have seen, she is determined not to accept an arranged marriage. Moreover, she is intelligent enough to handle her mother tactfully. But we cannot say the same of Young Bellair. His problem could have become quite serious if Etherege had not treated his father, Old Bellair, '" such a pleasant' humor that it removes any sense of threat from¬ him. Old Bellair, we learn, has come to town and has found out that his son is courting 'an idle town flirts with a painted face, a rotten reputation, and a crazy fortune' (II.i.). He has written to him telling him that he has already made a match for him. The Ieper also contains the warning that he should 'resolve to be obedient to his ~will, or expect to be disinherited' (I.i.). Young Be11. is not a song enough character, and when asked by Dorimant and Medley whether he would defy his father and marry Emelia, the woman he loves, all that he is able to resolve to do is 'not to marry at all' (1.1.).

He is also the man who described Romeo and Juliet as poor sacrifices of our enmity.

We way now ask whether the fault was that of the parents alone. We may also ask whether the parents were given a chance to show the depth of their affection. Capulet functioned all along in ignorance. His outbursts may be condemned as they deserve to be would we be affair in saying that in this play Shakespeare is exposing the cruelty and tyranny of the family? Surely he is presenting a complex picture in which many factors contributes to the tragedy including parents and children. The real test of capuletwould has come if he had known the truth. The test never came and he bungled. But Shakespeare has not painted him as a monster. His society would have regarded Capulet as an affectionate though unfortunate father.

The play does however expose one special feature of the patriarchal family. On the whole such a family is in stone’s words a low keyed and unemotional institution. Its chief shortcoming is not the tyranny of parents though that is there but the lack of communication between parents and child ran. Maynard Mack

has summarized the usual attitude of parents as embodied in contemporary domestic advice books keep your distance from your children never makes companions of them set them a good example. He cites Thomas bacon's advice to parents contained in his catechism written in 1560. Laugh not with thy son bacon says lest thou weep with him also and lest thy teeth be set on edge at the last. Give him no liberty in his youth and excuse not his folly. Bow down his neck while he is young hit him on the sides while he is yet but a child lest he wax stubborn and give no force of thee and so thou shalt have heaviness of soul. For comparison Mack mentions the experience of Lady Jane grey who confided to roger Atcham when she was fifteen.

When I am in the presence either of father or mother whether I speak keep silence sit stand or go eaten drinker be Marie or sad be sowing playing dunging or doing any things else I must do it as it were in such weight measure and number even so as god made the world or else I am so sharply taunted so threatened yea present lie some tie mess with pinches nipples and bobbies and other ways which I will not name for the honor I bear them so without measure disordered that I think myself in hell.

The plays of Shakespeare do not of course paint such a harsh picture but there is no doubt that in them the lack of intimacy between parents and children persists. It is after all not an accident that lady Capulet does not even remember the age of Juliet. Nor is it surprising that in a moment of crisis Juliet turned to her nurse and not to her mother. The father and the mother however concerned the y might otherwise be about her welfare have never cared to understand her as a person. She is their only heir and it is their duty to find a suitable husband for her. But beyond this they seem to have no other interest in her. In such a situation a daughter cannot have sufficient courage to speak her mind. So she becomes decretive and feels that it is safer to deceive them. She is the product of a culture where however courageous daughters may otherwise be the presence of parents is intimidating or at least inhibiting.

Nothing could have better established the absurdity of yoking Anne and slender together then this sense. Shakespeare does not have demoralize it is enough for him to show them together. Master slender says elsewhere:

I will marry her sir at your request but if there be no great love in the beginning yet heaven may decrease it upon better acquaintance when we are married and have more occasions to know one another. I hope upon familiarity will grow more contempt. But if you say marry her. I will marry her that I am freely dissolved and dissolutely.

If we forgive his slips of language even welsh parson Evans catches one slips when he says the word should be restoration and not dissolutely what slender says was happening in Shakespeare age on a large scale. In Shakespeare plays however such marriages are consistently rejected.

The distinguishing feature of Shakespeare's plays in that even when the daughter rejects the arranged marriage she never gives us the impression of open against her father or of violating the scares bond that exists between parents and children. It is the fathers who are not willing to tolerate even the slightest disobedience from their daughters. In a society family honor or interest is so important that the happiness of children is of no consequence. Shakespeare does of course try to soften the harshness of a society but the fact remains that fathers in his plays do not find it easy to treat their children as individual with minds of their own.

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