

An Approach To Women's Social Situation in Seventeenth-Century England.

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El principal objetivo del presente artículo está relacionado con el papel y la posición social desempeñados por las mujeres inglesas a principios del siglo XVII. Para dicho análisis hemos recogido una serie de ejemplos de la obra *Patient Grissill* (c. 1599) escrita por Thomas Dekker. El corpus a considerar contiene un vocabulario específico formado por palabras y expresiones pertenecientes a Grissill, la protagonista de la obra, y que la caracterizan como una mujer que sufre una situación injusta y cruel dependiendo de los roles sociales adoptados. De entre éstos, destacan los de esposa y madre que, por otra parte, resumen perfectamente la situación social de la mujer en el periodo a estudiar. Menos significativos parecen los roles de hija y hermana aunque, ciertamente, reflejan el patriarcalismo de esta época. Trataremos, pues, de establecer una comparación entre los papeles adoptados por nuestra protagonista y los desempeñados por sus semejantes en la vida real en la Inglaterra del siglo XVII.

0. Introduction

The issue of the present paper aims at describing feminine roles and position in early seventeenth-century England. The analysis of this situation will be based on a corpus taken from the play *Patient Grissil* (c. 1599) by Thomas Dekker. Such corpus contains a special vocabulary that characterizes Grissil as a woman who suffers an unjust and cruel situation. Her miseries derive from the roles she undertakes: mother, wife and daughter. The point is to compare these roles with the ones played by contemporary females. In a word, our main concern will be to depict the situation of married women who, in addition, perform their part as mothers.

1. Analysis of Data

For the analysis of the corpus, only Grissil's own speech has been considered. This is so because our main objective would be to discover women's subjective perception of their own misfortune. Thus, we have a total number of 76 examples, each one of them assigned to a specific role played by our protagonist:

Table 1

ROLE	NUMBER OF EXAMPLES	PERCENTAGE
Sister	8	10,5%
Mother	30	39,4%
Wife	25	32,8%
Social Self	5	6,5%
Daughter	8	10,5%

From the results above it can be inferred that the most important reason for Grissil's miseries directly relates to her roles as mother and wife. Both of them amount to a 39.4% and a 32.8% respectively.

Less significant are the roles as daughter and sister both representing a 10.5%. Nevertheless, they reflect a patriarchal society in which the children owed obedience to the father.

Finally, only a 6.5% of the examples correspond to Grissil's social self determined by her low condition when compared with the higher status of her husband, the Marquesse.

Summing up, Grissil's personality and character are mainly based on the roles she adopts throughout the play. We do not find any instances of Grissil speaking, i.e.: without undertaking any role. Therefore, we may conclude that she must perform a role in order to live, although her life is full of misery, pain and humiliation. As King points out: « Women, with very few exceptions, were categorized in terms of their relations to the female ideal of virginity and nightmare of sexuality » (1991:23). So male roles were very different from female ones. Whereas men were classified into those who fought, prayed and worked women were: mothers,

nuns, wives or widows and their identity depended on the role they assumed. Unfortunately, and as we will see later on, Renaissance women lacked social protagonism no matter how well they performed their parts either inside society or inside their private and domestic environment.

2. Grissil versus Real Women in the XVII century: Marriage and Motherhood

As said before, Grissil's roles will function as the vehicle through which we are going to establish the comparison between her and real females.

Having in mind the predominance of the roles as wife and mother, our topics of discussion now will be marriage and motherhood:

2.1. Grissil as Wife

Marriage in Renaissance England was crucial for a woman. We may say that her identity was not complete until she married. Women were not considered as autonomous beings but rather in relation to a man: the father or the husband. Even their social condition was determined by the status of the male they depended on. In the case we are analysing, unmarried Grissil would be ascribed to a low status (her father's) and would be referred to as woman. After her marriage with the Marquesse she would be termed as *lady*, *gentlewoman* or *noblewoman* according to the classification established by Laurence (1995).

It seems to be accepted by most of the authors (among them Laurence (1995) and Macfarlane (1987)) that there was a considerable freedom of choice in the XVII century, especially for low class people. But as Macfarlane himself affirms: « although the consent of the parents was not strictly necessary for marriage, it was the duty of a child to attempt to obtain it» (1987: 132). In our case, Grissil agrees to marry the Marquesse because her father wishes so. To his wish, she answers:

(1) This doth she say,
As her olde Father yeeldes to your *dread*¹ will,
So she her fathers pleasure must fulfill.

Act I, Sc. II

Therefore, it does not seem that Grissil is able to choose her husband freely. On the contrary, as a dutiful and obedient child, she is forced to yield and it is in this way that Grissil conforms to the pattern of her times when women were constantly put under pressure to marry. Additionally, marriage for our protagonist and for females in general, meant a change from one prison (the paternal) to another one (the husband's) thus denying them any trace of autonomy. Both situations (daughter and wife) are in relation to Vigil's following idea:

Y la acción de la colectividad femenina se localiza, sobre todo, en el espacio privado e intradoméstico. Por eso, las mujeres- consideradas como grupo- sólo pueden aparecer en la Historia si ésta es abordada desde la perspectiva de la vida cotidiana. (1986: 2).

Another impediment for marriage was the difference in social status. At that time, it was advisable to marry equally. However, the Marquesse does not follow the advice and chooses Grissil who belongs to a lower social group. Our protagonist is conscious of her humble condition when she addresses the Marquesse in the following way:

(2) Oh my gracious Lord,
Humble not your higher state to *my lowe birth*,
 Who am not worthy to be held *your slave*,
 Much lesse your wife.

Act I, Sc. II

Women belonging to lower classes had little chance of advancing themselves socially. One of these few opportunities was to marry higher. Consequently, one might think that Grissil would be very lucky marrying the Marquesse. Nevertheless, her low origin will be repeatedly stressed by her husband to make our protagonist feel inferior and humiliated. In the following example, the Marquesse has decided to cast Grissil's father and brother out of the Court on the grounds that his subjects are much offended to see poor people raised to such a favourable position. This is what Grissil replies:

(3) Oh *cast them downe*,
And send *poore Grissill poorely home* again,
High Cedars fall, when lowe shrubs safe remaine.

Act II, Sc. II

Although the idea of companionate marriage, rather than forced, was present in the society, it did not mean that both the rights and duties of husband and wife were equal : First, and above all, a wife owed *obedience* to her husband:

That love is the basis of marriage is shown by the marriage contract itself : ‘ the husband first promises to love his wife, before she promises to obey him : and consequently as his love is the condition of her obedience ‘

(Macfarlane, 1987: 176).

A closer reading seems to suggest that whereas men were supposed to love their wives, women were expected to obey their husbands. Therefore, one might conclude that female love inside marriage was considered as something secondary. Anyway, Grissil perfectly performs the role of the obedient wife, even when she is more vexed and troubled by her husband like in the following example:

(4) Friend you *doe me wrong*,
To let me holde my Lord in wrath so long,
Ile *kneele* and tye them.

Act II, Sc. II

Here, the Marquesse orders Grissil to kneel and tie one of his servant's shoes. She obeys not only because she is his wife but also because Grissil's relationship to him is very similar to the one existing between master and servant.

Again according to Macfarlane the duty of a husband was : « not to be churlish and cruel toward her, but quiet, gentle, modest, patient, long-suffering, kind and soft in all his behaviour toward her.» (1987: 182).

Ironically, in the play we are dealing with, all these virtues are embodied in Grissil. It is clear then that the Marquesse unfulfills his duties as husband. The great majority of contemporary writers² claimed that the most outstanding virtues in a wife should be obedience and submission. Silence was another important quality that an English gentlewoman must observe: « Silence in a woman is a moving rhetoric, winning most, when in words it woeth last » (Aughterson, 1995: 84). It is very interesting the fact that, in the early XVII century, to speak in order to complain was a punishable offence for a woman. As Belsey states: « But for women to speak is to threaten the system of differences which gives meaning to patriarchy.» (1985: 191). In the play Grissil is threatened by the Marquesse with wearing a bridle. This instrument had a metal gag which restrained the tongue and was used to punish women accused of complaining too much. Ducking in water was another useful practice to keep them silent. Showing no fear to all these tortures, our protagonist perfectly embodies the virtue of silence and, as a proof of obedience, she would accept being punished in such a way. Thus, Grissil answers to the threat:

(5) And from your *humble servant* when you please

Act II, Sc. II

On the one hand, one might have thought that husbands' cruelty in general and, in our case, the Marquesse's, could be avoided by resorting to divorce. The problem was that the Church of England did not recognize it. Although separation was possible, any remarriage was considered illegal. The *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* allowed divorce from 1552 to 1602. One of the legal reasons was cruelty. So, having in mind that *Patient Grissil* was written in 1599 and that the Marquesse was a cruel husband, we may conclude that it was possible for her to divorce. In 1603 the pre-1552 position was reinstated and marriage was again indissoluble. On the other hand, divorce was a very expensive process and, most of the times, mothers could not claim access to their children. This is what happens to Grissil:

(6) Must I then be *divorc'd*? And loose this treasure,
I must and am content, since tis his pleasure,

Act IV, Sc. II

Our protagonist has returned to her father's, having been cast out by the Marquesse. She is poor again and unable to put up with the costs of a divorce. Although he has ordered that the children should be taken away, Grissil accepts separation, yielding, in this way, to her husband's decision. Her choice is well defined in Belsey's words : « there was no remedy but patience for marital disharmony and discontent.» (1985: 40).

2.2. Grissil as Mother

Women's readiness to become mothers was as important as being a good wife. Lack of children was cause for concern and most of the times it was attributed to female infertility. Pregnancy was considered as a blessing but not as a pure one. Twenty-eight days after birth, women were expected to attend church in order to be purified. Unmarried mothers were threatened with the refusal to church them unless they divulged the name of the father. Sometimes they underwent punishment in front of the congregation. Anyway, illegitimacy was uncommon in the XVII century. Desperate measures were also taken especially by unmarried or poor mothers overburdened with children. Laurence (1995) and Macfarlane (1987) mention some practices like abortion, infanticides and abandon.

Despite this situation, children were welcomed, being mothers more inclined than fathers to express pleasure. In contrast, many women feared pregnancy due to the high risk of death in childbirth.

Mothers were responsible for the education of her sons and daughters until they had reached seven years of age. In addition to all said so far, the fact that many children were sent away as servants or apprentices at twelve or thirteen has led many authors such as Lawrence Stone³ to think that parents did not really care too much about their children. Nevertheless, it seems that, generally speaking, seventeenth century English fathers and mothers did feel love and tenderness towards their little ones. This idea of the affectionate family is also supported by Laurence:

The early age at which children left home was evidence not of lack of affection, but of a belief that the family was a network of obligations, of which children were as much a part as adults. (1995: 91).

High infant mortality does not diminish parents' feelings, but it encourages the development of resignation and the acceptance of death, qualities which may be confused with lack of affection. (1995:92).

Thus, the role of the affectionate mother is perfectly performed by Grissil. We must not forget that the major part of her miseries derives from the deep love she feels towards her children. For instance, when her husband takes them away, she claims :

(7) That which *strikes blinde mine eyes,*
 Makes my heart bleede

Act IV, Sc. II

More important than her own sorrow is the possibility that the babies might be separated from their mother:

(8) Why must my babes *beare* this ungentle doome

Act IV, Sc. II

or that they might suffer any kind of harm. With this fear in mind, she addresses Mario, one of the Marquesse's courtiers, in the following way:

(9) You cannot plaie the nurse, your *horred eyes*
 Will *fright* my little ones, and *make them crie*

Act IV, Sc. I

Grissil's husband even denies that she is the babies' mother. It is another blow for her, who sees how her condition is now lowered to that of a simple nurse :

(10) I am but their *poore nurse* I must confesse,
 Alas let not a nurse be *pittillesse*.

Act IV, Sc. I

Another reason for Grissil's concern relates to the habit of putting high born children to wet-nurses. Renaissance writers and physicians⁴ recommended breast-feeding and it was thought that babies should be fed by their own mothers. Contrary to the advice, and according to King (1991), ladies usually neglected their natural duty. As De Maio affirms: « La costumbre del ama de cría fue considerada por los humanistas y por la Iglesia, si no como pecado, ciertamente como omisión de la maternidad. » (1988: 115). But listening to her motherly instincts, Grissil insists on feeding her own children; on the one hand, because she follows a popular habit among women belonging to lower classes (from which Grissil herself comes) and on the other hand, because she perfectly plays the role of the loving and caring mother. It is for this reason that we have to understand Grissil's despair when she is not allowed to nurse her own babies. Then, she implores:

(11) I prithee let my *teares*, let my *bow'd knees*,
Bend thy obdurate hart, see heer's a fountaine,
Which heauen into theis Alablaster bowles,
Instil'd to nourish them : man theyle *crie*,
And blame thee that this ronnes so lavishly,
Heres milke for both my babes, two breasts for two.

Act IV, Sc. I

As we can see, Grissil is also conscious that there is no better milk for her son and daughter than her own one. She even fears that her suffering may have a negative effect on her capacity to feed the children:

(12) (...), if thou dost beare them hence,
My *angrie breasts* will swell, and as *mine eyes*
Lets fall salt drops, with these *white Necter teares*,
They will be mixt : this sweet will then be brine,
Theyle *crie*, Ile *chide* and say the sinne is thine.

Act IV, Sc. I

Summing up, we may characterize our protagonist as a most affectionate and tender mother. In fact, all the mothers in Renaissance England were supposed to possess these same virtues.

3. Conclusions

First, I would like to point out that, although the character of Grissil may be considered as an archetype and the play, as Belsey (1985) suggests, was probably addressed to a misogynistic audience, she broadly embodies feminine roles in the England of the early seventeenth century. Her patience and resistance to misfortune represent the apogee of feminine achievement : she is an obedient wife, a caring mother and a dutiful daughter. In a word, Grissil represents those virtues that society expects from her as a woman and, what is more important, she incarnates the ideal of a Renaissance wife : silent, chaste, obedient and patient. Grissil would have to be taken as an example to be followed by contemporary women, who, on the whole, were considered either as devils or saints. It is the triumph of virtue (represented by Grissil) over tyranny (symbolised by the Marquesse). Of course, not all the females were ready to endure such a miserable situation : there were widows, single women, witches and even wives who were found guilty of murdering their husbands. But they are marginal people who might have become the object of another kind of research.

Secondly, English society at that time could be defined as patriarchal considering the establishment of a set of relations between those who have the authority (husband, father and master) and those who must obey (wife, children and servant, respectively). The hierarchy just mentioned leads us to the problem of female identity : In general, women's public speaking was forbidden. If they dared to complain, they would probably have to undergo punishment. In this way, women played an insignificant part within the family, being more servants than partners. As said before and through the analysis of Grissil's character, we may conclude that marriage was the only institution which actually provided females with a certain position inside the family and the society. Consequently, the roles of mother, wife and daughter constituted the essence of their identity.

Finally, a riddle written in 1733 which can also be applied to the period just described, summarizes both Grissil's unfortunate condition and that of those women who might have identified themselves with the same situation:

*How wretched is a woman's fate,
No happy change her fortune knows;
Subject to man in every state
How can she then be free from woes?* (Laurence, 1995: 275)

NOTES

1. The words in italics stand for the examples used for the analysis of female roles

2. Descriptions of virtues which a good wife was supposed to have can be found in writings of contemporary authors like Samuel Rowlands, Richard Brathwait, William Whateley, etc. See Aughterson, K. (1995)

3. This author's opinion is mentioned by Laurence (1995: 90).

4. See Erasmus, D. 1671: *The Woman in Childbed* and Clinton, E. 1622: *The Countess of Lincoln's Nursery* both in Aughterson, K. (1995: 105- 116).

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