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THE FEMININE MIND IN CHARLOTTE SMITH'S *DESMOND* (1792)

Abstract

Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806), an English poet and novelist, published her novel *Desmond* in three volumes in 1792, a time of great political and social instability.

Contrary to the mainstream idea that women had no business with politics, Smith writes on this occasion an Epistolary novel with a political purport, in which a series of opinions concerning the different ideologies at the time both in France and in England are offered. Besides this aspect, but always intertwined with it, we have the eponymous hero's generous and disinterested attachment to Geraldine, a married woman whose state of wretchedness, due to an arranged marriage with a dissolute and extravagant husband, is progressively disclosed as the narrative evolves. Cleverly questioning different general aspects related to property, in which the legitimacy of possession is looked into, and transposing them to the level of domesticity, Charlotte Smith presents a heroine who, as Geraldine herself eventually acknowledges, is her husband's property.

How she handles the difficulties she meets with on account of her husband's irresponsible behaviour, of Desmond's «andue» friendship, of her mother's unfeeling harshness, and the education which she has received, are aspects to be examined in this paper. One will see that it is torn between duty and ignominy that Geraldine will poignantly speak of herself, always acting, however, under the banner of propriety.

Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty. And to this selfish principle every nobler one is sacrificed.

Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790)

When, in 1792, Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) published her novel *Desmond* in three volumes, the art of novel writing had already gone a considerable way. Despite the fact that since the death of the Big Four (Richardson, Fielding, Sterne and Smollet), shortly after the middle of the eighteenth-century, novelists had not been, according to many Histories of English Literature, very innovative, and that between the former and Jane

Austen, the period had been one of «undercurrents, not high tides» (Probyn, 1993: 149), the truth is that things had changed quite a lot in as much as women were presented in the narrative.

Novelists proliferated and one of them was Charlotte Smith, who besides being a novelist¹, was also the first poet² in England one could, in retrospect, call Romantic. She is an exception in her time and is a woman who contradicts the accepted cultural divide between men and women. She achieves, towards the close of the century, a substantial critical reputation.

Born into a genteel world, in spite of losing her mother at the age of three, her youth was idyllic and her education the best according to what was thought proper for a girl at the time. At the age of sixteen she was married off to Benjamin Smith, who was to prove a lifelong bane. Her qualities would, however, mark her out as one who would never give up. Continuous strife for survival was always really the issue. She fulfilled for as long as she could bear the «four cardinal functions», as Roy Porter (Porter, 1986: 41) puts it, of a married lady – she obeyed her husband, she was an heir-producing machine, she ran the household and she was ladylike, an ambassadress of grace. But the time came when she could take no more.

After a seemingly perpetual period of her life with her husband, during which she bore him twelve children, joined him in debtors-prison, and had to struggle with his never-ending debts, she managed legal separation without obtaining, however, power to secure her own financial affairs. Out of necessity she began to write to provide for herself and her eight surviving children and eventually became a professional writer.

Contrary to the mainstream idea that women had no business with politics, Smith writes, on this occasion, an epistolary novel with a political purport, in which a series of opinions concerning different ideologies at the time, both in England and in France, are offered. As Walter Allen states, although «much less openly doctrinaire than Bage and Godwin, Mrs Smith was all the same a radical; without in the least distorting her fiction to propaganda ends, she was using it to embody her criticism of society» (Allen, 1991: 97).

Cleverly questioning different general aspects related to property, whereby the legitimacy of possession is looked into, and transposing them to the level of domesticity, Charlotte Smith presents a heroine who, as she herself eventually acknowledges, *is* her husband's property. This second aspect, always intertwined with the first, will introduce the reader to the eponymous hero's generous and seemingly disinterested attachment to Geraldine, a married woman whose state of wretchedness, due to an arranged marriage with Mr Verney, a dissolute and extravagant husband, is progressively disclosed as the narrative evolves.

Charlotte Smith, undoubtedly, turns the table, as far as point of view is concerned. She will now be a woman speaking for both good-hearted and vile

men, besides covertly her sister Fanny, who to an eponymous hero.

She, as we shall see, is the suppressed self, written radically so.

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men, besides covertly speaking for herself through the characters Geraldine and her sister Fanny, who come to the foreground even though the novel is ascribed to an eponymous hero.

She, as we shall see, is going to subtly combine the socialised, if not actually the suppressed self, with one that is in opposition to society without being too radically so.

In disregard to all the innovation she brought about, Charlotte Smith has, in fact, been somewhat insistently underrated, either for the sake of misogyny or because there is a canon to conform to. For whichever reason, her work has been persistently underestimated.

W. L. Renwick, for example, speaks of her saying that «there are few criticisms from which she could be absolved», and, after enumerating them, concludes: «this is the third-rate novel of any age» (Renwick, 1990: 68). Curiously, he did not even succeed in getting the date of *Desmond's* publication right! It is because if statements such as these that I speak in unison with all those who at present endeavour to rehabilitate her to the position which is rightfully hers.

In the novel, the male characters' attitude towards women varies more as a consequence of the nature of their heart, than of their actual upbringing. Montfleuri, Desmond's French friend, for example, had always received the preference of his parents, especially his mother's. After her husband's death, she tried to solve her problems by marrying the eldest and third of her daughters to the first who proposed, and sending the second and youngest of them to a nunnery.

Notwithstanding, after her death, the good nature of Montfleuri's generous heart, led him to remedy the situation as best he could. His open-mindedness in relation to his sisters, and to women in general, made it possible for him to accept the birth of Josephine's illegitimate child to Desmond, on account of her equally wretched marriage, and to rescue his youngest sister from the convent before she took vows.

His marriage to Fanny, which takes place towards the end of the novel, would be for life, now that Mrs Waverly, her mother, had overcome the problem of origin and religion on account of money. *This* was «the idol of her worship» (Smith, III, 1792: 236), as he sarcastically remarks. However, by admitting that «there [were] a good many chances of being reasonably happy with her, at least, for three or four years, and that [was] as much as any body [had] a right to expect» (Smith, III, 1792: 240), he subtly rejects the irrevocability of the vow, when such a vow became burdensome for either.

Desmond, on the other hand, respects Geraldine's marriage from the very start, and gentlemanly conceals his attachment from her. He is, nevertheless, aware of its growth, and feels the effects and consequences it has in his life.

Albeit nurturing a deep concern for society and for a just world, at a certain point, it is only Geraldine that matters. The world was then «divided into only two parts; or rather, to [him], it [was] all blank where Geraldine [was] not» (Smith, II, 1792: 240), and «he would not care if all [of it] were enslaved, so Geraldine was but free» (Smith, III, 1792: 102). His premonition, in the very beginning of that novel, that the time would not be long when Geraldine's feelings for her husband would fade, is confirmed in the end. Geraldine, significantly in French territory, acknowledges that

Being now, however, but too sensible, that whatever share of tenderness my young heart once gave him, he had long since thrown away; and that duty alone bound me to him, I determined to fulfil what seemed to be my destiny – to be a complete martyr to that duty, and to follow whithersoever it led (Smith, III, 1792: 271).

Deeply contrasting with these characters, we have Waverly, Geraldine's brother, who had a mind that could never get itself resolved on anything, and who is the extreme opposite of Montfleuri. He cannot provide for himself, let alone his sisters, even though he remains Mrs Waverly's only hope for the consolidation of her position in society as a «respectable lady».

Verney's behaviour too, is very much in the line of irresponsible men in general. His only ambition is to have the time of his life, and all patriarchal duties are secondary. He had married, as he admits

because I was a green-horn, drawn in by a pretty face, and a fine figure. The old woman, her mother, had the art of Jezebel, and I was a raw boy from College, and fancied it very knowing to marry a girl that all the young fellows of my acquaintance reckoned so confounded handsome; besides, a man must marry at some time or other (Smith, II, 1792: 39-40).

When he was home, which he seldom was, it made no other difference to Geraldine, than that of destroying her peace without promoting her happiness. She was only his wife – of whose understanding he had the most contemptible opinion – and his children, only «her brats» (Smith, II, 1792: 36), better off, all of them, in the nursery. Besides, women were «good for nothing but to make a shew while [they] were young, and to become nurses when [they] were old» (Smith, II, 1792: 32-3).

Mrs Waverly, despite being a woman, who was, as Fanny observed, «just at that period of her life, when the character retains little that is feminine, but a love of trifles, and a redoubled attachment to some one weakness that has long been cherished» (Smith, II, 1792: 184), behaved, and made others behave, in total accordance with the basic assumption which governed relations between the sexes at the time, even if reality proved differently. She, like Mrs Montfleuri had done, gives preference to her son Waverly, in detriment to her daughters.

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Surrounded by cronies, women she believed were sage, (notwithstanding her dislike of women's knowledge), she dearly took their advice. She thus further disfigured her already misshapen mind, and greatly contributed to the increasing distress of her daughters. When not restraining, scolding or reproaching them, and whenever she had to put her mind off any minor preoccupation with her son, she took refuge in tea parties and card games, and pretended Geraldine's misfortune was not her responsibility.

With a brother who thought nothing of them, and a mother who thought of no one but him, Fanny and Geraldine could but feel at a loss, the sole exception being that of having each other to rely on. But even this was eventually narrowed to secret letter writing. As Fanny regretfully remarks:

Alas! if I did not love you, what else should I have to love in the world? My other sister is so much older, that I have always had my affection for her «chastised by fear», and she is now afar off, and time and distance are cruel enemies, even to the ties of blood – My brother! – Alas! does he care for any of us, and is it possible to waste ones affection on apathy and indecision? – My mother! I trust, I venerate and regard her, as my only parent; I think myself indebted to her for the trouble she has taken during my infancy and childhood, and for that portion of regard which she is able to spare me (since I believe the affections are involuntary) from her son; but I have felt too much awe, to be sensible towards her, of that sympathetic and gentle affection which unites me to you (Smith, II, 1792: 142).

Geraldine, too, feels the effects of this rejection, however with redoubled acuteness. Though always observing propriety and never disregarding duty, she had been literally abandoned by her mother, who would refuse to receive her in her house on account of the noise Geraldine's children would make. Besides, Geraldine had failed to follow her husband's orders, and had not asked for her family's permission to do so. If the welfare of her children had anything to do with it, then Geraldine should leave them with someone and go. Her mother would thoughtfully see them «now and then».

Though having often called Fanny's attention to check the «flippancy» with which she often spoke of her mother, once in France, and here again significantly, she will speak of her father, as he was, and of her mother, as she really is, without in the least being disrespectful. Her father, she recalls:

I cannot help recollecting that he was a very Turk in principle, and hardly allowed women any pretensions to souls, or thought them worth more care than he bestowed on his horses, which were to look sleek, and do their paces well (Smith, III, 1792: 133).

Her mother was no better. No sentiments were to be adopted which did not square with the substantial rules of domestic policy. Her daughters were to throw

out encouragement to whomsoever seemed capable of offering a good settlement. And to this idea their minds should conform.

Riches and high birth were ever the most certain recommendations to the favour of my mother – Merit unattended by these advantages, we were always taught to shun; she knew that, unless we were blinded by early prejudice, it would force itself irresistibly on unadulterated minds; and against such impressions she was constantly on her guard (Smith, III, 1792: 133-4).

Geraldine further excuses her mother. She too had been adulterated and her mind did not have the capacity for renewal. This is why the same expression – «to be sensible» – had different meanings for both of them. Notwithstanding, Geraldine realises that it «is not to be imputed to her as an error; her judgement was originally wrong; the fault of the head rather than the heart» (Smith, III, 1792: 136).

Having shifted her bond and her bound, having moved, even if involuntarily, from England to France, Geraldine is able to speak more freely. She is no longer bound by the propriety of her own country, by its articles, some of which, on account of her age and sex, might exempt her from thinking at all. It is in France, that she understands the meaning of citizenship, and proclaims herself a democrat.

Having desperately fought to conform to a socialised self, even if suppressing her own in the process, she eventually availed herself of a state of alienation which was at once one of liberation. And, if this liberation does not seem clear enough due to her insistence on duty, it is because, in fact, mentally debilitated and driven to a state of quasi madness as she was, she still believed that if she acted up to it, she could «always appeal to a judge, who [would] not only acquit, but reward [her]» (Smith, III, 1792: 72).

Fortunately, she had Desmond to rescue her, but we are left with a nagging feeling that there were many women who were equally bargained, both by their husbands and by their family, and had no hero to rescue them. Extreme distress, or even madness, could, in effect, eventually be the only way out.

In relation to Smith's heroines, Stuart Curran observes, «though their virtue may seem too generally insisted on and may appear to surmount only the kinds of tests that are conventional to fiction of the period, it is plain from Smith's concentration on these figures and on the nature of the threats to them that survival is indeed a real issue» (Curran, 1993: XXIII).

Ultimately, it is because «there is Charlotte Smith's decorous and devastating *Desmond* to speak for the times» (Bowstead, 1986: 261), that it has its place in feminist criticism. It is a novel with undeniable importance for the

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¹ *Emmeline* (1788), *Ethelinde* (1789), *Celestina* (1791), *Desmond* (1792), *The Old Manor House* (1793), and five other novels.

² *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Poems*, *The Emigrants*, *Conversations Introducing Poetry*, *Beachy Head and Other Poems*.