Domestic Themes In Thomas Middleton’s Women Beware Women

Leonardo Buonomo

Università di Trieste

The period that spans the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is one of great importance in the history of the basic unity of society, the family. In England, as well as in the rest of Europe, the extended household of feudal origins is gradually replaced by a more compact and circumscribed social group, with the couple as its nucleus (Coward 18-24). Relations between husbands and wives and parents and children become less formal and cold, and the figure of the husband/father strengthens his position of authority. In England the latter phenomenon is in large part the consequence of a cultural campaign that identifies family and State, a concept advertised with particular energy under the reign of James I. Marriage, more and more identified as the foundation of the family, becomes an issue of enormous interest and lies at the centre of political, ecclesiastical and cultural projects. New rules and new standards modify this institution and, with it, the whole of society.

Domestic themes make their appearance in English literature in this period and not only within the restricted field of manuals and treatises; as Don E. Wayne points out in Penshurst (191), the traditional theory that identifies the emergence of the topic of domesticity with the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, can be seriously undermined by a close reading of Renaissance texts. A number of plays written between the end of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century reflect a widespread concern for the interrelation between family life and the preservation of social order and stability. Whether local in setting like the
anonymous Arden of Feversham (c. 1592) and A Warning for Fair Women (c. 1599), or masked with exotic colours like Thomas Middleton’s Women Beware Women (c. 1621), most works of the time illustrate the catastrophic consequences that disharmony within the family (and, particularly, within its conjugal nucleus) can bring. In an article entitled “Alice Arden’s Crime”, Catherine Belsey observes that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries marriage becomes “the site of a paradoxical struggle to create a private realm and to take control of it in the interests of the public good” (84). In such a context, Middleton’s play is of particular interest, as both its main plot and subplot tell stories in which the institution of marriage is degraded and parodied.

In Women Beware Women the union between Bianca and Leantio represents a challenge to authority and social hierarchy. Theirs is a match that jeopardises well-established values and its frailties are all too soon revealed. Censurable according to the moral and legal standards of the time, their elopement does not even seem to be motivated by real passion. From the very outset of the play, Leantio’s words betray his unromantic, philistine nature; for him Bianca is not so much an object of desire as rather a valuable property, a rich prize, a jewel to be “cased up from all men’s eyes” (I. i.170). By associating her so insistently with words such as “jewel”, “treasure”, and “gem”, he de-humanises her, turning her into a “piece of theft” (I.i.43). The ardour which, supposedly, led him to elope with her, heedless of danger and her parents’ wrath, seems to have exhausted itself in the excitement of the enterprise.

In a period in which the debate on marriage often centred on the question of parental authority, Middleton’s emphasis on the immature, almost childish aspects of the personalities of Leantio and Bianca is hardly accidental. As delivered in the first act, Leantio’s self-congratulatory lines are those of a child with a new toy; as for Bianca, her diligent but naive set of good proposals (I.i.125-142) seems to falter at the very first difficulty (Leantio’s departure [I.iii]). The young couple’s disarming blindness to reality is effectively contrasted with the Widow’s [Leantio’s mother] realistic, concrete concerns, which seem to foretell the tragic epilogue of the marriage. But the Widow herself can only cope with the essential, square-cut problems that can be identified through daily experience and that are part of the world she knows. She is however helpless when confronted with the refined, sophisticated games of the court. In line with a profoundly patriarchal culture, Middleton cannot but present a family (the one
formed by Leantio and his mother) devoid of paternal authority and guidance, as being at the mercy of the external world. The first part of the play conveys rather clearly, I believe, the idea that what is outside the front door is essentially hostile. This is made particularly evident by the famous “game-of-chess scene” in II.ii, which is extremely effective, among other things, in the way it makes us sense distinctly that the Widow and Bianca are stepping into enemy territory. Later on, Leantio’s proposed defence against the threat to his household represented by the Duke’s invitation to court, consists in confining Bianca in an even more secluded space. This emphasis on the sense of menace inherent in the outside world, as opposed to the security of the household, bears a curious resemblance to the “wolf-at-the-door” theme in traditional fairy tales. In addition, the image of Bianca locked up in some secret chamber can be seen as a reminiscence of the figure of the princess in the tower.¹

On the one hand, Bianca’s story can be read as a warning to young people (and, particularly, to young women), a cautionary tale on the effects of disobedience to parents. On the other, though, it is possible to find in it a pungent criticism of the inadequacy and uselessness of the kind of education women received at the time. Once out of the golden cage of her parents’ household, Bianca is totally unprepared, innocent of the world. We may assume that, like Isabella and most women of her class, she has been denied access to “real” knowledge, having been furnished instead with those “feminine” accomplishments (dancing, drawing, etc.) that serve exclusively to please a husband.

In Middleton’s England the debate over women’s education was particularly lively.² In their studies of the period, Chilton Latham Powell (161) and Lawrence Stone (137-138) point out that an active propaganda for a better education coexisted awkwardly with the publication of reactionary pamphlets that questioned the reasoning faculties of women. The emergence of the figure of the learned noblewoman (Lady Jane Grey, the daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke, etc.) was counterbalanced by the activities of those theologians and philosophers who still claimed that women were devoid of a soul.³ Women Beware Women does not seem to furnish clear evidence of Middleton’s position on the question, but the characterisation of its female figures plainly reveals the tension surrounding it. We may regard Bianca and Isabella as the product of the typical superficial education that was considered appropriate for most high middle-class and noble young women. As for the Widow and Livia, it is possible to think of
them as representing two extremes: the uneducated housewife and the unusually learned gentlewoman. Through Leantio’s mother the play shows cynically enough that common sense and domestic wisdom alone can do very little in a deeply amoral society. Livia, on the other hand, is the woman who has developed her intellectual powers at the expense of the emotional sphere of her personality. A perverted use of intelligence has made of her an irresponsible scheme-weaver, a cynical puppeteer, utterly indifferent to the effects of her manipulations.

The relationship between Bianca and Leantio presents a number of similarities with that between Alice and Arden in Arden of Feversham, possibly the prototypical domestic tragedy. Commenting on the latter play in Il precario equilibrio (54-55), Sergio Perosa describes Arden as a singularly passive character, always hesitating between indignation and complacency in his response to his wife’s conduct. In the face of her infidelity, he assumes a sort of fatalistic attitude and is almost fascinated by her boldness. “Fatalistic” is an adjective which, I believe, can also be used to describe Leantio’s attitude during and after the banquet at Livia’s house. Confronted with the devastating effect that the world of the court has had on his marriage, Leantio seems to let go, to surrender to an iniquitous reality (“Here stands the poor thief now that stole the treasure, and he's not thought on” III.ii.91-92). As Roma Gill points out in her introduction to the Ernest Benn edition of the play, “the captainship of the fort, the fine clothes, and at last his death are all received passively, with a mixture of surprise and resentment” (xx). The sophisticated and cynical Bianca we encounter after Act II has some of Alice’s implacable wilfulness and determination, as her plan to kill the Cardinal amply demonstrates. For both women murder is not simply the swiftest way to get rid of an obstacle on their path, but represents also a means to take the initiative, to abandon the subordinated position that society has reserved for them. Coming from a condition of subjection, they see in their affairs with—respectively—the Duke and Mosby, an expression (perhaps a dream) of independence and free choice. Both plays, however, give us plenty of hints that a hypothetical future life with their new companions would still see Bianca and Alice’s hopes for emancipation bitterly frustrated. The improved status that would derive from the position of favour they enjoyed with their lovers, could only be unstable and precarious. If Alice’s union with Mosby would probably be undermined by his distrust, Bianca’s future does not look much brighter; her present condition and the Duke’s attitude towards her
depend in fact on such fleeting things as youth and beauty. What distinguishes the two women is the primary motivation of their actions. There is no trace in Bianca of the authentic, almost instinctive passion that dominates Alice (and which is identified and condemned as lust by the culture of her time); rather, Bianca is driven by an irrepressible hunger for social advancement and material comfort, a desire to regain the status and privileges that were hers before she forfeited them by eloping with Leantio.

The motif of greed is undoubtedly of central importance in both plays. In his analysis of *Arden*, Perosa stresses the role of the combination “love and money” or “sensuality and greed” and finds in the characters’ obsession for wealth (with the exception of Alice) the most “bourgeois” aspect of the play (67-68). A similar idea is expressed by Roma Gill with reference to *Women Beware Women* where, in her view, the society described by Middleton “identifies goodness with utility and measures status by possessions” (xvi). It is a society characterised by a strong “market philosophy”, where everything, including people, has a price (when the Duke and Livia use the word “love” in relation to, respectively, Bianca and Leantio, they are in earnest. To their way of thinking, love is a commodity that can be bought, like everything else, and they have paid it in full).

If marriage in *Women Beware Women* is to be interpreted as a symbol of the moral health of society, then clearly it is in the subplot that Middleton’s pessimism reaches its peak. The meaning of the institution, grossly distorted by Bianca and Leantio, is utterly trivialised and parodied by the proposed marriage between Isabella and the Ward (who is himself a poor imitation of a man). The Ward is a sort of brutalised version of Leantio, or even the embodiment of the moral degradation of an entire society. In terms of lewdness and obscenity, he is always one step ahead of the other characters, whose hidden desires, Middleton seems to suggest, find expression in his actions and words. His characterisation exemplifies Middleton’s strategy in the subplot, where we find all the problems illustrated in the main plot, but worsened and exacerbated.

Like Bianca, Isabella is evaluated by the men of the play exclusively in terms of external appearance. If the former, by being compared to a precious piece of property, loses her human dignity and becomes an object, the latter undergoes the ultimate humiliation of being treated like a horse at market (III.iii). The scene is famous and deservedly so; the Ward and Sordido’s “inspection” of Isabella exemplifies the attitude of a society in which women are systematically de-humanised and where the emphasis is
on their specific functions (as mothers, wives, whores, etc.) rather than on their personalities (Sordido: "Now to her, now y'have scanned all her parts over" III.i.42). This attitude is also exemplified by Fabritio, who can only conceive of marriage as a mercenary agreement (in Roma Gill's words "the 'sale' of Isabella ... is a most savage indictment of parental domination" ["World" 32]) and has no concern for the emotional sphere of conjugal life. He even encourages Isabella to take advantage of the façade of respectability that marriage provides ("those that marry fools, live ladies' lives" I.ii.83), and his words are echoed later by Livia ("you may take him, as you see occasion//for your advantage" II.i.114-115). The institution that, according to the ideals of the time, had among its primary ends the avoidance of fornication and lust, is used here to keep adultery and (later) incest "hid from sin-piercing eyes" (II.i.238). It is not surprising that, in such a context, Isabella yields to "sin" and undergoes a moral decline that parallels that of Bianca. As in the main plot, what cannot fail to impress the reader is the rapidity with which this process takes place. Isabella's case is the more striking: she rejects the idea of incest as something abominable, but does not hesitate to launch herself into—what she thinks is—an adulterous relationship with Hippolito. Her exclamation of "What's become//Of truth in love, if such we cannot trust" (I.ii.227-228), could be used appropriately as a general comment on family relations as portrayed in the play. In all their forms—husband and wife, father and daughter, uncle and niece, aunt and niece, etc.—they show signs of degradation; not only truth, but also affection and respect, are absent from Middleton's picture, while betrayal, lust and authoritarianism are rampant. The latter, exemplified by the behaviour of the Duke, Fabritio, and, though to a lesser extent, Leantio, is one of Middleton's main concerns. Abuse of power and arrogance bring destruction both in the family and the State. In a way, Fabritio's relationship with his daughter mimics that between the Duke and his subjects. A dangerous state of constant tension and instability is caused in both cases by a tendency, on the part of the powerful, to misuse authority to satisfy selfish interests, and the neglect of the responsibilities that such a position of power involves. The meaning of the Cardinal's words in Act IV.i—"great man,//Ev'ry sin thou commit'st shows like a flame//Upon a mountain" (206-208)—may be extended to encompass all forms of rule, not only over the State, but also over its microcosm, the family. The example of the Duke's conduct is lethal, as the character of Livia, who may be thought of as the product of an authoritarian and cynical culture, amply
demonstrates. She represents the ultimate case of absolute and extreme commitment to the self, the exasperated search for enjoyment that leads one to consider other people’s lives as nothing more than pawns in a game of chess.

The debasement of the institution of marriage, illustrated by the couples formed by Bianca and Leantio, and Isabella and the Ward, finds its culmination in the ceremony that unites Bianca and the Duke. The use of a sacrament to legitimise a union born from adultery and murder, is the signal that the chain of vice has been completed. Even more than in Arden of Feversham, the final dispensing of punishment is swift, almost mechanical, and has often been considered the weakest part of the play. But that chaotic dénouement, which to modern readers and audiences has something of the involuntary humour of silent films, is consistent with Middleton’s determinedly gloomy view throughout the play. Unlike Alice, Bianca dies unpentent with a last display of determination, nor is there a real sense of reestablished order as we find in Arden. Middleton’s pessimism is also revealed by his characterisation of the Cardinal, who is not incisive enough as the “spokesman” for morality and religion. As David M. Holmes notes in The Art of Thomas Middleton, “he has a weakness of character that renders him incompetent to deal with the Duke’s—[and, one might add, society’s]—hardened corruption” (171n).

When Bianca, Isabella and Livia comment on the subordinate condition of women in marriage, they do it with a tone of utter disenchantment that borders on cynicism. In 1.ii Isabella describes marriage as a form of slavery (“When women have their choices, commonly//They do but buy their thraldoms” II.ii.171-172); and even though she adds that “honesty

and love makes all this happy” (179), the strength of the previous image is such that these words seem to come as an afterthought. Equally unromantic is Livia’s view in I.ii, where she uses such words as “hard task” (35) and “duty” (42) and draws a picture of marriage as almost completely devoid of pleasure. Finally, commenting on Isabella’s match with the Ward, Bianca sums up the question observing that women always “strive” for the “upper hand” (III.ii.212-213), something that, apparently, they can only achieve with a half-witted or often absent husband. The world of Middleton’s play is one in which women have very limited possibilities of action, and where every attempt to step out of their pre-established route is severely punished. Family laws, resembling those of the State, are inflexible. The art of dissimulation, which has traditionally been seen as
typically feminine, is one of the few possible forms of defence against an essentially hostile environment. Commenting on Bianca’s claim that “women’s chief enemy is other women” (V.ii.215), Martin White justly notes that this “traditional view of the essential wickedness of women ... is challenged and undercut ... by the presentation in the play of equally vicious manipulations by men, and of the social practices such as arranged marriages that deny women freedom” (114).

Finally, I believe that the centrality of domesticity in Middleton’s play is confirmed by the strong sense of place created by the author’s accurate and ingenious use of setting. What conveys with brutal effectiveness the chasm between the world of the common people and that of those in power is, even more than plot action, the description of Leantio’s and Livia’s houses. The first, with the humbleness and modesty of its furnishings, reflects the simplicity and ordinariness of its occupants; the second, with the sophisticated disposition of its rooms, becomes the objective correlative of Livia’s (as well as the court’s) craftiness. Even more than by the Duke’s words, Bianca is seduced by the rooms, pictures, and “fair ornaments” of Livia’s house. Once dazed by the sumptuousness of her new surroundings, she is no longer in control of herself, as Guardiano cynically points out:

... to prepare her stomach by degrees
To Cupid’s feast, because I saw’ twas queasy,
I showed her naked pictures by the way—
A bit to stay the appetite. (II.ii.402-405)

Significantly enough, Middleton conveys the change in Bianca’s personality through her complaints about Leantio’s house; in a way, she is complaining about him as well:

This is the strangest house
For all defects, as ever gentlewoman
Made shift withal, to pass away her love in! (III.i.16-18)

Similarly, later on in the play, Leantio’s verbal abuse of Bianca is introduced by a series of ironic remarks on the luxury of her new dwellings:
... these are her lodgings!
She's simply now advanced! I took her out
Of no such window, I remember, first;
That was a great deal lower, and less carved.
... Y'are richly placed
... A sumptuous lodging!
... A chair of velvet!
... Y'are very stately here. (IV.i. 42-45, 51, 53, 55, 57)

The impression is that of a particular attention to place, not only for its theatrical function of "frame of the action", but also for its metaphorical value. Domestic details (the house's architectural structure, its furnishings and ornaments, etc.) are used to underline and emphasise the changes in the relations between the characters, the general development of the story, its social and moral implications. Ultimately, by relying on such devices, Middleton successfully captures the signs of the cultural change taking place around him. *Women Beware Women* prefigures, in fact, with authority, a social and literary scene in which more and more attention was to be focused on what takes place inside a house's walls and its relation to History.
In her essay “The World of Thomas Middleton”, Roma Gill voices the opinion of the majority of Middleton scholars when she observes that “dramatic characters may be given a local habitation in Florence or Madrid, and a name appropriate to their surroundings, but they still hold British passports” (16).

In his book on The English Family, Ralph A. Houlbrooke points out that in the sixteenth century “[p]remature marriage was singled out by contemporary commentators as a major cause of social ills” (67).

Stephen Wigler also associates Bianca with the world of fantasy when he observes that her fastidious attitude towards Leantio’s house in III.1 resembles that of “the fairy-tale princess who felt the presence of a pea beneath fourteen feather mattresses” (188).

See chapter 13 (“The Popular Controversy over Woman”) in Louis B. Wright’s Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England and chapter 11 (“Literacy and Learning”) in Anne Laurence’s Women in England 1500-1760. Significantly enough the decades following the publication of Women Beware Women saw the appearance of works, such as The Woman’s Sharp Revenge (1640) and Hannah Woolley’s The Gentlewoman’s Companion (1675), where women themselves voiced their dissatisfaction with a system that denied them access to education.

The ills of mercenary motives in courtship and enforced marriage are also at the centre of Middleton’s little known comedy The Widow (1652), which, like Women Beware Women, has an exotic setting (the scene being “Capo d’Istria and the neighbouring country”).

As R. V. Holdsworth has aptly put it, the world of Women Beware Women is “committed to a male-centred relegation of its women to the status of commodities” (21).

For their bleak view of married life Isabella and Bianca recall the character of Crispinella in Marston’s The Dutch Courtesan (c. 1615). Commenting on her sister Beatrice’s upcoming nuptials, the world-weary Crispinella observes that “[a] husband//generally is a careless, domineering thing that grows like//coral, which as long as it is under water is soft and tender//but as soon as it has got his branch above the waves is//presently hard, stiff, not to be bowed but burst; so when//your husband is a suitor and under your choice, Lord, how//supple he is, how obsequious, how at your service, sweet//lady! Once married, got up his head above, a stiff, crooked,//knobbly, inflexible, tyrannous creature he grows; (III.i.70-77).
See also Caroline L. Cherry's *The Most Unvaluedst Purchase: Women in the Plays of Thomas Middleton.*