TALKING ABOUT THE FEMININE IN RENAISSANCE TIMES

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Abstract*: Our article focused on several images of women such as they appear in texts ranging from pre-Renaissance to Renaissance, showing how woman changes from a symbol or an abstract image, devoid of corporeality of own desires, to an individual feeling and acting just as well as a man, even though the general opinion on women is far from being a favourable one in texts written by male authors.*

Keywords*: women, Renaissance, image.*

Talking about women, "the second sex", from a historical point of view on their evolution (or rather lack of it, most of the times), Simone de Beauvoir reminds us that in the Middle Ages men's opinion of women was rather unfavourable, a fact reflected by the literature of the time. Court poets exalted love, but "the writings of bourgeois inspiration attacked women with malignancy: fables, comedies, and lays charged them with laziness, coquetry, and lewdness." (Beauvoir, 1956:126).

Ottaviano Fregoso, one of the characters in Baldesare Castiglione's *Book of Courtier* (1528), advocates a similar attitude towards women, "imperfect creatures and of little or no worth in comparison with men, and […] not capable of performing any worthy act" (163), completed by lord Gaspar's words: "when a woman is born, it is a defect or mistake of nature[1] […] Thus woman may be said to be a creature produced by chance and accident" (Castiglione, 1903:182), who laughs at the preposterous idea of women as equals to men, as Magnifico Giuliano, another character, describes them ("Since you have given women letters and continence and magnanimity and temperance, I only marvel that you would not also have them govern cities, make laws, and lead armies, and let the men stay at home to cook or spin." (Castiglione, 1903:181).

Elissa B. Weaver points to the fact that Giuliano de Medici, Castiglione's spokesperson, believes that beauty and chastity are especially important for women, and the dress and speech of all should reflect dignity and grace, and the elegant style and decorum recommended in all social encounters required that genlemen and ladies keep to their own social class. (2007:192)

According to Joan Kelly (2004:167-168), Castiglione's *Courtier*, and the corpus of Renaissance works it heads, took up the themes of love and courtesy for this courtly society, adapting them to contemporary social and cultural needs. Castiglione introduced into the aristocratic conception of sex roles some of the patriarchal notions of women's confinement to the family that bourgeois humanists had been restoring.

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[1] We will see a similar view in Rabelais's third book of Gargantua and Pantagruel, when the physician Rondibilis, speaking of women, says, among other things, that Nature "did in a manner mistake the road which she had traced formerly, and stray exceedingly from that excellence of providential judgement by the which she had created and formed all other things, when she built, framed, and made up the woman." (Rabelais, 2008:143).

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Earlier on, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1320), written from the point of view of a man in love with a married woman[1], had shown us "*la donna angelicata*" next to God, a woman powerful enough to have him accompanied all the way to Paradise, through all the realms beyond death. In Dante's work, heralding the new period of Renaissance, a woman's love can lift to heaven the man she loves. According to Peter Bondanella (2003:21), Dante raised the poetry of praise, the most traditional role of medieval love poetry, to the highest possible level, surpassing the traditional claims of courtly poetry that a woman's love (sexual or chaste) refined a man. Dante affirmed that a woman's love could lead a man or a poet to God, and this bordered on blasphemy.

For Lino Pertile, Beatrice in the *Divine Commedy* is no longer a symbol, she has grown through Dante's experiences to the point that she becomes his active conscience, being able to trace his itinerary from the times of the Vita Nuova to the present and shed light on the dark hole he emerges from at the beginning of the poet. Dante'slife will be renewed after his meeting with Beatrice in Heaven. (Brand & Pertile, 2008:56).

Another female character in Dante's journey, Francesca da Rimini, unhappy in life for having been tricked into marrying a lame, older man, spends the eternity of afterlife together with her loved one, Paolo Malatesta, her brother-in-law[2]. In the second circle of the Inferno, sinful and damned, but together. That's Dante's way of saying that love overcomes everything else.

We don't really know how Beatrice Portinari looks like, except for her eyes like the stars and heavenly voice. This changes with Petrarch's verses in *Il Cazoniere* (first published in 1336), where the woman he loves, Laura de Noves, while still an ideal, starts acquiring various physical features. Critics have resembled her with Botticelli's *Primavera*: she has golden hair, loose on a neck whiter than milk, rosy cheeks, walks barefeet on the grass and starts behaving like a real woman, instead of only a symbol or an ideal. Like many other Renaissance poets later on, Petrarch introduces the idea that his words would make his loved one immortal.[3]

Giovanni Boccaccio dedicates his *Decameron* (1349-1353) to ladies, as many women of the elite, having achieved a basic education, had begun to develop a taste for reading vernacular books, stories, poems and romances (see King, 12991:173). Therefore, it is only appropriate that a woman, Pampineea, should be the leader of the company of young people (seven ladies and three gentlemen) who leave the city of Florence affected by plague in order to find shelter and a better way of spending their time telling the one hundred stories which compose his work.

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[1] Dante supposedly met Beatrice Portinari when they were both eight, and saw her nine years later. His unrequited love for Beatrice inspired him to write poetry, *La Vita Nuova*, where he tells the story of their encounter and of his love for her, and the *Divine Commedy*.

[2] Francesca fell in love with Paolo while they were reading about the love affair between Queen Guievere, king Arthur's wife, and Lancelot, one of his knights. Gianciotto Malatesta, her husband, discovered the two lovers and killed them.

[3] "My passion, for which you care so little,/and your praises that pervade my verses,/may yet perhaps set thousands on fire:/ since, my sweet flame, in my thoughts, I see,/long after us, this tongue, grown cold, yet your/two lovely closed eyes, there, glowing still." (Petrarch, 2001:301)

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By taking an active role and suggesting this trip[1], Pampineea "confronts misogynist discourses and practices prevalent in the Middle Ages, since she announces her subversive trip in a place (a church[2]) and time governed by the authority of the Father", writes Valerio Ferme (Ferme, 2015:7).

In his foreword, Boccaccio explains that love's torments are more painful for women who,

> constrained by the wishes, the pleasures, the commandments of fathers, mothers, brothers and husbands, abide most time enmewed in the narrow compass of their chambers and sitting in a manner idle, willing and willing not in one breath, revolve in themselves various thoughts which it is not possible should still be merry […] more by token that they are far less strong than men to endure. (Boccaccio, 2007:6).

Pampineea, the leader, the queen of the first day and narrator of the tenth story of her day, criticises women who seem to have lost their common sense and values, replacing virtue by display:

> For that virtue, which was erst in the minds of the women of times past, those of our day have diverted to the adornment of the body, and she on whose back are to be seen the most motley garments and the most gaudily laced and garded and garnished with the greatest plenty of fringes and purflings and broidery deemeth herself worthy to be held of far more account than her fellows and to be honoured above them. […] these women that are so laced and purfled and painted and parti-coloured abide either mute and senseless, like marble statues, or, an they be questioned, answer after such a fashion that it were far better to have kept silence. (Boccaccio, 2007:100).

In the ninth story of the second day, Ambrogiuolo of Piacenza gives voice to the general opinion on women, that

> man [is] the noblest animal created of God among mortals, and after him, woman; but man, as is commonly believed and is seen by works, is the more perfect and having more perfection, must without fail have more of firmness and constancy, for that women universally are more changeable. (Boccaccio, 2007:248).

The lady in question, Bernabo's wife, Madam Ginevra, who becomes the object of a bet between her husband and Ambrogiuolo, shows enough strength and cleverness to manage on her own after being (unjustly) sentenced to death by her husband and spared by a merciful servant who was supposed to kill her.

Setting the stage for the seventh day, when he was going to be the king, Dioneo choses as subject for his day's stories the tricks played by wives on their husbands. Women usually play a prank on men to avenge themselves. They make a fool of their husbands, and don't hesitate to play around even in their presence. This is a big change from the previous, medieval conception that women, if unhappily married, must endure their fate and should be

[1] "What do we here? What look we for? What dream we? Why are we more sluggish and slower to provide for our safety than all the rest of the townsfolk? Deem we ourselves of less price than others […]?" wonders Pampineea, aiming to convince the other ladies to join her. (Boccaccio, 2007:26)

[2] The church in question is Santa Maria Novella, in Florence, and the rules of the time stated that women were supposed to be quiet in churches.

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justly killed if they tried to find happiness with another partner (as was Francesca da Rimini's case, for instance).

Dioneo justifies and defends his choice, almost introducing the idea that men and women are equal: "the times are such that, provided men and women are careful to eschew unseemly actions, all liberty of discourse is permitted". (Boccaccio, 2007:692). This liberty of discourse corresponds to women's liberty of following their own desires and acting upon their own wishes.

However, in contrast with Dioneo, Emilia, the queen of the ninth day, advocates women's submissive role, considering that

> the general multitude of women are, by nature, by custom and by law subjected unto men and that it behoveth them order and govern themselves according to the discretion of these latter; wherefore each woman […] should be humble, patient and obedient, besides being virtuous. (Boccaccio, 2007:992)[1]

Wicked women are criticised and rightly punished. So it happens in Pampineea's story (the seventh story of the eighth day) about fair Elena, who made fun of (together with her lover) and was very cruel with the young man in love with her, the scholar Rinieri, but is stupid enough to ask for his help when her lover abandons her. It is the perfect occasion for the scorned young man to avenge himself, which serves the heartless Elena right. Boccaccio provides his readers a whole range of female characters, as opposed to the generally unfavourable image present in other authors' works and in the society of the time.

In his *Third Book* (*Tiers Livre*) of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, published in 1546, François Rabelais's character, Panurge, wonders if he should marry or not. He starts by discussing his dilemma with his friend, Pantagruel, then asks different characters, opens books, resorts to interpreting dreams or seeing a sybil, only to decide, in the end to seek an answer from the oracle of the Holy Bottle.

His dialogue with Pantagruel anticipates replies in Molière's theater. Panurge is afraid he will be cuckolded (albeit he does not mind making a cuckold of other husbands), although he is aware and keeps saying that it is not good to be alone, to have an empty life and house, lacking offsprings.

When Pantagruel asks him to open the Eneid to see what meaning they could decipher on the opened page, and talking about gods and their feats, Rabelais criticizes women who, instead of confining themselves to their domestic sphere, interfere in men's affairs (or gods', in this instance): "they had often seen battles lost by the cumbersome lets and disturbing encumbrances of women confusedly huddled in amongst armies" and Panurge declares that he wants a completely different type of woman: "My wife will be honest, virtuous, chaste, loyal, and faithful; not armed, surly, wayward, cross, giddy, humorous, heady, hairbrained, or extracted out of the brains, as was the goddess Pallas". (Rabelais, 2008:45)

[1] For Emilia, unsubmissive wives are justly punished, i.e. beaten, to learn their place: "women are naturally unstable and prone to frailty, wherefore, to correct the iniquity of those who allow themselves too far to overpass the limits appointed them, there needed the stick which punisheth them". (Boccaccio, 2008, 992)

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This reflects Leon Battista Alberti's position in his *Book of the Family* (1432-1434), who wrote that it was the husband's duty to restrict the activities of his wife to the house and domestic sphere. (Caferro, 2011:64)

There are no honest women, he states, as marriage quickly changes their nature and they can become aggressive[1] and turn sour, and he might marry a woman ready to abandon him in his hour of need, in case of ilness, and she would not only not take care of him, but she would also make fun of him and steal from him:

> But if […] being ill at ease, and possibly through that distemper made unable to discharge the matrimonial duty that is incumbent to an active husband, my wife, impatient of that drooping sickness and faint-fits of a pining languishment, should abandon and prostitute herself to the embraces of another man, and not only then not help and assist me in my extremity and need, but withal flout at and make sport of that my grievous distress and calamity; or peradventure, which is worse, embezzle my goods and steal from me, as I have seen it oftentimes befall unto the lot of many other men, it would be enough to undo me utterly. (Rabelais, 2008:36)

The physician Rondibilis has been seen as the voice of Rabelais' misogynistic attitude towards women[2]. Women's liberty of following their own desires, accepted in the *Decameron*, is strongly frown upon here, and they are severely judged:

> they squat, skulk, constrain their own inclinations, and, with all the cunning they can, dissemble and play the hypocrite in the sight and the presence of their husbands; who come no sooner to be out of the way, but that forthwith they take the advantage, pass the time merrily, desist from all labor, frolic it, gad abroad, lay aside their counterfeit garb, and openly declare and manifest the interior of their dispositions. (Rabelais, 2008:143).

As it may be expected of a former Franciscan monk turned physician, Rabelais mistrusted women and supported their diminished social role, a remnant of the medieval conceptions of society. Gargantua's and Pantagruel's mothers appear very little in the books, their role is only to give life to the characters. The subsequent opinions on women are, as we have seen, rather negative.

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[1] "An honest woman who should beat me […] it hath been told me that those exceeding honest women have ordinarily very wicked head-pieces; therefore is it that their family lacketh not for good vinegar." (Rabelais, 2008:35)

[2] "When I say womankind", says Rondibilis, "I speak of a sex so frail, so variable, so changeable, so fickle, inconstant, and imperfect […] in the devising, hammering, forging, and composing of the woman (Nature) hath had a much tenderer regard, and by a great deal more respectful heed to the delightful consortship and sociable delectation of the man." (Rabelais, 2008:143).

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