

How Did The Beloved Become A Commodity?

Shivpriya Kumari

Amity Institute Of English Studies And Research, AUUP Noida

Prof. (Dr.) Jayatee Bhattacharya

Amity Institute Of English Studies And Research, AUUP Noida

Abstract

In British Literature, the theme of love has always existed. But the question is what actually happened to the beloved in real life. Although the poets often put the beloved on a pedestal, did that pedestal eventually turn into a prison for women? In this paper I am going to compare the work of Anne Finch, a woman writer of the Augustan Age, with works of 3 different male poets and try to draw out the difference between their respective perspectives towards women. I will be discussing the following works : "The Introduction" by Anne Finch, "Amoretti" by Edmund Spenser, "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" by Jonathan Swift and "To A.L. Persuasions To Love" by Thomas Carew.

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I. Introduction

Some critics argue that Renaissance love poetry is monologic, because the male poet/lover formulates and speaks the words, he inevitably subordinates the woman to his "masculine persuasive force (Mambrol, *Literary Theory and Criticism*). This is evident in "Amoretti" by Edmund Spenser. The lover's tone is condescending. Instead of the beloved leaving a mark herself, "her virtues" has to be remembered through his verse.

This is also a representation of how history has always been written from male perspective to justify the acts of the patriarchal society. Also the question is did the beloved wish for only her love (which the speaker is a part of) to be eternalised? Why not let the beloved create something of her own worth remembering through eternity. But then "any woman that attempts the pen" gets treated like "an intruder on the rights of men" (Finch 10).

Anne Finch's (1661-1720) father, who died 5 months after her birth, left a will stating that both his daughters and sons receive equal financial support for education. Although later on, she did face financial problems; growing up, her father must have been a good example for her. She was also fortunate to marry her lover, who lacked patriarchal impingement. She wrote several poems expressing her love for her husband, who encouraged and supported her writing career. But not many women of that age were that fortunate and even those who did write, had to hide away their work as Anne writes in "The Introduction":

To some few friends, and to thy sorrows sing; For groves of laurel thou wert never meant; Be dark enough thy shades, and be thou there content.

Anne Finch's *Miscellany Poems, on Several Occasions* (1713) is considered to be the most important book of poetry written by a woman in the eighteenth century. Yet at the time of publication it went out of print because of lack of attention from male readers and critics.

Her friendship with Alexander Pope prevailed through a poetry contest in which he had to admit defeat. He requested permission to publish her piece alongside his poem, "Impromptu" in his next book. Yet, it is only recently that she has been rehabilitated as an important 18th-century poet who revised many poetic forms in which male speaking voices were naturalized by imagining them from the perspective of a female speaker. Pope, on the other hand, was always the spokesman of the Augustan Age. (Mlinko, *Poetry Foundation*)

II. Discussion

In her poem "The Introduction" she expresses her discomfort with the functioning of the society. In her very first few lines, she anticipates the harsh criticism her words will receive. The poem ends too, in a similar tone where she warns her "Muse", i.e. all women, that ambitions will only lead to despise from society (Finch 59).

Virginia Woolf has rightly commented on Anne Finch's poems in *A Room of One's Own*. The following lines show her empathy for her;

Men are the 'opposing faction'; men are hated and feared, because they have the power to bar her way to what she wants to do-which is to write ... But how could she have helped herself? I asked, imagining the sneers and the laughter, the adulation of the toadies, the scepticism of the professional poet. She must have shut herself up in a room in the country to write, and been torn asunder by bitterness and scruples perhaps... She 'must have', I say, because when one comes to seek out the facts about Lady Winchelsea (Anne), one finds, as usual, that almost nothing is known about her... Pope or Gay is said to have satirized her 'as a blue-stocking with an itch for scribbling' (46, 47)

This is relatable when Anne talks about how no tales are told about women blessed with "some share of wit, and poetry" (Finch 24). Then she gives a biblical reference to the welcome song sung on the day of the return of the Ark, by "holy virgins in the concert" which completed "the hymn divine" (30, 32). The applause received was such that "its mighty thunder" shook Saul's crown (40). Yet such tales get buried with time.

Corinna, an ancient Greek poet who was the teacher of Pindar Thebes, the greatest lyric poet of Greece, has been reduced to the character of a prostitute in "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" by Jonathan Swift. She is forced to live such a miserable life that she can't even have a happy dream. Her "wings" have been "contracted" for so long that their presence itself has been forgotten (Finch 60). Each day she has to "recollect the scattered parts" and reconstruct herself to meet the Augustan stereotype of woman as a commodity (Swift 70).

Men were always ready to dictate "the accomplishments" women should desire (Finch 15). "The conquests" they should invest their beauty and time on (18). This brings me to Thomas Carew's "To A.L. Persuasions To Love" where he tries to convince a maiden to accept his love. He suggests while she is still young and beautiful, she should think of her future when the beauty will fade away. The maiden shouldn't "let brittle beauty" forsake "wiser thoughts", i.e. finding a suitor. Is this what "the conquests of our prime" means (18)? Reading, writing or thinking "would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time" (17). A similar reference has been given when Swift compares women with ants working for "time of scant"; as with time, her admirers will move on to someone younger and more beautiful (Carew 48).

From one point of view, "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" by Jonathan Swift reflects his disgust and hatred for the extent women went to attract men. But then the standards for an attractive woman itself were set by men, so can we really blame women for trying to imitate them? Carew gives a detailed description of how beautiful the maiden's body is. The "curious locks, so aptly twined, /Whose every hair a soul doth bind," are being imitated by the prostitute with "artificial hair." A "crystal eye" is used to imitate the maiden's "eye, which now is Cupid's nest." Although unlike the young maiden; her cheeks, chin and nose are not as beautiful as a rose or lily, she is trying her best using plumpers, artificial sets of teeth, eye-brows made from mouse's hide and other props to look as beautiful as possible.

Early modern English homilies, sermons, and marriage manuals all insist that men and women alike are bound to chastity; in practice, however, men were allowed much more sexual freedom. Patriarchal ideology equated female honour with virtue and chastity, subordinating the daughter to the father, and wife to the husband. (Mambrol, *Literary Theory and Criticism*). Yet Swift has shown the harsh reality where Corinna has to provide sexual favours to people "from religious clubs" without charges.

III. Conclusion

Comparing different texts and their possible interpretation has shown a different direction to the school of thoughts about the life of women during the Augustan Age. We have many references in the Bible (and other ancient texts) about the great achievements of women. Anne's allusion to the great military commander Deborah, who brought peace to Israel, "And rules the rescued nation, with her laws" is a proof of what women can achieve (50). She expresses her sorrow through the following lines :

How are we fall'n, fall'n by mistaken rules? And education's, more than nature's fools, Debarred from all improvements of the mind, And to be dull, expected and designed;

Though there were "hopes to thrive" but they could "ne'er outweigh the fears" of the harsh treatment received by any woman who dared to pick a book or pen (Finch 57).

Through this comparative study, we saw how patriarchy affected the society. We can conclude that literature is not all about stories and poems. It can also tell us about the people, their lives, and the ideologies they believed in. It is important to learn from our ancestors' mistakes/achievements and to not follow the notions which got corrupted over the years, without questioning them.

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