

Some Notes on John Cowper Powys' feminine characters

IN POWYS' fiction the situation and reactions of women in society give an indication of his philosophy of femininity: it is no accident if the feminine characters in his novels obey certain established patterns, if they are representative of only a few social types, and if the range of feminine professions is limited.

By studying what is implied by their names we are led to examine family situations. A woman is seen primarily as a mother, a spinster or a young girl, and in each case, there exists a precise cultural role, which must be taken on to avoid banishment from society. Often linked to social status, there is also the problem of a profession, or of its absence.

Married women of a certain age are always called "Mrs", Mrs Solent, Mrs Otter or Mrs Ashover, but only if they belong to a fairly high class or if they represent a family lineage. In other words, only the upper middle class *bourgeoises* get referred to in this way: a sense of family continuity, the idea of inheritance, of succession being of value only to the *bourgeois* and those social classes in which people have something to transmit. Married women from inferior classes of society are only allowed a name and surname. That Penny Pitches, Tamia Cuddle or Betty Squeeze are wives or mothers is not very important; they are not responsible for the maintenance of the bourgeois world; they exist far more as individuals than as links within the family.

As for the spinsters, they are called "Miss". As above, in Powys' fiction, spinsters for the most part belong to the *bourgeoisie*, and are the very symbols of respectability and tradition. When a feminine character bears a title, this title is always



mentioned; for instance Rachel Zoyland is always “Lady Rachel”.

Young girls and little girls are named by their first name or their name and surname, as are also certain married women who in some way do not confine themselves to their role as wives. For instance Persephone Spear who lives as though she was not married, Lucinda Cobbold, the wife of a famous clown, but above all the zany woman of “elsewhere”, or Nancy Quirm, hardly Enoch Quirm’s wife.

Finally a whole series of feminine characters are known only by a first name or a nickname. These are generally poor women, like Mad Bet, or gypsy witches like old Betsy (*Ducdame*) or Gypsy May (*Weymouth Sands*). All these women are on the fringe of society, which does not mean, however, that they do not play a part in society. To this category we must add women with a still more ambiguous status, who, by profession or by choice, are bawds. I mean the “mothers”: Mother Legge, official and almost sacred procuress of Glastonbury; Mother Urgan, sensitive to feminine charms, but even more so to money.

The meaning of the names chosen is as revealing as the different ways of naming women. A few examples will be enough to see that all the names in Powys’ fiction are significant. Morwyn in the eponymous novel is the very image of the young girl, of the maiden, and Morwyn in Welsh means exactly that: “young maiden”; and to reinforce this symbol, Powys does not give her a family name. Perdita, with such an evocative name, is not only “lost”, “*perdue*”¹, but she is also Perdita “Wane”, thus recalling “decline” and a “wan” decline, to boot.

Persephone Spear, the girl-boy, the androgyne in spirit is Persephone the goddess who reigns in the underworld, but “spear” masculinises her, the spear being a man’s weapon but also the symbol of the male organ; let us also note that “the spear side of the family” means the male line of descent, which can only emphasize her masculine character.

In *The Inmates* Antenna Sheer, the mermaid confined to a mental hospital after having tried to kill her father, has a name which is also meaningful: the word “sheer” means “clear”, “pure”, “absolute” as an adjective, and “to swerve” in nautical use as a verb (which reminds us that Antenna’s mother drowned and that her image is obsessing the young girl), or it can also mean to go off in a new direction. Tenna therefore is the young girl who goes to the bitter end, and who because of this has “swerved”, has left the right track, violating the basic rules of society — to respect or love one’s father — and who finally flees.

Mad Bet, whose real name is Bet Chinnock, is crazy, and Bet, a diminutive of Betsy or Betty, also means “a wager”. Mad Bet, the “crazy gambler” is the person who instigates the tragedy by betting on life and death, by choosing the victim fortuitously: Tom Barter dies, in place of John Crow, but it is purely by chance, and John Crow wins because he put all his bets on Mary.

A character’s name, thus, plays a triple role: it links the feminine and masculine characters, (John and Mary Crow are cousins before being husband and wife but they have the same name. Might they not in fact be the same

¹ Although one does find the word “perdu” in the OED, it now has other meanings in English, whereas the association with “lost” is irresistible and immediate for a French reader.

character?), it implies a certain social standing or the absence of it, and finally it is often in itself a rich source of information on the character.

But woman is also defined in the eyes of others, and sometimes in her own eyes, by her family position. Society can only function if its members can be classified, that is to say if they conform to some norm. And a family position also implies a part which must be played, the more so for a woman, at least in our culture.

Family positions are very diverse. We note that little Sis Cole for instance is already confined to a precise role. Belonging to a band of children, she is “burdened by the care of her brother Bert”² and at the age of ten plays the part of a mother. On the other hand, Caddie, Dr Higginbottom’s grand-daughter (*Weymouth Sands*) and Olwen Smith (*Wolf Solent*) who live in precarious situations, are over-protected and are treated by adults in a very different way to boys. Only “Morgan-Nelly” (*A Glastonbury Romance*) offers the picture of a little girl somewhat apart, but if Nelly Morgan is totally independent and lives her childhood with the freedom a boy would have, it is because she is an exceptional being.

For what is striking in the little girls Powys describes is to see to what extent they are already conditioned by their future status as women: they are asked either to assume the condition of mother which will be theirs, or to behave as “well brought-up girls” and to renounce adventures and boys’ games.

As for young girls, they are single by definition. Their family situation is explicit: they have suitors and are awaiting marriage, and — this is not incompatible — they live with their fathers.

In fact, whether it be little girls, young girls, married women, with the exception of spinsters who have, at least officially, settled the question, it is impossible to imagine a woman without a man nearby, or rather without any attachment. A married woman must have children; this is so true that the sterile Netta Page (*Rodmoor*) cannot consider marrying Rook Ashover, and that Tilly Crow, wife of the great industrialist of Glastonbury, is ready to adopt her husband’s illegitimate daughter.

A woman is therefore expected to behave in a certain way. And even old maids who, in Powys’ fiction, live alone with their servant, feel obliged to intervene in family problems, because they are unattached. Jenny Dearth (*Maiden Castle*) for instance, is divorced and extols equality of man and woman, but “she likes to befriend the bad, while *she* stays good...”³ and she is practically driven into Claudius Cask’s arms by her entourage, people who think a woman cannot forever refuse a man who loves her: “You are behaving like a woman *who’s never lived with a man* (...) You are a bigoted old maid, that’s what you are, and I am ashamed of you”⁴, says her father. From beginning to end, according to the different phases of her life, a woman is locked into a network of family ties which weighs more or less on her life, which can point her in such and such a direction, but from which she has very often more difficulty extricating herself than a man:

² *A Glastonbury Romance*, Simon & Schuster, 1932, p.163

³ *Maiden Castle*, Simon & Schuster, 1936, p.68 / University of Wales Press, 1990, p.55

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.446/409

as a girl she will go from her father's house to her husband's; as a mother, she is mainly responsible for the children; as an old maid, she sees it as her duty to take charge of order and of the traditional smooth working of things.

One must note that, in Powys' work, things are far more complex. Most of his characters are in very complicated family situations, and this very complexity may lead us to new perspectives on his conception of femininity.

Overall three different types of position within the family may be observed: the illegitimate, the orphans, the "aliens". In practice, all the characters, masculine and feminine could be subjected to this analysis. For that matter, Powys' position remains the same in each case:

— The illegitimate: Nelly Morgan, daughter of Jenny Morgan and the industrialist Philip Crow, has never been recognized by her father. Her mother works all day as a charwoman and gets drunk every night; and Nelly Morgan "became to her mother at these times as if she were totally invisible, inaudible and non-existent."⁵ She is therefore always alone and almost an orphan.

Olwen Smith lost her mother at birth. She lives with Smith the hatter, who passes as her grandfather, and Mattie Smith, an illegitimate daughter who is in fact Wolf Solent's half-sister. Olwen is the daughter of Mr Malakite, the bookseller, and the result of his incestuous love with his eldest daughter.

We are confronted here by two situations of bastardy. The theme of the bastard, so often exploited in literature, is that of a hero who owes nothing to his birth (except in most cases difficulties) and who, if he succeeds, owes it to his own merits only. The problem of a female bastard is a little different because in the eyes of society a woman's aim in life is not success in confronting professional or social obstacles, but marriage, a good reputation and belonging to a certain class. One characteristic common to the situations of female and male bastards is that for this very reason they are not seen as occupying any well defined social position: Nelly Morgan's mother comes from the lower class, but Nelly is also the daughter of one of the mightiest men of Glastonbury. Illegitimate children are nobody's children, therefore they are everybody's children. Powys plays precisely on such unlimited possibilities: Nelly Morgan and Jenny Morgan, her mother, are doubles of the same character. Both are eccentric and wild: Jenny chats with her dead husband and her daughter talks to herself, as though they belonged to another world than that of the men who are around them. And such is indeed the case for, given the importance of Celtic mythology to Powys, it cannot be by chance that he gave his heroines the name of Morgan: according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, in Avallon lived nine sisters (nine fairies) and Morgan was the fairest of all.

Olwen Smith, my other example of a female bastard, is in such an entangled family context that, again, one may say that she is nobody's daughter: her real parents, (Malakite and his daughter), are struck out of her life; her so-called grandfather dies; her so-called aunt (Mattie Smith) gets married and entrusts her to her real aunt, who is also her half-sister, since they have the same father! A complicated situation if ever there was one... Could it be that on his part Powys wants to make us aware of a quite conscious refusal of family ties? This loathing

⁵ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p.163

for the parents-children link will be one of the themes in *Ducdame*. Powys will more than once proclaim the strength of sterile love and will even declare: “No one has ever lived who more devoutly wished that children were born from trees, or, like the warriors of Cadmus, out of dragon’s teeth sown in the earth.”⁶ To make bastards of his characters, boys or girls, is a hidden way of having them be born from trees or dragon’s teeth, since they are then rejected by human society.

— Fatherless or motherless orphans or orphans who have lost both parents, also appear frequently. Perdita Wane has no family and is brought up by an elderly aunt; this was inevitable: was it possible to imagine a fairy coming from a distant isle, in search of the poet who is to save her (Skald, the poet of Scandinavian legends, is the name of the hero), trailing her family with her? Antenna Sheer has only her father, whom she hates, as her mother drowned (whether by accident or not? To resolve this question is one of Antenna’s problems). Peg Grimstone is living with a father who deserts her and holds her responsible for his wife’s death; as for Christie, her father is a little *too* loving. So we always encounter these family maladjustments. (Are they unexpected or unavoidable from an author who was so involved with his parents and his ten brothers and sisters?) There is in him a refusal of the “classic”, “normal” family, father-mother-child, as if the parents-child relation could not co-exist with the man-woman couple, as if the child-father or child-mother couple could only kill the father-mother couple. Powys insists: when, on rare occasions, he accepts the idea of a “complete” family, he manages to do it in such a way that the same problems are encountered notwithstanding.

— The “aliens”: that is to say women who although they live inside a united family, are in fact cut off from that family. Megan, Geard’s wife, has two daughters, but “she was uniformly cold to both”⁷ and although she is attached to Geard, there is between the two a distance which Megan, locked up in her dreams and in the scornful reticence of a descendant of the Rhys (a great Welsh family), never seeks to cross. She wants to be “alien” to what is of interest to the other members of the family, just as Gerda Torp is “alien” to her family with which, however she has an affectionate relationship. Gerda is “alien” because she is so fair that her beauty makes her “more than human”. She does not want to be only Mr and Mrs Torp’s daughter since she belongs to a super-human world. Here too the image of the family is destroyed.

Studying family situations in Powys’ novels is to discover his loathing of the family and the continuity which it represents, but it is also to discover that if he wishes his heroines to be free of family ties, it is because these are fetters which hinder them from belonging fully to a lover. “Was she one of those girls (...) whose heart can be hardened permanently against a lover by the deadly force of family ties?”⁸ the narrator is wondering, about the woman he loves. A pertinent question.

A third approach to Powys’ feminine characters is to scrutinize their professions, or lack of profession. In Powys’ fiction we find scholars, doctors,

⁶ *Autobiography*, Colgate, 1968, p.223

⁷ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p.142

⁸ *Morwyn*, Village Press, 1974, p.287

writers, clergymen, preachers, professors, industrialists, workers, but feminine professions are scarcer.

Most women are idle: they either live on their private income or are kept by a man; those who do work fall into two classes: they practise more or less artistic professions, “pseudo-professions”; or they are barmaids or servants.

— Women without a profession: married women belonging to middle or upper middle class do not work. The most perfect incarnation of this is Tilly Crow, wife of the great industrialist of Glastonbury. Tilly has no profession and she has a servant to do all the chores. She lives most of the time in a world of her own, and shows little interest in her husband’s plans. She is in fact totally “free” and she fills this freedom with childish dreams, from which her husband Philip, and men in general, are excluded.

Women who live on their income, old maids, also divide their lives in two: they take an interest in the town where they live, have their opinion on social problems, on the one hand they care (often indiscreetly) for other people, and on the other they concentrate a good part of their energy on their servants and on the domestic world. Through what they are and their way of life these women of leisure therefore have a part to play, maintaining both social and domestic order and making sure tradition is respected.

Most of the young girls are also free. Christie Malakite and Mattie Smith manage their widowed father’s household, but the others do nothing; or rather, they are doing something: waiting. They are waiting for a change in their life, an event, marriage. But they do not try to take advantage of this time by studying or learning a profession. When Mattie finds herself alone after her father’s death, she is totally at a loss and quite incapable of providing for her needs. The freedom of young girls who do not have to work for their living provides “a latency period” which enables them in fact to find themselves, to discover what life can bring to all the senses and to discover the multiverse which surrounds them. We will see that this “time for living” is a privilege Powys is happy to grant his feminine characters.

— Women who work. First problem: the choice of a profession. Other than becoming servants or barmaids, what is possible? Mary Crow and Perdita Wane are “companions”; Lady Rachel writes a newspaper to help the man she loves; Netta Page was an actress (second-rate), Thuella Wye is a painter and Wizzie Ravelston a circus girl...

These professions have one point in common: they allow the women who practise them to enjoy great independence in their work, and above all they allow them complete freedom of mind. Even if some of them, like Wizzie, have a passionate interest in their work, these activities are never overburdening, they do not hinder “real life” for the characters; they do not exhaust them, do not “devour” them. They are even sometimes seen as the means of escaping from others, as “secret domains” enabling the heroines to bloom. This somewhat marginal aspect of women’s professions, of work which liberates more than it confines, is underlined by the character of Mother Legge the procuress. To be a procuress is a profession, but a special profession, not because it is immoral, but because, for Powys, it is “sacred”.

He declared that this Easter Monday party was the last surviving relic of some ancient Druidic custom of Religious Prostitution.⁹

But do the servants, the barmaids have this time for living, or are they in the grips of a destructive profession because it is too exhausting? Tossie Stickles, Miss Elizabeth Crow's servant, is described as "the plumpest as well as the most good-tempered young woman who ever put on an apron."¹⁰ Emma, Tilly Crow's servant who "was a strict Professional; and her Profession was that of the Perfect Servant"¹¹, is perfectly satisfied with her fate, as is Mrs Robinson who is very proud to have served a bishop, or Lily and Louie Rogers, who are handmaidens for Miss Drew and copy "good manners" with much pleasure. So even in these inferior professions, women make something pleasant of their work and it makes them proud or fills them with well-being. For most of them, life is a source of marvel and joy.

Powys said again and again:

I fully agree that I ought to be forced by a Communistic State to share the burden of manual labour. But when I've done my share, I want to be free *to turn from the State altogether*, and from all tedious mundane concerns (...).¹²

This freedom in work or after work, he demands it for all and he grants it, in his books, to women. Why to women? Because for them it is a vital need, so strong that even when they find themselves in situations where the "time for living" is limited, they are going to find, create, invent this "latency period" without which they cannot be themselves. Nell Zoyland's revolt, while reading a "Marxian" pamphlet with "its air of irreversible and doom-like finality"¹³, is the expression of this feminine need for the deeper life, a refusal of total enrolment in work, in an aim, in social progress.

While women do not flinch from the general effort of humankind, they only want, (or are able) to take their part so long as this effort does not destroy something more essential, deeper, truer, at least for them, and this something is a vital link with time and the world.

By concentrating on feminine characters as social beings, on their external characteristics, we already see more clearly some of their specificities. Through their names, their positions in the family, their professions, Powys gives us a glimpse of his conceptions of woman and femininity.

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This text is an extract from C. Armandet's thesis "La Philosophie de la Femme et de la Féminité", University of Poitiers, 1978.

⁹ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p.494

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.193

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.189

¹² *Autobiography*, p.323

¹³ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p.476