



The Influence of Milton's Divorce Tracts on Farquhar's Beaux' Stratagem

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VIII. THE INFLUENCE OF MILTON'S DIVORCE
TRACTS ON FARQUHAR'S
BEAUX' STRATAGEM

That the discussion of the problem of divorce in *The Beaux' Stratagem*, is unique in Restoration Drama, both in its tone and in the arguments employed, has long been recognized by students of Farquhar. Strauss¹ finds in the play a growing thoughtfulness regarding manners and institutions, and a perceptible alteration of moral tone. He is inclined to question, however, whether we are to conclude from the single instance presented, that Farquhar actually meant to countenance divorce by mutual consent. William Archer, in a considerable discussion of the divorce phenomenon, is inclined to treat the matter more seriously.² He finds in the comedy Farquhar's firm belief that a breach of the marriage vow is by no means the only immorality possible in the marital relationship. "The scenes are," he says, "in fact, a plea for what Farquhar regarded, rightly or wrongly, as a more rational law of divorce . . . He admitted a moral standard, and subjected social conventions, not to mere cynical persiflage, but to the criticism of reason."³

To Professor Ward the divorce motive is equally puzzling. "Some of the incidents are dubious, including one at the close—a separation by mutual consent, which throws a glaring light on the view taken by the author and his age on the sanctity of the marriage tie."⁴

A curious but important light is thrown upon this somewhat bewildered discussion by a fact of interest and importance which seems to have been overlooked by students of restoration drama, namely, that all of the material in question was borrowed directly from Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline*

¹ *Beaux' Stratagem*, *Belles Lettres Series*, *Intro.*, xlvi; liii.

² *Intro.* to Farquhar, *Mermaid Series*, p. 28-29.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Quoted in Archer's *Intro.* to Farquhar, p. 28.

of *Divorce*. Farquhar's play is shot through with ideas, phrases, and sentences borrowed from Milton's tract. In the following, Farquhar has copied Milton's phraseology, almost verbatim.

Mrs. Sul. "When she [nature] has set tempers opposite, not all the golden links of wedlock, nor iron manacles of law can keep 'em fast."⁵

Milton's phraseology is:

To couple hatred, therefore, though wedlock try all her golden links, and borrow to her aid all the iron manacles and fetters of the law, it does but seek to twist a rope of sand.⁶

It is, however, in the ensuing dialogue that we have the most decisive evidence. Here two speeches are lifted whole, and almost precisely as written by Milton, from the *Doctrine and Discipline*, and given place in the *Beaux' Stratagem*:

Squire Sul. "You're impertinent."

Mrs. Sul. "I was ever so, since I became one flesh with you."

Squire Sul. "One flesh! rather two carcasses joined unnaturally together."

Mrs. Sul. "Or rather a living soul coupled to a dead body."⁷

In Chapter XVI, Book II of the *Doctrine and Discipline*, we read:

Nay, instead of being one flesh, they will be rather two carcasses chained unnaturally together; or, as it may happen, a living soul bound to a dead corpse.⁸

In addition to the above, a number of passages in the *Beaux' Stratagem* present the precise ideas, and sometimes the unique phraseology of Milton. The closing lines of the play are as follows:

'Twould be hard to guess which of these parties is the better pleased, the couple joined, or the couple parted. . . .

Both happy in their several states we find,

Those parted by consent, and those conjoined.

⁵ *Beaux' Stratagem*, Act III, Sc. iii, 522-524.

⁶ *Prose Works*, Bohn Edition, III, 265.

⁷ *Beaux' Stratagem*, Act III, Sc. iii 342-348.

⁸ *Prose Works*, III, 271.

Consent, if mutual, saves the lawyer's fee.
Consent is law enough to set you free.⁹

This was the great idea of Milton's divorce tracts; the consent of both parties mutually given is a cause fully sufficient for divorce. "There is no power above their own consent to hinder them from unjoining."¹⁰ "There can be nothing in the equity of law, why divorce by consent may not be lawful."¹¹ "Not he who puts away by mutual consent [commits adultery]."¹²

Here is another extremely interesting passage from the *Beaux' Stratagem*:

Bon. "Pray, sir, as the saying is, let me ask you one question: are not man and wife one flesh?"

Sir Chas. "You and your wife. . . may be one flesh, because ye are nothing else; but rational creatures have minds that must be united."

Squire Sul. "Minds!"

Sir Chas. "Ay minds, sir: don't you think that the mind takes place of the body?"¹³

Sir Charles here represents exactly the philosophy of Milton, and Squire Sullen the man whom Milton condemns. It is necessary to quote only a few passages:

There is no true marriage between them who agree not in true consent of mind.¹⁴ . . . The solace and satisfaction of the mind is regarded and provided for before the sensitive pleasing of the body.¹⁵ . . . This is the rational burning that marriage is to remedy.¹⁶ . . . What can be fouler incongruity, a greater violence to the reverend secret of nature, than to force a mixture of minds that cannot unite?¹⁷ . . . Marriage is a human society. . . if the mind, therefore, cannot have that due company by marriage that it may reasonably and humanly desire, that marriage can be no human society.¹⁸ . . . The greatest breach [of marriage is] unfitness

⁹ Act V, Sc. iii.

¹⁰ *Prose Works*, III, 271.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹² *Ibid.*, 393.

¹³ Act. V, Sc. i.

¹⁴ *Prose Works*, III, 290

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 206.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 210.

of mind.¹⁹ . . . The unity of mind is nearer and greater than the union of bodies.²⁰

Another and equally important passage follows:

Mrs. Sullen. “. . . Should I lie groaning under a yoke that I can shake off, I were accessory to my own ruin, and my patience were no better than self-murder.”

Dor. “But how can you shake off the yoke? Your divisions don't come within the reach of the law for a divorce.”

Mrs. Stil. “Law! what law can search into the remote abyss of nature? What evidence can prove the *unaccountable disaffections*²¹ of wedlock? Can a jury sum up the endless aversions that are rooted in our souls, or can a bench give judgment upon antipathies?”²²

Here are echoes of Milton in every word. Milton launches into a long argument concerning the ruin and suicide which an ill-mated marriage is to those suffering under its yoke. But the law permits no divorce for the cause which Milton considers the greatest cause of all. Milton's proposition in the *Doctrine and Discipline* was this:

That indisposition, unfitness or contrariety of mind, arising from a cause in nature unchangeable, hindering and ever likely to hinder the main benefits of conjugal society, which are solace and peace, is a greater reason of divorce than natural frigidity especially if there be. . . mutual consent.²³

Milton also maintained, as does Mrs. Sullen, that the law could not have any determining hand in a thing so secret and private as troubles between husband and wife.

The radical and innocent affections of nature. . . is not within the diocese of the law to tamper with.²⁴ . . . But because this is such a secret kind of fraud or theft, as cannot be discovered by law. . . therefore to divorce was never counted a political or civil offence. . . The law can only appoint the just and equal conditions of divorce.²⁵ . . . God. . . . [did not] authorize a judicial court to toss about and divulge the *unaccountable*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* 339.

²¹ Italics mine.

²² Act. III, Sc. iii.

²³ *Prose Works*, III. 185.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 265.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 267-8.

and secret reason of *disaffection* between man and wife, as a thing most improperly answerable to any such kind of trial.²⁶

The following is even more striking:

Dor. "They [the courts] never pretended, sister; they never meddle but in case of uncleanness."²⁷

Mrs. Sul. "Uncleanness! O sister! *casual violation* is a *transient injury* and may possibly be repaired, but can radical hatreds be reconciled? No, no, sister, nature is the first lawgiver."²⁸

Milton preaches precisely the same doctrine:

Natural hatred, whenever it arises, is a greater evil in marriage than the accident of adultery, a greater defrauding, a greater injustice.²⁹ . . . They [men] would be juster in their balancing between natural hatred and *casual adultery*. this being but a *transient injury*, and soon amended. . . but that other being an unspeakable and unremitting sorrow and offence.³⁰ . . . To forbid dislike against the guiltless instinct of nature is not within the province of any law to reach.³¹

The conclusion from these parallels is incontestable: Farquhar had been reading Milton, and was deeply under his influence; so great, in fact, was that influence, that without it, Farquhar's last and greatest play could not have been written as we know it. The divorce ideas of our dramatist assume a seriousness greater than they otherwise might have done, when we know that their source lies in documents so profound as those of Milton. And may we not suggest, finally, that this employment of Milton in restoration drama, is a unique signal of the great seriousness which even then was beginning to fill the volumes of English letters?

MARTIN A. LARSON

²⁶ *Ibid.* 263.

²⁷ *Beaux' Stratagem*, Act III, Sc. iii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Prose Works*, III, 254.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*