

The Concept of Honour in Caragiale's Female Character

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Abstract: In Caragiale's literary universe, the drama of the female character is limited to "farce", as Ioana Pârvolescu defined it. The romantic literary model of angelic womanhood, in which honour and virtue represent the focus of female existence, experiences a process of dilution, being ironically disconcerted by the author, step by step.

Keywords: honour, Romanticism, female character, literary representation, irony.

Honour, apart from virtue, is a dynamic concept, deeply related to the way society changes along the decades. It can be perceived as code of conduct or social convention, either quietly accepted or loudly preached. Associated with "male authority", the concept of honour had its glory days in literature. Heroic attitude, pride, dignity and bravery were requisite, all being defining elements of the medieval chivalrous model.

During the Romantic century, masculine honour remains faithful to the original chivalrous pattern only up to a point, because, once the dilution process of the dominant masculine model begun, the concept of honour itself gradually lost its power. The process of weakening of these concepts that marks a change of paradigm is visible in Caragiale's works, where ridicule is brought to the rank of art.

In the Western bourgeois universe, the inherited code of honour does not abandon the well established values of conduct. Those values still emphasize moral discipline, constraining of sexuality and fertility, proof of courage, loyalty and bravery in combat (N. Robert 1994, 47). The feminine quality which largely corresponds to the male's honour is 'virtue'. The woman of the 19th century is 'glorified as the angel of the household, protector of the home, her role is to be a mother, housekeeper and wife, guardian of morality, culture and religion' (G. Bock, 2002, 110). In the European Bourgeois society, although the woman has the moral and cultural mission to civilize the proximal universe, the male still has the dominant role as the being superior by reason to the fragile woman, who, while still depending on him for a good name, becomes bolder and bolder.

Within the Romanian literary 19th century Caragiale is part of the category of the "ironic writers". Two of his famous predecessors are Negruzzi, with his superb heroine, "Lady B.", and Hasdeu with "The Little One", an angel of the suburbs. However, Caragiale cynically separates himself from the romantic cliché of the Forty-Eight's literature that entraps the woman in an obsolete angelic corset.

This essay takes into account a limited number of characters, but they are emblematic for the author's rendering of the concept of honour, with the variant of feminine virtue, which makes them representative for Caragiale's literary work as a whole. Wealthy ladies, Veta (**A Stormy Night**), Zoe (**A Lost Letter**), Aglae Verogopolu (**Small Savings**) and dame Sofica (**Honeymoon**) are all part of the category of respectable wives and, in dame Sofica's case, diligent mothers. An important distinction must be made here: the almost twenty years that separate the sketches from his comedies also reveal a change in Caragiale's rendering of the concept of honour.

In the comedies – **A Stormy Night** and **A Lost Letter** – the literary criticism discovered a narrative which is excessively and explicitly oriented towards honour and virtue in characters like Master Dumitrache or Zoe. When Dumitrache, with a bellicose attitude, says: 'My pride is gone. I don't care about anything anymore. My honour as a family man was tarnished, now nothing else matters, even if I go to jail' (Caragiale 1984,78), he is just a ridiculous vestige of the "Pater families" image that has dominated the literary universe for so long. The romantic heroism, a quality exclusively attributed to male characters, is here reduced to a pompous speech about "pride" and to the "enraged" gesture of pulling a sword "ready to go to battle", all dismissed by Veta with a loud laugh.

The obsession for honour represents an ironic dilution of the image of the bourgeois patriarch for whom personal attributes are his second nature. It guarantees his identity as an honourable man leading an honourable family. The obsession with his honour is the reason that keeps Master Dumitrache, merchant and captain of the city's guard, from publicly cop the "tramp" who messes with his sister in law. It is also a reason for Chiriac, his second, to protect Dumitrache's honour as a family man when he is not around. Having a strong belief in his noble mission, as he sees himself as the protecting "patriarch" of the household, Master Dumitrache, who acquired an ideal image of the two women in his household, considers himself the sole authority fully responsible for their honour (and virtue). In his eyes, his wife Veta and her sister Zita are fragile and shy angels of the house. He would not talk "straight" to Veta, and does not want to "explain to her the formals of things so she's not embarrassed". (Caragiale 1984,81) He feels that Zita, a 'romantic' girl who attended three years in a girls' boarding school, must be saved from the hands of the 'tramp' who was "treating her with insults and beatings" and "did not care about his own honour as a family man" (Caragiale 1984,82), despite his pretence of being a merchant himself.

The same image of womanhood is revealed in another male character, the respectable Trahanache, another "patter families" whose imaginary portrait of honourable man "is contradicted by the real portrait of an imbecile cuckold". (Fanache 1984,123) He sees Zoe, his wife, in the same idealistic light: she is a sensitive angel, a priestess of the home. She must be protected by both the "venerable" husband and the "honourable" lover from the despicable "forgery" she was framed for by the "miserable" Catavencu. As we know, the saviour will be the sly and "venerable" Trahanache. The lover, Tipatescu, a poor caricature of the romantic lover, suggests running away as solution to the situation. In Zoe's spoken interventions, the term honour is only pronounced once, with the meaning of "reputation" or "prestige". The lost letter could cost her her honour; she would become the subject of everyone's gossip, with

or without a motif. Tipatescu does not give in to Catavencu's requests and Zoe finds him guilty of prioritizing his political interests over the honour and life of the woman he loves.

In the literary critics have was mentioned time and time again Zoe's ability to manipulate, graciously or harshly, the men in her life, so we are not going to reiterate. Our point of interest in the two dramas was the portrait of the apparently strong husband, pater familias who, following the dominant pattern of the epoch, naively treat the woman like a fragile being, sheltered in the golden cage of the home.

Characters which are gradually revealed as devoid of both heroic and tragic substance are brought to light by the irony which envelops the text. The concepts of honour and virtue are reduced to a grotesque tirade, for both the masculine characters and their "sensitive" consorts. As we stated earlier, the time distance that separates Caragiale's comedies (1879 - **A Stormy Night**, 1884 – **A Lost letter**) from his sketches (gathered in the volume **Moments**, published in 1901) is also the distance that marks the author's definitive separation from the literary idealised typology of angelic femininity.

The two sketches we have in view here, **Small Savings** and **The Honeymoon**, focus on the image of the high life wife and mother, two feminine typologies present in most of Caragiale's sketches. There is a progression, said the literary critic Garabet Ibraileanu, from Mita Baston to other characters in Caragiale's sketches (Ibraileanu 1930,85) that marks the "raising of the masses", the evolution of our bourgeoisie. But, no matter how high on the social scale the characters are, says Ibraileanu, Caragiale is interested in the "slum as spiritual category", that includes the upper class as well. The two sketches included in the section dedicated to family life are focused on dynamic characters, true city girls. This mobility is "the consequence of the urbanization, which allows a decent lady to get out and conquer the centre of the big city" (Aries and Duby 1997,117). It is no longer unusual for a lady to travel by train, like Madame Sofica, who joins her daughter for a trip, nor is it awkward to travel all the way across town on her own in a horse carriage, like charming Madam Aglae Verigopolu in **Small Savings**.

Unlike in the comedies, where the auctorial voice is hidden behind the character's action and gestures, in his sketches the author, apparently, takes the liberty to get involved in the plot. Here, the author-narrator ironically complies with the situation he narrates and emphasizes the moral fault of the world he lives in. Consider the following example where the narrator notes the words of his friend, Iancu Verigopolu:

Because if Mr Georgescu had not been a scumbag, I would have kept my job; I wouldn't have submitted my resignation... But for a miserable three hundred lei salary, well, what am I saying three hundred, I would take home two hundred fifty six and fifty... and to put up with all the annoyanc, arrogance and lack of education of a boss... (Caragiale1984,100)

His friend, Iancu Verigopolu, man of a strong and harmonious character, argue about his honour as a dignified and true person, discursively overwhelming and perplexing the narrator with the emphasis of an antic philosopher. Verigopolu genuinely thinks that the honour of a man who is poor but honest is more important than any attempt at finding another job. The image of the husband - the absolute master, protector of the household who channels all his energies to provide a decent leaving for his family – proves to be nothing more than empty

rhetoric. The stronger and ampler he speaks, idealistically cultivating his conviction in sustaining his principles - which confuses the narrator – the less he acts.

Aglae Verigopolu, the wife, an elegant and charming dame, both energetic and efficient is the one who "takes care" of things in a spectacular way, obtaining what seemed impossible for the husband – luxurious housing: 'living room, four bedrooms, bathroom, kitchen, servants' room, basement, private yard, tout-a-l'égout, little garden' (Caragiale 1984,166). Even more, the rental contract is closed for three years and six months' rent is paid in advance. She still plays her role as lady of the house up to a level: she invites the narrator to eat lunch at their place after she does herself the grocery shopping for marvellous dishes, all paid from her "small savings". After lunch she gets busy and goes out to visit her "tante". Her "little rooster" stays home for drinks with the confused narrator, who, in amazement, "watches again, like an imbecile" (Caragiale 1984,169) how the husband "makes" a lot of money from his wife's "small savings", oblivious to the fact that she is using her feminine charms to provide a better living and – of course – to support the 'strong character' of her husband.

Another feminine figure that stirs the professional interest of the writer is the mother. We will encounter many mother figures, young or old, among the heroines of Caragiale's short stories. On the other hand, if the husband is usually a puppet, the masculine character seen as a father figure is scarcely present in Caragiale's sketches, in fact, as Ioana Parvulescu remarked, if there, he is completely absent. Thus, the typical domineering masculine pattern is either reduced to caricature or his role in the narrative is otherwise suppressed.

Beginning with the second half of the 19th century, a 'secular religion of mother and family' is publicly promoted. (Lipovetsky 2000, 101). The duty of being a wife and mother is seen as sacrosanct. A woman's meaning in life is to dedicate her entire existence to her husband and to her children's education, to be committed body and soul to her household. As a mother, the woman must be synonym with kindness, goodness, gentleness and sacrifice, especially when she accompanies her offspring everywhere, preoccupied with their happiness.

That is precisely what Madame Sofica does in **The Honeymoon**. She is a "skinny woman, in her forties, who seems to have been really pretty in her younger days; the fiery type, with bright eyes, glimmering and full of ruse" (Caragiale 1984,355). The mother is travelling by train to Pesta, joining her daughter "a striking blonde beauty" and her husband, a portly gentleman, who is not really old, between 50 and 60, dependent on his hearing aid, Kneipp's treatment and some American pills. The apparent normality of this situation is shattered when in the train car, joining the married couple, appears the young and Misu, a "dark skinned man in his thirties, handsome and strongly built" (Caragiale 1984,357). In this short story we will see happening out in the open something that the 19th century would only allow in the sacred space of the house, in the confines of the interior. The embarrassed witness to a love scene between young Mița, the blonde wife, and Misu is none other than the narrator, a haphazard traveller who happen to be assigned a seat in the same car of the train. There is another witness, Madame Sofica, who, unlike any mother in the 19th century, rather protecting her virtue, protects the daughter's flaunting affair instead. From now on, the image of the woman in Caragiale's writings no longer fulfils the role of the supervisory body, but she distances herself from the preoccupation to preserve her honour that we could observe in a character as

dame Joitica. In fact, the portrait of the mother with bright eyes, glimmering and full of ruse, is the hint of a wild youth, just like the daughter's, find stabilită complicitatea pe linia moravurilor.

The question that arises as a logical conclusion at the end of this analyze is: do Caragiale's prose really portrays women in the process of emancipation? They are, indeed, dynamic characters, they 'own the town' and travel a lot for business or pleasure; therefore, from this point of view the emancipation is obvious. However, this is a horizontal evolution and deals with the conquering of the space, but has nothing in common with the spiritual emancipation that takes place vertically, in the intrinsic core of being.

The imposing pater familias' pattern of the masculine figure undergoes a significant deterioration process. If the comedies bring forth masculine characters who act under the heroic impulse to protect the woman and place her on a pedestal, (see Tipatescu, Trahanache, Master Dumitrache, Chiriac), quite the opposite, in the **Moments**, the hero is either a puppet (Iancu Verigopolu, the son-in-law), or, in the instance of the character-narrator, he approaches the woman according to the obsolete romantic clichés to the effect that he finds himself inadequate to the new type of femininity.

The femininity still belongs to the private environment, but is, in fact, much less dependent on men, with the result of social liberation. However, Caragiale's female characters emancipation in **Moments** stops here. They don't have the desire for individual recognition and self validation. The woman in comedies and sketches chose a perpetual gravitation around the man – even if he's only just a name – as she does not intend to change her status. This is the only liberty she chooses, this is the ideal scene that allows her to act anyway she wants, and thrive.

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