

## The Problematics of Matrimony in the Light of Gender Interests in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*

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### Abstract

*The Vicar of Wakefield* was defined in the *Monthly Review* of May 1766 (the year of its original edition) as a "singular tale" which was "difficult to characterise." Goldsmith himself looked upon his text as a book that "may be," on the one hand, "amusing with numerous errors, or," on the other hand, "it may be very dull without a single absurdity." In my paper, which will focus on clashes of interests in the novel concerning the propositions of the late eighteenth-century 'marriage market' within and between families, I shall assert that genderised interests, whereas forced to exist and function in the symbolic order of the contemporary *pater familias* as such; may still be profoundly manipulated by the female members of the family in such a manner as will, finally, culminate in a social-cultural 'common denominator,' morally acceptable, virtually, for all parties inside and outside of the vicar's family.

**Key Words:** daughters, father, gender issues, Goldsmith, matrimony

Oliver Goldsmith's only novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, was defined in the *Monthly Review* of May 1766 (the year of its original publication) as a "singular tale" that was "difficult to characterize" (qtd. in Wilton 1923). Goldsmith himself looked upon his text as a book that "may be," on the one hand, "amusing with numerous errors, or," on the other, "it may be very dull without a single absurdity" (qtd. in Wilton 1923). Sir Walter Scott, however, succinctly declared that "we return to it again and again, and bless the memory of an author who contrives so well to reconcile us to human nature" (qtd. in *The Cambridge Guide* 1031).

In my essay, which primarily focuses on clashes of interests in the novel concerning the opportunities provided by late-eighteenth-century "marriage market" from the viewpoint of an Anglican vicar's family, I shall assert that genderized interests—whereas forced to exist and function in the contemporary *pater familias*'s symbolic order *per se*—may still be open to subtly profound manipulation by female members of the family in such a manner as will, finally, culminate in a social-cultural "common denominator," morally acceptable for all parties inside the Vicar's family.

I shall start with an examination of the figure of the Vicar (Charles Primrose), then move on to a scrutiny of his spouse (Deborah Primrose); finally, I will investigate the daughters' (Olivia and Sophia Primrose) gender interests concerning matrimonial difficulties and their plausible solutions.

Goldsmith assigns the Revd. Dr. Charles Primrose to function as the central male character and first person narrator, not only for the duration of the outlining of the introductory background of the Vicar's patriarchal world, but throughout the novel, primarily to enable readers to grasp the rich, religio-ethical masculinism of Dr. Primrose, whose moral strength is continually put to such psycho-social tests as intermittently proceed from both inside and

outside of his family.

To attract and to confine readers to the Vicar's individual social-verbal microcosm, Goldsmith opens the narrative with the personal thoughts of the narrator-character Dr. Primrose:

I was ever of opinion, that the honest man who married and brought up a large family, did more service than he who continued single, and only talked of population. [...] I [...] chose my wife, as she did her wedding gown, not for a fine glossy surface, but such qualities as would wear well. [...] The year was spent in a moral and rural amusement, [...]. We had no revolutions to fear, nor fatigues to undergo; all our adventures were by the fire-side, and all our migrations from the blue bed to the brown. [...] The temporal concerns of our family were chiefly committed to my wife's management; as to the spiritual I took them entirely under my own direction. (*The Vicar of Wakefield* 25, 29)

The first few lines of the novel already allude to the Vicar's primary concern (marriage and its attendant propositions). The passage is interesting also because of its quite undisguised view of gender roles within the institution of marriage. First, the wife is allowed to choose the material of the wedding gown, but this is as far as her freedom goes; the husband chooses her, there is no question of reciprocity or mutuality. Second, the distribution of roles is quite clear: the wife takes care of the worldly worries, while the husband, who is conveniently also a vicar, looks after the spiritual welfare of the family. This serves as the declaration of the politics of the text, at least of the Vicar, and to emphasize its significance as thematic preoccupation. Not much later Dr. Primrose states that "[m]atrimony was always one of my favourite topics, and I wrote several sermons to prove its happiness; but there was a peculiar tenet which I made a point of supporting: [...], I valued myself upon being a strict monogamist" (*The Vicar of Wakefield* 29). This latter categorical declaration subsequently proves to be of crucial significance in assessing Dr. Primrose's value judgement pertaining to his elder daughter's unforeseen, almost irrevocably fatal experiences with Squire Thornhill, the morally unstable and unpredictable antipode to the Vicar.

Dr. Primrose, who proves himself to be practically throughout the plot an 'omnipotent', although not omnipotent, father—"father" significantly both in the temporal and the spiritual sense of the world—endeavours to sustain his psycho-social family superstructure among adversities with exemplary stoicism. His primary aim for his daughters' future wedded life is to lay the spiritually and financially untroubled foundation of a domestic structure that is highly similar, although not necessarily identical, to his; where the laws of existence are defined completely by the head of the symbolic order, and this head (the future spouses of Olivia and Sophia) ought to be the replica of the Anglican Vicar, irrespective of his apparent secular role in the social fabric. This "plan" entails the impending presence of latent problems as sources of conflicts associated with matrimony: On what sociological ground is it possible and safe to choose a spouse for Olivia and Sophia?

Conflicting gender interests, as ever more inevitable, mental, tension-creating phenomena with regard to the father-mother binary opposition, rise to the surface in different forms. Despite being aware of a country squire's obviously amorous advances, Mrs. Primrose provides a laconic and illogical, *geographical* answer to the cardinal question posed above: "This I am assured of, that London is the only place in the world for all manner of husbands" (*The*

*Vicar of Wakefield* 80).

Instead of a terse, authoritative maxim, the Vicar, however, struggles to prove his parental circumspection in his reactions concerning ominous marital decisions within his sacred domestic sphere. He has his well-established motive to behave with circumspection, since “characters such as Squire Thornhill and Mrs. Primrose are repeatedly said to harbour ‘secret reasons’ and ‘hidden motives’; they take ‘secret pleasures,’ give ‘secret instances’ of affection, betray or successfully conceal ‘latent plots,’ and seek to further their schemes through ‘private conferences’” (Patey 241).

What Mr. Primrose considers the surreptitious machinations of Mrs. Primrose, Squire Thornhill and Mr. Burchell directly connected to the Primrose domestic affairs shake the moral foundations of the Vicar’s religious ethos and its surrounding tangible world. No wonder, then, that, initially, Dr. Primrose deliberately looks upon both Squire Thornhill’s and Mr. Burchell’s advances towards his daughters as aggressive male interference with his “personal property,” even though they themselves, up to a certain point, obviously try to gain the favour of the *pater familias*. The unintentional effects of the two, more or less, eligible suitors are tremendous upon the Vicar’s domestic affairs. As a melancholic self-confession, he asserts the following:

I now begin to find that all my long and painful lectures upon temperance, simplicity, and contentment, were entirely disregarded. The distinctions lately paid us by our betters awaked that pride which I had laid asleep, but not removed. Our windows again, as formerly, were filled with washes for the neck and face. The sun was dreaded as an enemy to the skin without doors, and the fire as a spoiler of the complexion within. My wife observed, that rising too early would hurt her daughters’ eyes, that working after dinner would redden their noses, and she convinced me that the hands never looked so white as when they did nothing. [...] [T]heir former gay companions were cast off as mean acquaintance, and the whole conversation ran upon high life, and high-lived company, [...]. (*The Vicar of Wakefield* 70)

In other words, Dr. Primrose—in spite of his ironic remarks—is bound to confront a potential future power-shift within his family, which, however, does not pose a substitution as threat with regard to the building blocks of patriarchal family structure; none the less, its hitherto appreciated, Judeo-Christian guiding principles may be entirely annihilated by the daughters’ potential spouses. Raymond Hilliard, discussing wider implications of matrimonial difficulties from the father’s aspect, comments:

[The Vicar] fails [...] in the two primary responsibilities of eighteenth-century parents: situating sons in an occupation and supervising the selection of a marriage partner for each child. [...] [H]is desire to see Olivia prosperously married contributes to that most dire of eighteenth-century family calamities, the ruin of a daughter, and this by a philanderer whose actions mock her father’s attachment [...] to the principle of monogamy. (Hilliard 465)

A prosperous marriage for the Primrose daughter is a cause upon which the Primrose parents seem to be in agreement; Mrs. Primrose, however, lays claim to fewer stipulations to an advantageous matrimony than her spouse. Their bankruptcy early in the novel as well as the

subsequent devastation of their house by fire compels the mother to choose, without due discretion, the first financially—and if possible—socially eligible man for at least one of her daughters to secure thereby the future of the whole family.

Throughout the novel, the Vicar alludes to his spouse as his appropriately responsive, complementary entity, who, however, is not above either overt or covert confrontations if she considers her interests threatened or curtailed. A memorable instance in connection with this is when the family first encounters Squire Thornhill, and Mrs. Primrose immediately regards him as a prospective son-in-law:

[A] young gentleman of [...] genteel appearance came forward [...] with a careless superior air. He [...] was going to salute my daughters, as one certain of a good reception; [...]. [H]e let us know his name was Thornhill, and that he was owner of the estate that lay for some extent round us. [...] [W]e soon became more familiar; and perceiving musical instruments lying near, he begged to be favoured with a song. As I did not approve of such disproportionated acquaintances, I winked upon my daughters in order to prevent their compliance; but my hint was counteracted by one from their mother; so that, with a cheerful air, they gave us a favourite song of Dryden's. (*The Vicar of Wakefield* 45)

In this case, the mother acts as a subject of equal authority with the father; consequently, her volition is given due respect, even if it implies the acquiescence in the father's temporarily inferior social status by all the family members. Her daughters receive behavioural patterns by which they are capable of not merely surviving the increasingly oppressive force of the surrounding masculine micro- and macrosociety, but also experiencing repeated triumphs over patriarchal figures in direct relationship with them. The opposite case—the mother's eclipse—would have disastrous consequences for young female subjects.

Marianne Hirsch points out that “[m]aternal absence and silence, [...], rob the heroine of important role models for her development, of the matriarchal power which could facilitate her own growth into womanhood” (44). Hirsch adds that “even within patriarchy, women can be powerful if connected with each other” (44), and where else would it be more important for mothers—and daughters of marriageable age—to effectively express their co-existent mental strength, than in managing the not infrequently delicate, preliminary socio-cultural phenomena/experiences/circumstances of a potential, future matrimonial life?

Mrs. Primrose's conscious antagonism does not manifest itself only towards her spouse, but she reveals manipulative, though carefully restrained, rivalry towards her daughters as well. She “could not avoid discovering the pride of her heart, by assuring [the Vicar], that though the little chit did it so cleverly, all the steps were stolen from herself” (*The Vicar of Wakefield* 66-67). She vindicates and fosters her maternal interests not only in the management of the “local” marriage market but also in strengthening her own social status and respectability within a family, in which the eighteenth-century social/cultural ideology reduces her to an inferior social position. None the less, the Vicar occasionally takes her seriously and acknowledges her qualities as a dominant female subject:

But as men are most capable of distinguishing merit in women, so the ladies often form the truest judgements of us. The two sexes seem placed as spies upon each other, and

are furnished with different abilities, adapted for mutual inspection. [...] [W]omen have a much stronger sense of female error than men. (*The Vicar of Wakefield* 65, 152)

On other occasions, more or less obvious ironic allusions are expressed by the narrator to Mrs. Primrose's presumed, low mental capacity, consequently to her paternalistically justifiable social inferiority, as though the Vicar intended to "educate" her by means of humiliation:

She could read any English book without much spelling; but for pickling, preserving and cookery none could excel her. She prided herself also upon being an excellent contriver in housekeeping; though I could never find that we grew richer with all her contrivances. [...] The little republic to which I gave laws, was regulated in the following manner: [...] I allowed half an hour for this meal [breakfast], and an hour for dinner; which time was taken up in innocent mirth between my wife and daughters, and in philosophical arguments between my son and me. [...] [To Mrs. Primrose] "Confute me in argument, child!" cried I. "You mistake there, my dear, I believe there but few that can do that: I never dispute your abilities at making a goose-pye, and I beg you'll leave argument to me." (*The Vicar of Wakefield* 25, 41, 48)

The patriarchal, law-governed "little republic" (which is anything but a republic) is geared to the perpetuation of the gendered power relations of the masculine symbolic order. Not even *one* person as a weak link is tolerated in the domestic framework that would endanger its well-established, androcentric superstructure.

For this reason, the Vicar must pay constant attention, besides his spouse, to his daughters as well. The daughters pose the most serious threats to the Vicar's mentally-spiritually resistant attitude of mind concerning his status inside the domestic sphere. As the previous quotation shows – he provides the laws of the community – the whole point of the father's position is that he is both part of the domestic setup, and thus being part of it, and being outside it, he provides its laws; the key to his power is precisely this double role which is not given to any of the other family members, who are thoroughly and permanently inside the family.

Olivia and Sophia share fairly similar marital interests with their parents—despite their perpetual conflicts as to the method of procuring a spouse. The parents, however, harbour almost fatal misconceptions in connection with the potential suitors' connubial ethos. The primary result of their common delusion is a series of psycho-social traumatic neuroses concerning Olivia's conjugal exigencies, and an aborted marriage proposal in the case of Sophia's rudimentary love affair.

The daughters' relation especially to their father is largely determined by their mother's expected interference. This relation is prone to become traumatic when Olivia does not struggle against her abduction, which spiritually unbalances her father, and when Sophia experiences a highly similar situation; she, however, seeks assistance, noticing Mr. Burchell in the vicinity, who, rescuing her, causes severe mortification to the already imprisoned Vicar on account of their previously deteriorated relationship.

The manner in which Goldsmith provides a hardly believable, positive, comprehensive solution for the marital crisis in the Vicar's family at the end of the novel is reminiscent of typically recursive, problem-solving narrative techniques frequently applied in eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century fiction such as, for instance, in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), or in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1857).

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