

PATRIZIA PASTORE

## Power and Submission: Gender Roles in William Byrd's *Secret Diary*

In eighteenth-century Virginia women were trapped in a form of servility by the attitudes of a patriarchal and male-dominated society. Their status of forced submission was implied in a rigid distinction of sex roles, based on the assumption of the unequal but complementary nature of masculine and feminine virtues. As Daniel Blake Smith pointed out (66), this notion "was made abundantly clear by Lord Halifax in *The Lady's New Year's Gift or Advice to a Daughter*, which was published in 1688 and went through fifteen editions until 1765:

We are made of differing *Tempers*, that our Defects may the better be Mutually Supplied: Your *Sex* wanteth our *Reason* for your *Conduct*, and our *Strength* for your *Protection*; Ours wanteth your *Gentleness* to soften and to entertain us.<sup>1</sup>

In some way this careful formulation was still resumed in the nineteenth century by Thomas R. Dew, a pro-slavery theorist who wrote three essays for the recently founded *Southern Literary Messenger* under the general title "On the Characteristic Differences between the Sexes, and on the Position and Influence of Woman in Society" (Taylor 148-51).

On such account early gentry families trained their children according to sex-typed educational plans by the time they reached the age of six or seven. Boys were entrusted to their fathers, who defined male identity and began to shape them into strong, independent, and self-improving individuals in a position to lead

an active public life. Girls remained under the influence of their mothers, finding in them passive and submissive figures with whom they could easily identify; since their two ultimate goals were to be marriage and motherhood, they were relentlessly destined to be relegated to the private world of the "great house".

Furthermore, parents recognized that sons had to enjoy the privilege of a high education, essential for preserving family status, managing plantations, and becoming members of the colonial ruling class. Daughters were just provided with an education circumscribed to appropriate subjects such as domestic economy and female advice literature, exhorting them to develop their compliance and their natural "accomplishments" of gentleness, modesty and compassion.

William Byrd's *Secret Diary*, whose entries provide material for an extensive picture of Virginia aristocracy in the first half of the eighteenth century, documents that the planter shared completely this sex-typed educational plan. In the first place he used to spend more leisure time with his only son William than with his daughters Anne, Maria, and Jane. Moreover, he gave William both educational opportunities and a free hand, confining his daughters within their domestic circle. It is enough to remark that at the age of twelve the boy was allowed to go to horse races and come home "not till dark" (*Secret Diary 1739-41*, 93), while his sisters were permitted to go out by themselves just to pay a visit to a relative or a friend.

An inferior minority, women were not held in great consideration. Recalling Lord Halifax's way of thinking, Byrd felt their proper role to be ornamental - he "often frequented the company of Women, not so much to improve his mind as to polish his behaviour" (281) - and hardly kept himself from expressing his disesteem towards them. The *Secret Diary* attests that he perceived ladies as gossipy, emotionally volatile, and given to unpredictable moods, with a natural tendency to lose time in getting dressed and to make strategic use of their tears. On January 9, 1711, an overseer's wife came to Westover to beg him not to dismiss her husband, but he "would not speak to her for fear of being persuaded by her tears which women have always ready at

command" (*Secret Diary 1709-12*, 285). There is nothing to be surprised that years later Byrd wrote *The Female Creed*, a satire on women's credulity and superstition, equalling the most virulent antifeminist tracts of his age.<sup>2</sup>

Though little heeded for their opinions, upper-class women, unlike those of lower rank - regarded as mere sexual objects -, occupied the celebrated pedestal and, at least outwardly, were worshipped and treated with great respect. Byrd's journal proves that chivalrous behaviour was an integral part of men's attitude towards the fair sex. As the much-mentioned word "gallant" suggests, gentlemen felt always bound to treat ladies with gallantry and it was due to sudden acts of God if they seldom failed this duty: "it was extremely hot so that we sat without our [capes] notwithstanding the ladies" (380). Obviously there could be some rare exception to the rule, but gentlemen lacking in chivalrous behaviour constantly exposed themselves to harsh criticism:

...I went to court to hear a case between Colonel Hill and Mrs. Harrison where Will Randolph behaved himself rudely and so did Colonel Hill, for which I told them both they ought to be put into the stocks (579).

Nevertheless, "the deference shown to [ladies] in the form of Southern chivalry", at first brought about by the lack of women in the colonies but closely linked to their idealized image as heavenly and passive creatures, "was the deference ordinarily shown to an honored but distrusted servant" (Taylor 146). Hence their privileged status did not release plantation women from remaining on the fringe of society, escaping the impossibility of choosing their destiny, and being unceasingly sacrificed: "a young lady was supposed to be 'the dutiful daughter of her father' until she became the 'obedient wife of her husband'" (Barck and Lefler 305).

Based on the notion of "well-ordered patriarchal family", the same paradigm ideally applied to all plantation members, conjugal relationship depended on a clear understanding and a thorough interaction of roles aimed at ensuring a harmonious, stable, and well-regulated household. A husband's role lay in presiding over the family with unchallenged authority as well as in leading and

protecting. A wife's role required her to be submissive and obedient, to satisfy and please her helpmate, and to display a prowess in managing domestic affairs and rearing children. It is evident that spouses, suffered to keep silent in the background, had to fulfill completely the role assigned to them, because every deviation from the rule would relentlessly compromise the stability of the patriarchal regime. In a sense, the status of wives paralleled the theoretical status of slaves and supporting evidence was still provided a century later by Beverley Tucker's *George Balcombe*:

Let women and negroes alone, and instead of quacking with them, physic your own diseases. Leave them in their humility, their grateful affection, their self-renouncing loyalty, their subordination of the heart, and let it be your study to become worthy to be the objects of these sentiments.<sup>3</sup>

In the light of what has been previously said, it is necessary to state that Byrd's relationship with his first wife Lucy Parke, at least according to the *Secret Diary*, is not at all representative of most planters' married life, since the notion of "well-ordered patriarchal family" is not to be found in it. However, the vast amount of information about their repeated disagreements can help us identify both the patterns of power and submission and the standards of rigid division of gender roles inside the patriarchal regime.<sup>4</sup>

As their frequent quarrels and somewhat scanty sexual life prove, the Byrds' match was not a happy one. No doubt they shared an incompatibility of character increased by Lucy's ill-tempered personality. Yet their unsuccessful union cannot be simplistically ascribed to an arranged marriage, for in those days matters of economic class and social status, rather than companionship or romantic love, often dominated marriage choices. To some extent, according to the current notion of "well-ordered patriarchal family", the unhappy match of the Byrd's couple has to be brought back to Lucy's refusal to fulfill her wife's role and therefore to assume her responsibility for ensuring a harmonious and stable household.

Nowadays nobody would obviously blame Lucy for her

frustration in perceiving herself as inferior and subordinate, so much so that Byrd was often exasperating in imposing his authority, even though he had never recourse to violence. Indeed, Lucy was not allowed to take any initiative, either regarding her house and servants, or regarding herself. Suffice it to remark that she was prevented from following the contemporary fashion of plucking her eyebrows in preparation for the Governor's ball on the Queen's birthday. Moreover, she could be compelled to get rid of her personal property and rebuked when she tried to take a book out of the library, plainly violating her husband's masculine world of culture. Not to say that she had to endure his irritating demeanours aimed at asserting men's superiority. On August 27, 1709 he went so far as to cheat at cards, thus transgressing the gentleman code of behaviour, to give her no satisfaction in winning the game.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of that, according to Byrd - and to the set of rules of his time - Lucy was not at all a model wife. The planter's helpmate was regarded as a bad domestic manager as well as a careless and rather gruff mother. Hopeless at housewifery, she happened to give the wrong instructions to her servants and at times she even forgot it, as when she disregarded to make dinner ready for taking a walk with a lady friend. What's more, on occasion she neglected her children - in one instance she forgot to give a medicine to her son Parke - and if she showed herself too hard on them, she could prove to be cruel with Susan, a little niece kept in the family. From her husband's viewpoint, Lucy, besides possessing every "natural" defect of womankind, was spoiled, irresponsible, and irascible. As a matter of fact, at least in his presence, she was prone to behaving like a child and go into hysterics. She could threaten suicide, spurn the food out of spite, neglect herself - when pregnant she climbed over the pales of the garden - and refuse to follow the different kinds of treatment necessary to her delicate health. It seems clear that in Byrd's opinion his wife made few efforts to satisfy and please him, chiefly because she did not pay the slightest respect to him. At times she spoke rudely to her husband, she ill-treated him and found fault with him; furthermore, in the course of a terrible quarrel, she could hardly keep herself

from striking him.<sup>6</sup>

This was enough to arouse a state of tension relentlessly leading to a conflict, though Byrd, "having consideration for a woman's weakness" (*Secret Diary 1709-12*, 15), was inclined to please his spouse, endure her irritating outbursts, and initiate reconciliation. But Lucy, besides refusing to fulfill her wife's role, was also a rebel who tried to misappropriate her husband's, since she challenged his authority almost repeatedly by opening his letters, rebuking overseers, and having servants whipped and branded against his will. To Byrd's mind her insubordination was a threat to masculine supremacy as well as an unforgivable outrage he had to avenge through drastic retaliations. Thus he resolved to humiliate his "Governor" - as he ironically nicknamed Lucy (565) - both preventing her from leaving home and flirting publicly with the first woman coming to hand:

I played at [r-m] with Mrs. Chiswell and kissed her on the bed till she was angry and my wife also was uneasy about it, and cried as soon as the company was gone (101)

According to several scholars this entry should be regarded as an evidence of the diarist's doubtful morality. Yet, in particular if we consider other frequent cases, Byrd was not the substantially unfaithful husband that has been depicted, although his behaviour was wholly modeled upon the sexual conventions widespread among eighteenth-century gentlemen. His advances to Mrs. Chiswell, apparently effected to anger Lucy, were likely to remain a sole episode and his flirts with other ladies - quite ordinary in an age of libertinism - took place just once or twice and anyhow never led to fornication. Likewise, if on rare occasions he coveted another woman, he never carried on his design and, what's more, his fancy of an extramarital intercourse was chiefly suggested by a need to offset his wife's lack of attentions and the possible implication that it had to do with his virile inadequacy.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, though Byrd ended by imposing himself whenever a clash of wills occurred, noting with self-satisfaction in entries such as "however, ... [I] got the better of her, and maintained my

authority" (296), Lucy's insubordination deeply undermined his confidence to hold a commanding position and, consequently, his own masculine identity. It is then to this sense of insecurity that we should bring back the diarist's records about his sexual strength and prowess. The urgency to remark his aggressive marital sexual life, his efficacy as his wife's lover, and the various places where they had sexual encounters denote that in Byrd's mind sex was also, if not most of all, a means to check his virility and, ultimately, to reassume the reins of power over his wife. It is significant that sometimes he resorted to sex even to settle quarrels, since his decision to have sexual encounters seems to conceal not so much an emotional impulse of reconciliation as a compulsion to seal peace with his own final achievement.<sup>8</sup>

In Byrd's sexual behaviour we can also catch a glimpse of a way to react to those officially repressive sexual codes on whose ground the concept of eros was seen as quite bad, even within marriage. This view, which was not changed but in post-Victorian Age, is explicit in New England works - see Cotton Mather's *Manuductio ad Ministerium*, where the author censures the erotic play between husband and wife -, and there is no evidence that it was shared in the South. Yet, nothing entitles us to believe that in Southern colonists' mind it was not an aspect liable to repression. A possible confirmation is provided by the *Secret Diary* and in particular by the portion for 1717-1721, in which Byrd often confesses his sense of guilt because he "committed uncleanness", picked up a whore in the streets of London, and sought to have a sexual encounter with his maid Annie.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever their married life might be, many planters made use of sex to dominate their wives. Sex, however, was a double-edged weapon, since women made also use of it to bind their husbands to them and, indirectly, to exert their power. It goes without saying that this had nothing to do with a strategy of conquest, for the concept of eros as pleasure was an unequivocally removed category. Men always initiated sexual practices and women underwent them from a sense of duty or, at the best, lived them out of affection, being unacquainted with both the techniques of an uninhibited practice and the malice of experience. Rather, wives

had learnt to take advantage of sex as a means to get repeatedly pregnant and therefore to entrap their men appealing to their conventional sense of responsibility. In short, every pregnancy became a downright blackmailing, apart from a kind of revenge on the master-husband.

Lucy Byrd plainly adopted this tactic, inasmuch as she wanted children notwithstanding her delicate health and her lacking of maternal sentiment. But the planter's second wife was not at all inferior, as a letter from Byrd to his cousin Jane Pratt Taylor points out:

She was delivered of a huge boy in September last and is so unconscionable as to be breeding again, ... The truth of it is, she has her reasons for procreating so fast. She ... is apprehensive I should marry again, if she should start first out of this world, but is determined to prevent [that] by leaveing me to[o] great an encumbrance ... I knew no remedy but to make a trip to England some times, ... But then she'll be revenged of me, and redeem her lost years by having 2 at a time when I return.<sup>10</sup>

Of course women were conscious that too frequent pregnancies could endanger their health and in order to delay conception most of them were accustomed to breast-feed their offspring for about eighteen months. Actually, the absence of an adequate medical care made childbirth at home full of danger and infant mortality rates extremely high. Medical knowledge was slight by modern standards, in particular about pregnancy which was still considered a sickness. Natural remedies, such as the common practice of bleeding pregnant women to prevent miscarriage, were often counterproductive. Furthermore, planter-physicians, who mostly depended on medical literature, knew almost nothing about gestation and had to trust local midwives before they acquired experience. Even a learned family doctor as Byrd took down in his diary that a midwife taught him "to reckon 20 weeks from the time a woman is quick when she will seldom fail to be brought to bed" (*Secret Diary 1709-12*, 77).

At any rate men remained generally away from their wives'

entire delivery and recovery process. Besides a midwife, female kins and friends managed childbirth, took care of the mother, and provided emotional comfort in case of premature birth. When more than once Lucy Byrd miscarried, her cousin Elizabeth Harrison, the minister's wife, and other women stood by her until she recovered completely and got over the trauma of abortion (142, 365-67).

This mutual assistance among women is a thorough exemplification of their strong emotional and affective ties. Bound together by a sex-segregating patriarchal society, women had woven a network of friendships where they could find sympathy and complicity, as well as a consciousness of their own cultural role. In such a context the exclusively female opportunity of procreating was another linking-up factor. As a matter of fact motherhood represented a real revenge on a male-dominated world, a special event that women had to share together, leaving men out of any involvement.

1 George Savile, the first marquis of Halifax, was the author of some miscellaneous writings revealing the way of thinking of the late seventeenth-century English gentleman by whom the Virginia aristocracy was inspired.

2 The *Female Creed*, which Byrd must have written about 1725, falls within that kind of fashionable "prose de société" known as character sketches. In this pamphlet the author, by means of suggestive pseudonyms, makes fun of several superstitious ladies he met in London, resolving to confirm that beliefs in spirits, dreams, and divination are particularly typical of women.

3 Quoted in Taylor 153.

4 In the very few entries about his married life with the sweet-tempered and submissive heiress Maria Taylor, Byrd never mentions a single clash of wills, leading us to believe that with his second wife he did succeed in creating a harmonious and well-regulated patriarchal family.

5 *Secret Diary 1709-12*, 296, 53, 461, 75.

6 *Id.* 18, 19, 137, 461, 118, 225, 129, 180-81, 294, 494, 574, 368-69, 38, 400, 105, 17.

7 Regardless of the statements of authoritative critics such as as Inge (5), Marambaud (65), Smith (163), and Wright (341), Byrd, according to his journal, was not an impenitent womanizer. If on the whole he was a faithful husband - even his few approaches to black

women were not aimed at a real sexual encounter -, as a widower he did not lead a licentious life, apart from the 1717-21 period (see *London Diary*) when a serious psychologic breakdown caused him a pathological frantic search for loose women.

8 *Secret Diary 1709-12*, 253, 337, 214, 275, 293, 411, 570, 271-72, 321, 446, 541, 543, 583.

9 In some way, Byrd's relationship with Annie Wilkinson has also been misinterpreted, since the *London Diary* leads us to believe that the planter and his maid shared a passion that rigid social rules forced not to express.

10 William Byrd to Jane Pratt Taylor, April 3, 1729, *Byrd Correspondence*, I, 391-92. Quoted in Smith 164.

#### *Works Cited*

Barck, Oscar Theodore, and Hugh Talmage Lefler. *Colonial America*. New York: Macmillan, 1958 (2nd. ed., 1968).

Byrd, William. *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712*. Eds. L.B. Wright and Marion Tinling. Richmond: Dietz P., 1941.

- . *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1739-1741, with Letters and Literary Exercises, 1696-1726* Eds. M. H. Woodfin and Marion Tinling. Richmond: Dietz P., 1942.

- . *William Byrd of Virginia, The London Diary (1717-1721) and Other Writings*. eds. L.B. Wright and Marion Tinling. New York: Oxford U.P., 1958.

Inge, M. Thomas. "William Byrd of Westover: The First Southern Gentleman and Author". *Virginia Cavalcade* 37.1 (Summer 1987): 4-15.

Marambaud, Pierre. *William Byrd of Westover (1674-1744)*. Charlottesville: D.P. of Virginia, 1971.

Smith, Daniel Blake. *Inside the Great House. Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society*. Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 1980 (2nd ed., 1986).

Taylor, William R. *Cavalier and Yankee. The Old South and American National Character*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1963.

Wright, Louis B. *The First Gentlemen of Virginia. Intellectual Qualities of the Early Colonial Ruling Class*. Charlottesville: U.P. of Virginia, 1964.