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Patriarchy and the (late)Victorian Middle-Class Family Reconsidered

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of the article is to examine the relations within an upper middle-class family – as depicted by Virginia Woolf in a collection of autobiographical essays, *Moments of Being* – and compare these against the patriarchal model. The ultimate aim is to expose and locate, as early as the last decade of the Victorian era, the signs that a transformation was about to occur.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The Victorian paradigm of the patriarchal roles of *pater familias* and *mater familias* has been analyzed. In conformity with philological methods, appropriate literary evidence is provided.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article first focuses on the concept of the Victorian *pater familias* and *mater familias*. It presents an analysis of the Stephens family who feature in *Moments of Being.* A traditionally conservative perspective with regard to the male family members is juxtaposed with the contrasting viewpoint voiced by the author of the collection.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The analysis of the autobiographical essays reveals certain shifts in the roles of the Victorian *pater familias* and *mater familias* in late-Victorian times. Furthermore, certain rifts in familial relations are uncovered and investigated with reference to differing attitudes to the issue of female education.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The analysis exposed several fissures in the patriarchal model and located these at an earlier date than commonly accepted. It also demonstrated that the first signs of the transformations that would occur in British society were particularly noticeable in the novel attitudes to the question of female education. This may encourage further research of contemporary perspectives on institutional instruction.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **VICTORIAN PATRIARCHY, *PATER FAMILIAS*, *MATER FAMILIAS*, FEMALE EDUCATION, FEMININITY**

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STRESZCZENIE

Wiktoriańska rodzina klasy średniej wobec patriarchatu

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem artykułu jest analiza stosunków patriarchalnych panujących w rodzinach klasy średniej w wiktoriańskiej Anglii, która została przeprowadzona w odniesieniu do relacji zawartej w *Chwilach istnienia* Virginii Woolf. Celem nadrzędnym jest ukazanie pierwszych symptomów nieuchronnej transformacji modelu rodziny, które były zauważalne już w ostatniej dekadzie epoki wiktoriańskiej.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Analiza została przeprowadzona na podstawie pojęć *pater familias* i *mater familias* w odniesieniu do obrazu późnowiktoriańskiej rodziny patriarchalnej, nakreślonego w *Chwilach istnienia*. Argumentację dopełniają odniesienia literackie, wykorzystujące metodę filologiczną.

PROCES WYWODU: W pierwszej kolejności rozważono znaczenie pojęć *pater familias* i *mater familias* w epoce wiktoriańskiej. Następnie, na podstawie *Chwil istnienia*, przeprowadzono analizę relacji patriarchalnych panujących w rodzinie Stephenów – przykładowej rodzinie patriarchalnej. Przyjęto dwa skrajne punkty widzenia w kwestii wykształcenia kobiet, konserwatywny oraz postępowy, wyrażony przez autorkę esejów.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Analiza materiału źródłowego dowodzi, iż redefinicja pojęć *pater familias i mater familias* w patriarchalnej rodzinie późnowiktoriańskiej dotyczyła głównie ich wymiaru społecznego. Interpretacja treści esejów autobiograficznych uzasadnia trafność hipotezy, iż nowatorskie ujęcie kwestii edukacji kobiet uwidoczniło się w Anglii już u schyłku XIX w.

WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE: Analiza wykazała, iż model rodziny patriarchalnej w Wielkiej Brytanii uległ przedefiniowaniu na długo przed wybuchem I wojny światowej. Wartość dodana analizy polega na wykazaniu, iż symptomy transformacji społecznych uwidaczniają się w sferze prywatnej w kontekście edukacyjnym znacznie wcześniej, niż się zazwyczaj zakłada, co z kolei uzasadnia intensywność badań podejmowanych w tym obszarze.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **PATRIARCHAT, *PATER FAMILIAS*, *MATER FAMILIAS*, EDUKACJA KOBIET, KOBIECOŚĆ WIKTORIAŃSKA**

Introduction

"We, Other Victorians"[1] – with these words a groundbreaking study, *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978, p. 2), opens. The phrase denotes an ironically challenging assumption that, disconcertingly enough, twentieth-century Europeans still endorse the

[1] Later in the chapter Foucault mentions the phrase "other Victorians" in a reference to Steven Marcus' 1966 monograph, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality.*

Victorian mind-set – at least, in certain respects. Provocative as the statement certainly is, the phrase is nevertheless a token of the unremitting appeal of Victorian culture in the time of postmodernism; however, despite this, the phrase, and indeed Chapter 1 of the monograph, provides rather pessimistic conclusions about the "Victorian regime" (Foucault, 1978, p. 2) which, according to the author, has never ended since "we continue to be dominated by it even today" (Foucault, 1978, p. 2). However, the issue of Victorian sexuality, and a certain reticence concerning this topic in public discourse, remains beyond the scope of my paper. The starting point for the article is the assumption that the "Victorian regime" in familial relations – in modern stereotypes often equated with the patriarchal hierarchy within Victorian society and Victorian families – did lose its significance as early as the last decade of the Victorian era and that this can be seen in British literature. In my investigation I mainly refer to *Moments of Being*, a collection of autobiographical essays by Virginia Woolf,[2] in order to ascertain the moment when the Victorian family faced new challenges and was on the verge of a transformation. Thus, the focal point of my analysis will be a re-consideration of the patriarchal family model during the time it was weakening and being re-defined.

1. Patriarchy: conceptual considerations

In contemporary public discourse the discussion about patriarchy is bound to involve such issues as male dominance or implied female subjection (Walby, 1990, p. 20; Millett, 1977, p. 35; Giddens, 2006, pp. 467-478), issues beyond the scope of the article. However, one aspect underlying the concept of patriarchy should be emphasized, and even rethought, namely its original legal standing. Although in popular discourse the concept of the *pater familias* – the head of the family and a term bound to appear in an examination of the Roman origins of patriarchy (Saller, 1999, pp. 182-197) – arguably has sociological connotations, originally it was most frequently used in legal documents. In classical Rome the *patria potestas*, i.e. the legal authority of the *pater familias* over family members, was legitimized by several prerogatives, culminating in the expression *ius vitae necisque*.[3] As Saller asserts, a survey of classical texts reveals that, contrary to modern understanding, *pater familias* in most cases merely implied a skillful manager

[2] Biography was one of the leading genres in late-Victorian fiction. However, Woolf declared her wish to write "new biographies," different from those by her predecessors (Booth, 2016, pp. 13-26; Peterson, 1999, *passim*). Woolf's father was the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography.*

[3] That is the power of life and death. *Słownik kultury antycznej* lists other prerogatives, among which is *ius vendendi* that gave the *pater familias* the right to sell his children in times of economic necessity, and the final say in matrimonial matters (Kulesza, 2012, p. 378f; Saller, 1999, pp. 183-193). Lerner argues that *ius vitae necisque* of the head of the family had been already assigned to the father in Mesopotamian society (Lerner, 1986, p. 89).

of property. By contrast, today such an individual is stereotypically imagined as a tyrannical head of a patriarchal family with almost absolute power over its members.

With the passing of time the legal authority of the *pater familias* diminished and contracted. By the late Victorian era the legal position of the head of the family had become, in certain respects, less authoritative; and yet, it was still considerable, especially in matrimonial and economic matters: in the eyes of law, only the head of a Victorian middle-class family was able to act independently, that is *sui iuris* (Piszczek, 1990, p. 572). The robust and unwavering legal position of the Victorian father, alongside primogeniture, that is the right of the first-born legitimate son to claim his father's inheritance, is arguably a source of the modern gender stereotyping of Victorian middle-class families. It seems plausible to assume that the stereotypical image of a severe, patriarchal father may have had two sources; one from ancient times, since there is evidence that in their opposition to the Romans, the Greeks created the image of a Roman father-tyrant in the ancient world (Saller, 1999, p. 191); and one from modern times based on the notion of gender inequality, a notion which is widely featured in Victorian literature.[4]

2. The Victorian middle-class family and patriarchy

2.1. Victorian and patriarchal: implied synonymy

A study of Victorian family life is bound to embrace a multiplicity of approaches, both affirmative and critical. As far as the former is concerned, a renowned collection by Kenneth Grahame, *The Golden Age*, and its sequel, *Dream Days*, conjures up nostalgic visualizations of a happy family at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The popular image of the Victorian middle-class family is that of a seemingly complementary union of individuals, some of whom, namely the father and his sons, act as guardians of the family's female members, whose area of (in)activity is mainly the household. Such a model is a Victorian paradigm of patriarchy whose basic tenet is the demarcation between the public and the private. To some extent, this essentializing conforms with the classical patriarchal model, which generally reserves the public sphere for men and the private sphere, pivoted around the *domus*, for women (Saller, 1999, pp. 193-195).

Nonetheless, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries certain rifts in the popular image of the apparently happy Victorian (upper) middle-class family became visible: patriarchal *potestas* was sometimes, if not directly criticized, then at least called into question by certain female voices. This may have been a result of a social revolution, since in late-Victorian times ever more feminist activist voices were heard alongside those

[4] Virginia Woolf created a memorable image of a Victorian *pater familias* and *mater familias* in *To the Lighthouse*. A discussion on both can be found in my forthcoming article: "Nostos: aspects of nostalgia in 20th-century British prose fiction."

of the Marxist socialists.[5] Yet, in their claims, the social activists mainly referred to "the public patriarchy," i.e. male dominance in the public sphere (Walby, 1990, p. 5). In contrast, in my article I would prefer to concentrate on the fissures in the domestic scene which Walby defines as "private patriarchy." In this context, it is difficult to question the patriarchal as a synonym for the Victorian.

2.2. Patriarchy and the late-Victorian middle-class family in "A Sketch of the Past"

To the wider public, social changes in Britain arguably only occurred in the wake of WWI, as a result of a re-definition of a woman's place in British society in the inter-war period. Nonetheless, the transformation had been initiated much earlier and its first signs are noticeable in literature, both fiction and autobiography. To prove the hypothesis, I will examine Virginia Woolf's reminiscences in *Moments of Being* of the final years of the Victorian era, and particularly her essay, "A Sketch of the Past." In my analysis I intend to highlight the crucial moment in which the old – represented by the male adherents to the conventional way of living, i.e. Woolf's father and her older half-brothers – is arrested by the new – the unconventional worldview of the young females in the family.

As previously mentioned, a reasonable point of reference for a discussion on Victorian patriarchy is an examination of the organization of the *domus*, that is the household in which providing subsistence was perceived as a duty allotted to the male family members, whereas domestic matters were traditionally allocated to the women. An expression of long-withheld[6] criticism of late-Victorian conventionality, "A Sketch of the Past" is nonetheless conventionally structured around the notion of the *domus*: a sequence of literary portraits of several members of the Stephens family centers on recollections of 22 Hyde Park Gate – their London home.[7] In Woolf's work, this house is remembered in the last decade of the 19th century as the epitome of Victorian convention: "The patriarchal society of the Victorian age was in full swing in our drawing room" (Woolf, 1985, p. 153).

As tradition demanded, Leslie Stephen, an intellectual and an academic, the Victorian *pater familias* in a modern understanding of the term, cared for his wife and children in accordance with his "very simply constructed [patriarchal] view of the world" (Woolf, 1985, p. 115). Not only did he assume responsibility for providing subsistence for his large family, i.e. the duties of the *pater familias* in the classical meaning of the word, but he also submitted to and fully accepted the social obligations expected of the head of

[5] In his *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), Engels argued that capitalism and patriarchy concurred in the suppression of women – a brief discussion included in Giddens, 2006, p. 470f. Cf. J.S. Mill, *The Subjugation of Women*, first published in 1869.

[6] "A Sketch of the Past" was only begun on 18 April 1939 (Woolf, 1985, p. 61 f).

[7] Woolf provides a date for her reminiscences: "22 Hyde Park Gate – as it was in July 1897" (Woolf, 1985, p. 166).

the family – that is, he performed the role of the Victorian *pater familias* in the common modern understanding.[8] "[H]e played his part normally (…) in drawing rooms, dining rooms and committees" (Woolf, 1985, p. 114). In his social obligations he was accompanied by his wife, a Victorian matron – an ideal combination of both spotless morality and impeccable behaviour of a respectable wife and mother (Saller, 1999, pp. 193-194; Piszczek, 1990, p. 462).[9]

In accordance with the accepted rules of Victorian life, after Leslie Stephen's death his eldest (step)son, George, succeeded him as the head of the family. This conforms with the transmission of power and patrimony, enshrined in law, in a patriarchal society (Saller, 1999, p. 194). Indeed, George's power over the female family members seems unrestricted in Woolf's recollections. She rationally accounts for it by stating: "George was thirty-six when I was twenty. And he had [a] thousand pounds [a] year whereas I had fifty. (…) it was difficult not to submit to whatever he decreed" (Woolf, 1985, p. 152). Like a monarch, George would join the family at breakfast much later than the others, would "breakfast (…) more deliberately," sometimes "gossip[ing] about the last night's party" (Woolf , 1985, p. 147), and finally leave in a hansom to perform his duties in the Treasury. The demarcation between the public and the private becomes especially noticeable in this fragment: while other family members are leaving – Virginia's elder sister, Vanessa,[10] included – Virginia is left behind and nobody seems to take any interest in her. A young woman of eighteen could apparently please herself as she liked, as long as she stayed inside the *domus* – her allotted place.[11]

The disinterest in a woman as an intellectual being but the attention paid to her when it comes to socializing is best captured in Woolf's own words: "Society – upper middle class Victorian society – came into being when the lights went up. About seven thirty [p.m.] the pressure of the [social] machine became emphatic" (Woolf, 1985, p. 150). In consequence, unmarried middle-class daughters were expected to dress elegantly and join parties during which they used to "sit passively and applaud the Victorian males" (Woolf, 1985, p. 154). Their femininity was, by definition, passive – a characteristic which be understood if examined from a practical point of view: a young woman was to become a Victorian *mater familias*. The moral responsibility of bringing out a daughter or sister lay within the scope of the social duties of the Victorian *pater familias* – in so

[8] As Saller asserts, the Roman *pater familias* was often conceived as a landowner (Saller, 1999, p.191) and, in consequence, he was described – at least, by Pliny– as a *diligens agricola* (or even *homo rusticus*), which is inconsistent with the modern stereotype of the *pater familias.*

[9] In contrast to Cicero, Ulpian stressed the moral rectitude of the *mater familias*, who was not necessarily a matron (Saller, 1999, pp. 193-196).

[10] Vanessa Bell, a famous artist, studied painting at the Royal Academy. More information on the educational opportunities for young women in Schwartz, *passim*.

[11] Elsewhere Woolf describes the other option, i.e. leaving for town, as follows: "[a]s a girl could not then go about London alone, I used as a small child to be sent with her [Stella, her elder half--sister], as a chaperone" (Woolf, 1985, p. 97).

doing he considered himself the perfect guardian of femininity, "shepherding [his] flock" (Woolf, 1985, p. 114). In the case of the Stephens, George is depicted as such a want-to-be shepherd, that is a perfect "fossil" of the patriarchal system (Woolf, 1985, p. 151): having accepted his role as the head of the fatherless family, "he paid for clothes; he bought enamel brooches; to the public he represented the good brother; doing his duty by motherless girls" (Woolf, 1985, p. 157). In the manuscript these words are crossed out – a fact which, even after half a century, apparently betokens the difficulty to openly criticize the concept of patriarchy.

2.3. Contesting patriarchy in the late-Victorian middle-class family

Written during WWII, *Moments of Being* includes a range of objections voiced by an experienced woman who questions the idea of patriarchy. Reflections upon the past, with recollections highlighting the weakness of women facing male authority, allow for a relative outspokenness, hardly possible at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Numerous paragraphs in *Moments of Being* contain inferences that signal, and indeed even reveal, the moment of transition while evaluating the patriarchal hierarchy in late-Victorian Britain, which itself was on the verge of a re-definition. Since the issue is immensely broad and may be approached from various angles, my analysis is restricted to a feminine view and is centered around the question of female education, including both mandatory and anticipated instruction.

A popular belief at that time was that a woman should be accomplished: to become an ornament for her prospective family, she was expected to be refined in dress and manner. Regardless of the form of her education – whether it was a private governess as in the case of Woolf's eldest sister, Stella (Woolf, 1985, p. 97), or outside the home as in Vanessa's case – the instruction of late-Victorian women was an expression of conservative educational models. Schwartz observes that Victorian educational institutions "reproduced and re-created middle-class femininity" (Schwartz, 2011, p. 678), a femininity which was inextricably connected with and dependent upon the notion of the *domus*. The tea table became the epitome of the patriarchal conception of a woman's place in the system:

> The tea table, the very hearth and centre of family life, the tea table round which sat innumerable parties; (…) to which the sons returned from their work in the evening; the hearth whose fire was tended by the mother, pouring out tea (Woolf, 1985, p. 118).

Although the attitude of the narrative voice in the quotation is fairly detached, it later becomes ever more censorial, culminating in the statement:

> When I read my old *Literary Supplement* articles, I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their sidelong approach, to my tea-table training. I see myself not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do you take cream or sugar? (Woolf, 1985, p. 150).

From the perspective of an experienced woman, this remark seems incisive enough. However, in this context, it is worth noting that the symbolic, and narrow, perception of a woman's life, a life restricted to the "natural dominion" of the tea-table was quite common in Victorian discourse: it became a source for satirical derision on the part of feminist activists who ironically contested "the humanising influences of five o'clock tea" in a journal playfully entitled *Kettledrum* (Levine, 1990, p. 306).

The fissures in the accepted code of male/female relations are not only depicted in retrospect. *Moments of Being* records numerous situations in which the old patriarchal values clash with and are indeed challenged by unexpected retorts or unusual behaviour on the part of the young ladies of the Stephen family. The recollection of a disastrous conversation entered into during dinner at Lady Carnarvon's serves as an appropriate example. The epitome of Victorian convention, the hostess started a polite conversation on the weather and painting with an eighteen-year-old Virginia. However, when the girl re-directed the thread of the conversation to the dialogues of Plato and his alleged equal treatment of men and women (Woolf, 1985, p. 174)[12] Lady Carnarvon was horrified. In this instance, the tea-table training failed Virginia. The horror of the interlocutor was complete due to several transgressions. First, it was Virginia's young age which rendered any comment on a serious subject matter "unspeakable impropriety" (Woolf, 1985, p. 174), a violation of good manners. George, who accompanied his sister to the dinner, reproached her with the observation: "They're not used to young women saying anything" (Woolf, 1985, p. 174). The transgression was doubly serious since Virginia had entered masculine ground: she found herself entirely capable of discussing Plato, while, according to Schwartz, at that time the study of Greek and Latin was commonly perceived as an area reserved almost exclusively for male students at British universities (Schwartz, 2011, p. 677).[13] However, Virginia was in fact classically educated – as a member of an intellectual family, she was an ardent student who studied Greek authors under the tuition of a wise governess, Clara Pater, the sister of a famous Victorian scholar, Walter Pater (Woolf , 1985, p. 148; p. 156). Woolf would spend her mornings studying Greek authors, Plato, Euripides, or Sophocles (Woolf, 1985, p. 148),[14] a habit which proved detrimental to her socializing capability since it rendered her unable to play the role of a mere passive observer.

The clash with Victorian conventionalism was inevitable and was most noticeable when it came to "the intellectual game" (Woolf, 1985, p. 153): this game was beyond

[12] Among ancient Roman philosophers, Seneca is recorded as being an advocate of the equality of the sexes (Koehler in: Huchthausen, 1988, p. 71f).

[13] In her investigation of Victorian female education, Schwartz mentions Newnham College where women took other subjects instead of Greek and Latin during their degree examinations (Schwartz, 2011, p. 677). Resistance to female higher education was especially strong at Oxford (female students only admitted in 1920) and Cambridge (in 1947) – (Schwartz, 2011, p. 672).

[14] Woolf wrote an essay entitled "On not Knowing Greek" in which she extensively quotes from original Greek texts and in her analysis proves herself a classical scholar – in: *The Common Reader*, 23-38.

the reach of women, even women from the family of an upper middle-class scholar. However, the transformation of patriarchy was imminent and was seen most clearly in the *domus*: "The division in our [female] lives was curious. Downstairs there was pure convention; upstairs pure intellect. But there was no connection between them," recalls Woolf (1985, p. 157). And there could not be since, to adduce Woolf's words, "[t]wo different ages confronted each other in the drawing room at Hyde Park Gate. The Victorian age and the Edwardian age. (…) we looked at [our father] with eyes that were looking into the future" (Woolf, 1985, p. 147).

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to prove that the social upheaval in Britain from 1910 onwards was a well-organized movement away from the well-established Victorian patriarchal relations. The battleground for the first re-definitions of the formula was the family, and, as Schwartz asserts (Schwartz, 2011, p. 674), especially the middle-class family whose female members had been awakened to a re-consideration of their right to formal education before the demise of the Victorian era. Even if the Stephens – as recalled in *Moments of Being* – were not a typical Victorian family, in certain respects, and surely in a discussion on patriarchy, they may be perceived as representative of late-Victorian society. Woolf's autobiographical essays expose the moments of awakening on the part of the female family members who managed to move the demarcation between the public and the private, at least. Although this was not entirely in line with their own worldview, at that time it was not yet possible to reject the patriarchal model completely.

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