Honour and Shame in the Work of Constantinos Theotokis

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The antithetical pair, "honour and shame," has always been a decisive factor in human behaviour among people living around the Mediterranean where social anthropologists focussed on this topic. Aristotle, in his work on rhetoric, characterizes young people as "filotimoi," lovers of honour, which means lovers of social acceptance, institutionalized or not.

While in class societies of Antiquity social ascendance and distinction played a major role in human behaviour, in the archaic equalitarian societies, staying within the group and being accepted by its members has had greater significance. E. R. Dodds, in his work "Greeks and the irrational," talks about cultures of shame, characterizing the above societies, distinguishing them from those of guilt.

In the archaic societies where there is no institutionalized force imposing rules of coherence and order, discouraging crime, the only decisive preventive factor is social rejection. Since, therefore, in those societies social acceptance was of primary importance for the survival of man, their rules were internalized in the form of a super-ego, and this internalization was expressed in the form of the feeling of shame, whenever these rules were violated.

In the cultures of guilt codifications of social behaviour were later developed in the form of legal laws, and institutions for punishing those found "guilty" of violating them also emerged. Shame, however, as a feeling and as a form of disapproval by the group, remained restricted mainly to sexual behaviour.

These archaic "residua" characterize mainly countryside, agricultural societies. "Chastity belts" for the protection of the honour of the wife was an invention of the Middle Ages, occurred in an agricultural economy. Crimes of honour nowadays mainly happen in the villages of Mediterranean countries, whose urbanization was late in comparison with other European countries.

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A woman may not feel shame if she deceives her husband, because her loss of honour is not at all great, if she loses it at all. He however definitely loses his because of her conduct, being the object of ironical comments of people around him.

The motif of the adulterous woman is one of the most common in literary history, from *Orestia* to *Hamlet*. The male writers, however, take revenge of their adulterous heroines. Clytemnistra is killed by her own son, and Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina are led to suicide, to name only the most famous instances.

From this wide literary field we chose to speak today about the work of Constantinos Theotokis, an eminent Greek prose writer at the beginning of the century (1872-1923).

First we shall say a few things about the cultural and ideological trends of his era. At the beginning of the century, mainly among writers, an ideological trend named "societism" emerged. It consisted of heterogeneous elements coming from Nietzsche, Christianity and Marxism, in various proportions. This societism, while condemning injustice and exploitation, turned mainly against obsolete ideas prevailing in the Greek countryside, expressing a more lax conception of morality, resulting from the urbanisation of Greek society. Young people from villages had recently taken refuge in the cities, and intellectuals, even if they lived in villages, like Theotokis in Carousades of Corfu, had a European culture. Both groups felt the need to get rid of some anachronistic ideas and prejudices, mainly concerning honour, and they attacked them bitterly. To follow the voice of your heart and deceive your husband with the man you love is entirely legitimate in the early drama of Nikos Kazantzakis entitled "It Dawns" (1906). The title is very indicative: It is the dawn of a new era.

About the same time Theotokis wrote most of his short stories, later collected by Irene Dendrinou and published under the title *Stories from Corfu* in 1935, twelve years after the death of the writer. In these stories he undertook a bitter attack against an anachronistic and exaggerated conception about morality, responsible for numerous atrocities committed at the time. In this attack, he was helped by the literary tradition of naturalism that was prevalent in his era. In naturalistic works, for example of Zola, men are governed by violent passions, mainly by the passion of love, and this leads them to commit violent actions. While, however, in Zola sexual passion leads men to destruction unmediated, in Theotokis's work, their passions are almost always mediated by feelings of honour and shame, mainly in his *Stories from Corfu*.

In his short story "Pistoma" (1898), a rebel retreats to the mountains, to avoid the law. His wife, believing that he is dead, develops a sexual relation with

a man in the village, a relationship that produces a baby. After some time, however, the rebel returns to the village, and forces his wife to tell him the name of the father of the baby. As soon as he learns it, he goes and kills him. Then he comes back, and takes his wife and the baby to a field. There, he digs a ditch. When he finishes, he orders his wife: "Valto pistoma" ("Put it down on its face"). These are the concluding words of the short story: the men wished to bury the child alive. By creating a feeling of repugnance in the reader, Theotokis denounces a code of honor which leads to such atrocities.

In the short story "Not yet?" (1904) Theotokis presents a deceived husband forced by his cousin to kill his wife. "Kourkoupos realized that he was destined to be a killer. This thought was so terrible for this good man, that overcame his anger and his sorrow" (30). "-What are you waiting for?.... she disgraced us," his cousin tells him, seeing him hesitating. His wife implores him, telling him that she is pregnant and the child is his. He finally kills her. Outside the house the neighbors gather, asking what has happened. "Theodosis answered them: -He killed her" (32).

In " The Village Life" (1904) Jim betrays, to the villagers and Margarita's father, the place where she is now with his rival, Marc. Peter Kladis pushed him to this action of revenge, as he felt his honour stained, because Margarita rejected his son as a prospective husband. They catch them. "The old father from the hut cursed them, wanted to run after them. The voice of Jim was heard behind him, telling revengefully: -You have shamed yourselves" (63). Marc wants to marry her to save her honor, but this proves to be impossible, because, as a villager is eager to betray, "a nunos (possibly a Catholic) baptized them" (63). In "Estimation" (1904), the relatives of the girl force with guns the rich young man who seduced her, by blockading his house, to marry her, while in "The Two Loves" the relatives of the two women proceed to kill the man who shamed them. When he chooses to marry the girl he loves (the other girl was married, though separated, and not with an immaculate past), the two families are ready to kill each other, and ultimately only a miracle presents a massacre.

In "An Honest World" (1905), someone repeatedly insults a man belonging to a rival political party, in a cafe house of the village, calling him "disgraced." He tried nine times to avoid the fight, telling him "take your word back," but he insisted on repeating it. At last, seeing that the fight was inevitable, he throws the insult back: "You are disgraced, because I had your wife, before you had her" (93). In the duel that follows, he kills him with his knife.

In "Stalachti's Marriage" (1905), a rich young man abandons the poor girl he seduced, on the one hand because his father objects to his marrying her, and on the other because he himself is somewhat unwilling. She, in despair, falls into a well to drown herself. He, in remorse, climbs down, tied to a rope, to save her. The other end of the rope is held by the foreman of his estate. John, a former foreman of his, who had abandoned him in disgust for his disgraces, is nearby, watching the scene. "He reserves punishment, she, why should she live in disgrace? He thinks." He attacks the foreman, wounds him, and cuts the rope. "Drops of the water, splashed by the two bodies who were drowning, reached the brim of the well. The murderer looked around him, as if astonished by the act he had committed. -I made a judgment, he said to himself." (120).

In "Unlawful Love" (1906) the father-in-law repeatedly rapes his son's wife, (his son is doing his military service). The girl gets pregnant. Dying while giving birth to her child, she betrays the secret to the priest, trying to save the baby, because she is afraid that they will kill it to cover up the disgrace. As soon as her husband returns, his father "left the place in a hurry, and nobody in Dafnila ever learnt what had became of him" (175).

In the short story "Did She Disgrace Herself?" the priest gives holy communion to a girl, while he should not have done so, because she had confessed to him that she had sexual relations with a married man, because she had noticed the watching eye of her father, and had wanted to disperse his suspicions in order to avoid a possible tragedy. Only one of the short stories in this collection, entitled "Cain," has no relation with the concept of honour as it is developed in the rest of the stories. It does, however, develop the theme of honesty. A man refuses to steal his boss's flock, despite his brother's pressures, and brings it to him intact. His brother is furious and kills him.

The concept of honour in Theotokis's work has two major meanings. The one has to do with sexual behaviour, the other with social status. The shame connected with sexual behaviour has these types: a) Deception of a husband, in the short stories "Pistoma," "Not Yet?," "An Honest World," "Did She Disgrace Herself?" and in the novel *The Condemned Man*. b) Staining of the honor on an unmarried girl, mainly by a rich young man, in the short stories "The Village Life," "Estimation," "Stalachti's Marriage," "The Two Loves," in the novelette "Honor and Money" and the novel *The Slaves in Their Chains*. c) Incest, in the short story "Unlawful Love" and in the novel *Life and Death of Caravelas*.

Improper sexual behaviour can stain the honour of a woman, regardless of whether she is married or not, but not the honour of a man, whether or not he is married. Improper sexual behavior in a man is forgivable, but not in a woman. The word "cuckold" in Greek is masculine; there is no feminine equivalent. Improper sexual behavior is more tolerated in rich persons or persons of a higher social status: this appears characteristically in Theotokis's novel *The Slaves in Their Chains*. On the other hand, there is a concept of honor directly connected

to the social status, and one is constantly straining to avoid anything that could stain it. Leading a life that does not conform to this status (such as marriage to a person with an inferior social status), directly stains the honour of the person concerned.

Theotokis deals with this concept of honor in his novelette "Honour and Money" and *The Slaves in Their Chains*. It appears indirectly in the short stories of the b type (except the short story "The Village Life") where the young man seduces the poor girl and is reluctant to marry her, not only or mainly because she is poor, but because her poverty places her in an inferior social position, and a marriage with such a girl would permanently stain his honour.

In "Honour and Money" (1914), Andreas doesn't hesitate to marry a poor girl of inferior status, because his love for her is so great as to overcome any feeling of shame. He, however, needs a dowry to raise a mortgage for his house, a symbol of the prestige of his family. "Even he himself had cursed riches and had no special wish for them; otherwise he wouldn't have married her. But that didn't mean that he wished for his degradation" (173). According to the concept of honour of his class, he was not allowed to work as a hired man, and his wife certainly couldn't work as a hired woman. He could not avoid the first, when the police confiscated the small sailboat he used in contraband. It is still characteristic of his concept of honour that he hesitated to ask from his mother-in-law for the promised dowry, which he had refused in a desperate attempt to marry Irene before she got married to another man who wanted her. An uncle of his would do it for himself, when his economic situation was in despair. He, however, didn't want to avoid marriage festivities, to save money, because this was improper for their class. "- get married at night like a bandit! Says uncle to signora Epistimi. "Nobody has done this in our family, why should we start this? ...and my stupid nephew kept saying that he wants no dowry. He didn't want, so he says, to make a bad impression, since he once has said so" (166).

Signora Epistimi and Andreas always vacillate in their feelings of honor, love and economic interest. Signora Epistimi equivocates in her love of money, her sense of honor and her love for her daughter. Andreas vacillates between his love of Irene and his need for money. He saves the honour of his family by raising the money for the mortgage of his house and continues to be involved with contraband without being obliged to borrow money, at a high rate, from usurers. His need for money prevails. Of all the characters, only Irene stands unwavering in her love. At the end she makes the decision to raise her baby alone, as an unmarried woman, facing social contempt, rather than marrying the man she loves, since she sees that his love is not so great as hers.

The writer uses her as a *port-parole* to criticize some obsolete conceptions of honor: "He wanted to have me seated on a chair, to make the lady, fearing that otherwise his name would be sullied, because the women of his family were not accustomed to working. What rotten, what rusty ideas! That's why poverty overcame him" (157).

The same rusty ideas characterize count Alexander Ofiomachos in the novel *The Slaves in Their Chains*, published in 1922, though the greater part of it was written in 1915-6. Though his finances were not in such a good condition, he goes on leading the life of an aristocrat, spending money here and there. When he can no longer cope with his expenditures, he starts borrowing money, "secretly, not from banks, in fear of been known as a man in economical difficulties," but from usurers. For the same reason he avoids selling part of his huge estate, even when his debts increase dangerously. When everything is mortgaged, he finds a solution: he doesn't let his daughter, Eulalia, marry Alkis, the man she loves, but pushes her to marry a rich lawyer.

In this work, Theotokis ridicules the antiquated ideas about honour that characterize the old count, concepts that were responsible for his economical disaster, in the same way as the old-fashioned conception of honor, characterizing Corfu peasantry, led to the atrocities described in his short stories. The upper social strata, while they are so much attached to an excessive idea of honor linked with their status, have a rather loose idea of honor having to do with sexual behaviour. Ofiomachos, when he learns that his daughter left the house with her rich boy friend, feels distressed because he is sure that he is not going to marry her: His honour will remain stained. Valsamis, destined to die from an incurable disease, tolerates his wife deceiving him before his eyes with George, Ofiomachos' son. In this case Ofiomachos has no problem, since the fact that his son has sexual relations with a married woman does not affect his honour. On the other hand, he feels happy, hoping that after the death of her husband, she will marry his son, having thus a way out from his intolerable economic situation. The things won't turn out as he hopes. George has ceased to love her. She, in despair, will seduce the rich lawyer, Evlalia's husband. This has no great impact on his or her honor. However, is has a great impact on the financial situation of Ofiomachos. The lawyer will abandon his wife's family to this fate. Her sacrifice, to abandon the man she loved in order to save her father from economic disaster, was in vain.

In the next two (and last) novels of Theotokis, the action is triggered by sexual passion and economic interest rather than the concept of honor. In "The Condemned Man," Peter Peponas accuses Tourkoyannos, a pure, religious young man, of trying to seduce his boss' wife. He himself has sexual relations with that

woman, and he suspects that Tourkoyannos has noticed it. In this way he hopes that his boss will dismiss him. It happens. After that, Peponas kills Tourkoyannos's boss, and accuses Tourkoyannos of committing the crime. In jail Tourkoyannos preaches repent to the other prisoners. The sense of honour, though not primary in this novel, is still present. When Peponas tells Tourkoyannos's boss that he flirts his wife, he wants to appeal to his boss's sense of honour, to make him expel Tourkoyannos from the house.

In "Life and Death of Caravelas," sexual passion and economic interest inform the actions of the heroes. Caravelas, a foolish old man, flirts with Maria, the wife of John Statiris. She pretends to respond to his feelings, wanting to persuade him to leave his fortune to her, in exchange for taking care of him when he becomes an old invalid, since he has no children. As soon as the contract is signed, she stops pretending. Caravelas, facing her rejection and the contempt of the others, and feeling ridiculed, commits suicide.

Here also honour makes an appearance. Caravelas, believing that Maria is responding to his feelings, says that he has had sexual relations with her. She gets angry and curses him. He, when he was young, had seen Maria, a young girl at the time, in an incestuous intercourse with her cousin. Now, wanting to take revenge because of this unexpected behavior of Maria, he pushes her young daughter Amalia to an incestuous love with her cousin. He takes care that the young couple is seized during their meeting by their parents. John, her father, comments:

> Amalia hurt only herself. She could marry a rich man from our village, or from a nearby village. Now she will get an inferior man, a poor one, since she lost her first honour. (153)

The fact that the sense of honour in the last works of Theotokis is not so prevalent can possibly be explained by the fact that, with an increased urbanization, the sense of honour, responsible for the atrocities described in his short stories two decades before, had become rather lax, so there was no more need to attack it.

Corfu, at the border of Mediterranean, came into close contact with western civilization, because of the Venetian occupation and later the English occupation (the Ionian islands were united with Greece as late as 1864). This lead the strict sense of honour in Corfu to become less strict. Theotokis, having studied in Europe, attacked this strictness and contributed to a more relaxed sense of honour. Nowadays, honour in Corfu is still more relaxed, because of the influence of western morals. This is also true in Muslim countries, and this

situation sometimes provokes fundamentalists there. There are fewer and fewer places where social anthropologists can still trace such a strict sense of honour.

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