The Selected Prose of John Gray

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"Their Mothers"


Originally titled by Gray "For Worse: Angela," the typescript marks this story as the third part of a series (as far as is known, there are no other parts extant). The original title has been crossed out and the present one written above it in the hand of Gray’s companion, André Raffalovich. Raffalovich was also responsible for two minor stylistic changes near the end of the story.
Their Mothers

S they sit side by side in a box (like this evening) or in the stalls—they are indefatigable first-nighters—or facing each other—they entertain—or when in the same room—they are much entertained—they seem politely unacquainted or say a little sentence to each other with a smile perhaps. Charming, handsome, young, rich, sleek, prosperous, they are admired, envied even; who knows? They are so ornamental and life deals with them so kindly. They married for love (so-called), and yet not unwisely from the point of view of what is called the world . . . . And sometimes they not only look at each other, but see each other, though as a rule when they gaze on each other for a moment in public their brains refuse to receive or to notice the image on the retina: he sees her now as he gives her the programme.

Exquisitely pretty still, with her long narrow malicious eyes, her dainty nostrils, her red baby mouth so long and thin and ironical when it laughs, with her lively dimpled chin, with the complexion of an unknown flower, and red-brown hair—almost as pretty as when she played (the first time he liked her) with her little flaxen-haired nephew, pelting him with roseleaves and handfuls of wet grass, some grass and some roseleaves clinging to her mauve dress—almost as pretty as when during her honeymoon she struck her husband’s face with a bunch of stinging nettles because he had dared to playfully stroke her cheek with a dewy rose—not more malicious than when she innocently looked on whilst the cat captured the two
canary birds that sang so shrilly in the country inn where she bored herself with her husband during three wet days—not more malicious than when he once saved a drowning dog and appeared before her dripping and dirty—and not less hateful and wonderful than she suddenly seemed to be, almost on her wedding day, no! going back in his memory, even before. A malicious expression on the face he compared to an unknown flower, a smile of mean and petty derision that lengthened these narrowing lips had given her once an extraordinary interest in his eyes, and day by day her face had grown more fascinating, the tone of her voice more alluring, on account of something undefined in her, of something obscure in him. He did not, he could not, analyse what deepened and intensified the thought of her and of her prettiness, until he discovered that he hated her.

It was not dislike, nor disgust, nor disapprobation, but a feeling more akin to love, though the very reverse, paradoxical as it may seem to the inexperienced. The antagonism of their natures and the repulsion he felt for her had suddenly expressed themselves that day when her malicious smile became cruel, and her malicious look wicked, and the prettiness of her face merely irony. (He sometimes compared that prettiness to a slap in his face.) He realised that she would always prefer laughing at him to laughing with him, that she would prefer hurting him to pleasing him, that if she could only make him ridiculous she would think more of herself, that she was the born and made critic, that whatever she did not understand she would deny, that whatever she was incapable of she would pull down, that whatever she failed in she would never forgive in others.

She (however much she loved, if she could love) would never lose the ironical smile, the smile of ignorant contempt, that Frenchwoman's smile, which may spur on some men, but which leads others to desperation. She was the woman who (if sincere) would say pas mal, and think pas mal when most deeply moved. He may have been mistaken in the accuracy of his memory; she may not have been to him then what she became, but there is no doubt that
now he hates her. Hate is as satisfying to some natures as love to others. It is as interesting.

She catches the look in his eyes and understands it, and shares it and laughs a little hard laugh, although she could sigh. She too hates him, but in her own way. He was soon out of love with her, he could not endure her wit (as she calls her sarcasm), her originality (as she calls her caprice), her unconventionality (as she calls her want of what is called moral sense), and her youth (as she calls her unsuccessful bringing up). She gave him the best she had, and he has despised her for it, and he has not yet suffered as he ought to suffer. What is a woman to do who is unluckily yoked? A woman’s revenge recoils on the woman, and she is afraid. She meant to tame him when she married—to bring to her feet this tall, florid, good-looking man, and to keep him there—and she could only follow her nature, use her weapon and sting him. She grew almost mad, like an enraged insect, and stung and stung in her waspish fury.

He thinks of their two children, of their resemblance to their mother. He is inclined to accuse her of spite in giving him two such copies of herself; even the boy has his mother’s mouth and torments all his sister’s pet animals.

She thinks that her two chances have been lost, spoilt, that she cannot love children that have their father’s hard loveless eyes and his foolish easy ways, and his laugh and his languid gestures. And yet she does try to be the fond adoring mother. She can at any rate be more kind to them than he is, and when he reproves them gently for some fault (in which he sees her) she can cry with them and give them sweets and kisses; she can at least undo all he does; but it is a weary life.

Had she been poor she would long ago have gone with a bandaged head to ask a magistrate for advice, but in her set pokers are not used for correcting wives. Had she not been a prudent and a civilized woman, she might have put some poison in his food, but in her set
who does it? Besides she gets more afraid of him. His nerves are under control, hers are not.

They seldom speak very unpleasantly; their conversation is like that of two well-bred and suspicious and worldly opponents. They are on their guard. Before strangers they are very civil, though they may imply a certain satire now and then. But oh! the perfidious little suggestions, the half confidences she makes to her friends about him, the innuendos, the sighs, when she feels desperately worsted. And oh! the cool way in which he ignores her existence when he is with his friends, the two or three chilly words with which he receives any praise of her. Occasionally he may tell some very slight and very humorous story against her—she is sensitive on a few points.

There are no loud words between them, not even very long silences. How willingly they would quarrel! not roughly, not honestly, but still quarrel, and they don’t because of the servants, because of the children, because it would please their friends. . . .

She cannot flirt. She is afraid of him. She can humiliate him, disparage him, but when a man whispers words that she should not hear, she has a shiver down her back; if her husband could hear too! . . . . . And sometimes, being a woman and nervous, she feels that it is all too hard, too painful, that she cannot live on alone, with no one to help her, and she could almost, since he is a man after all, fall at his feet or on his neck, and ask to be comforted; but she knows too well that no comedy, no tragedy, could make him believe her, and that his incredulity would be justified, as at the moment when she asked for love the bitterness of hate would blaze anew in her heart. . . . And that is how they spend a pleasant evening at the theatre.