

"The Woman of the Injured Locust Tree of Qi" and Other Tales of How a Woman Should Be

There is a long tradition of literature written by men -- and women -- instructing women how to behave. Among the notable are *The Education of a Christian Woman* (1524) by the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives, richly praised by Erasmus and Thomas More, in which he calls for education for all women, regardless of social class and ability, because women's progress is essential for the good of society and state; Daniel Defoe's *Some Considerations Upon Street-Walkers, with a Proposal for Lessening the Present Number of Them* (1726) argues that female sexuality is deviant, and encourages women to be virtuous to avoid punishment through whippings, bridewells, and work-houses; *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787) is Mary Wollstonecraft's first published work, a conduct book aiming to educate women to be useful wives and mothers. It contains few harbingers of her radically feminist arguments in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); John Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens" in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) also advocates for women to stay home and create a safe haven for their worldly husbands; and more recently, the phenomenally successful *The Rules for Marriage: Time-Tested Secrets for Making Your Marriage Work* (1995), by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, updates and extends Ruskin's agenda.

In a recent *London Review of Books* essay entitled "The Public Voice of Women," the classicist and public intellectual Mary Beard writes about an aspect of this tradition found in Western letters: the long history of men telling women to "shut up." In Homer's *Odyssey*, Telemachus instructs his mother Penelope, after she publicly admonishes one of her many suitors, to "go back up into your quarters... speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household." Beard provides myriad examples of men taking control of public utterance while insisting on female silence -- from Ovid to Shakespeare to Henry James to the age of Twitter. Beard quotes a second-century AD "guru": "A woman should as modestly guard against exposing her voice to outsiders as she would guard against stripping off her clothes"; and cites a 2014 study finding that a woman who addresses the public is thirty times more likely to receive vicious verbal attacks than a man. *Plus ça change*.

The age-old tradition of telling a woman how to be is not limited to the West. Anne Behnke Kinney's new translation of the intriguing, poetic *Lienü zhuan (Categorized Biographies of Women)* written in 79-8 BCE by Liu Xiang is a series of biographical stories devoted to the moral education of women and the first of its kind in Chinese tradition. The book inspired generations of Chinese women to cultivate "virtues such as filial piety and maternal kindness but also lauded practices such as suicide and self-mutilation as means to preserve chastity."

Composed and collected by Xiang, the Counselor of the Palace, these ancient texts reflect the rise of imperial social control in the latter half of the Former Han dynasty (206 BCE-8 CE), which included an intensified debate over the role and influence of women in politics. There was also a class issue: many of the Han emperors had chosen their consorts from the lower orders and these women's political power was perceived as a threat to dynastic health. Like Juan Luis Vives, the Han court historians and sages considered women's influence fundamental to a healthy society and state, but needed to be strictly controlled. Xiang's compilation of exemplary women is above all a guide for how to maintain dynastic hegemony.

In her outstanding introduction, Kenney distinguishes dynastics from patriarchy, the former concentrating on the perpetuation of a power structure regardless of gender. "In the narratives of the *Lienü zhuan* and elsewhere in early Chinese literature," she explains, "we therefore see not just women subordinating themselves to men but also husbands, sons, and brothers who are directed to defer to women as a means to sustain dynastic power or family prestige." These women often move out of the domestic sphere "into the world of politics and statecraft in order to right a wrong that no one else is willing to address. But while the *Lienü zhuan* prompts women to step outside traditional roles, it also suggests that after the task is completed, women must then resume their roles as daughters or wives."

The stories are divided into seven categories. In the Maternal Models a mother's influence and advice, especially with adult children, is considered critical to the foundations of dynastic success. The stories are packed with lyrical lines, such as: "She trod upon a footprint and conceived a child"; "Swallowing an egg, she gave birth to a son"; or "When she went to relieve herself in the pigpen, she gave birth to King Wen." In these biographical tales mothers contributed to the founding of the great ancient dynasties -- the Xia, Shang, and Zhou. The Worthy and Enlightened are mostly women whose husbands have gone off the rails in some way. The wife manages either to lead him back to the path of virtue -- often by blaming herself for his digressions -- or to uphold in his absence or disgrace the prominence of his lineage.

The Sympathetic and Wise are women with great powers of intuition, empathy, and observation. However, these Cassandra-like women who correctly predict the future are usually ignored with disastrous results. In "The Woman of Qishi of Lu" the protagonist eloquently argues for female political involvement and is reminiscent of Hortensia, a rare Roman example of a successful female orator mentioned by Beard. Both women speak out against the corrupt state in order to defend their homes, children, husbands, and the interests of other women. Women, Beard sustains, could "in extreme circumstances publicly defend their own sectional interests, but not speak for men or the community as a whole." In the Chaste and Compliant and in the Principled and Righteous sections, many of the women end up committing suicide either to avoid dishonoring a husband's lineage or to punish a husband for an unforgivable offense.

My favorite category is the Accomplished Rhetoricians, in which women use their eloquence to convince incompetent rulers of their misguided policies or to extricate themselves or family members from mishap or ruination. In "The Woman of the Injured Locust Tree of Qi," the female protagonist goes to court to argue not only that her father has been unjustly accused of

injuring the emperor's prized locust tree and sentenced to death but that the law itself is unjust. She uses her considerable rhetorical talents to publicly defend her father -- an admirable example of filial duty -- while avoiding calling attention to her sex. (By comparison, in Shakespeare's time, it was so implausible for a woman to speak out in court, Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* was obliged to dress up as a man in order to have her say.)

Finally, in *The Depraved and the Favored*, we see unscrupulous women undermine the integrity of dynasty by using their beauty and sexuality to enhance their own power and satisfy their insatiable greed. Their tactics involve tampering with succession through slander, adultery, murder, and ubiquitous bloodshed.

Liu Xiang and the Former Han dynasty sought to enjoin all subjects, noble and common, male and female, to work toward a "Great Peace." Perhaps it is time for our civilization, East and West, to read beyond the prescriptive nature of this literature and learn from the simply descriptive. At their peril, women have long had to use their savvy to navigate around the laws, rituals, and cultural imperatives of society in order to uphold a utopian vision of that same society. Two millennia on, though great legal and social strides have been made, our world still predominantly compels women to be silent or subversive. What if we encouraged women to speak out on any subject and when they do, instead of being greeted with heckles, expletives, and threats, they hear applause? What might happen then?

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