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Unruly Women & Failed Patriarchs

PARADOXICAL PATRIARCHY
in EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

by
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Bobcat Comics
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PATRIARCHY ISN'T REALLY "A THING."
WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT IT AS A
COHERENT SYSTEM, BUT CLEARLY
PATRIARCHY TODAY IS VERY
DIFFERENT FROM HOW IT WAS...

Susan Amussen

...IN THE 15 AND 1600s. HOW DO
WE HAVE A LONG-TERM STRUCTURE
THAT MANAGES TO STAY MORE OR
LESS IN PLACE BUT ALSO CHANGE?
IT'S FILLED WITH PARADOXES.

PATRIARCHY



For example, the Church taught the equality of all before God...



...but also insisted on the subordination of women.



"Household manuals" of the time detailed how women were supposed to be modest and submissive.



"The good Woman is called an House wife...
Snail-like, with her house upon her head."¹

But in fact, there are lots of situations where women would also take on agency. Women in the market served the household, even when they were assertive and confrontational.



Quicke Quicke!
Buy my dish of great smelts, Mister!



AND WHEN A HUSBAND WENT AWAY, IT WAS OFTEN HIS WIFE WHO TOOK OVER GOVERNING THE ESTATE - NOT ANOTHER MAN.



Time to man up, Mary. You're the boss for a while.



THESE WEREN'T JUST EXCEPTIONS, THEY WERE EXPECTATIONS.



Thanks for all your help, dearest.

Now cough it up.

That only extended so far, mind you. In English law, a wife's money and goods still belonged to her husband.

"He ought to make her a joint Governor of the family with himself..."²

Puritan Preacher William Gouge



ahem. Yes, about that...

You are hereby sentenced to be ducked in the Cucking Stool for horrible scolding and base and scandalous words!

Women needed to balance all these competing demands. If they got the balance wrong, there were... methods of restoring patriarchal equilibrium.



GEOFFREY, YOU DRUNKEN POCKY-NOSED WHOREMASTERLY KNAVE! I--SQUIGGG!

sigh... that's not helping, Agnes!

Be too independent or ambitious...



Too outspoken or argumentative... and you could be prosecuted as a "SCOLD."



Or worse.



¹ Bethel, or a Forme for Families by Matthew Griffith, 1633

² Of Domesticall Duties by William Gouge, 1622



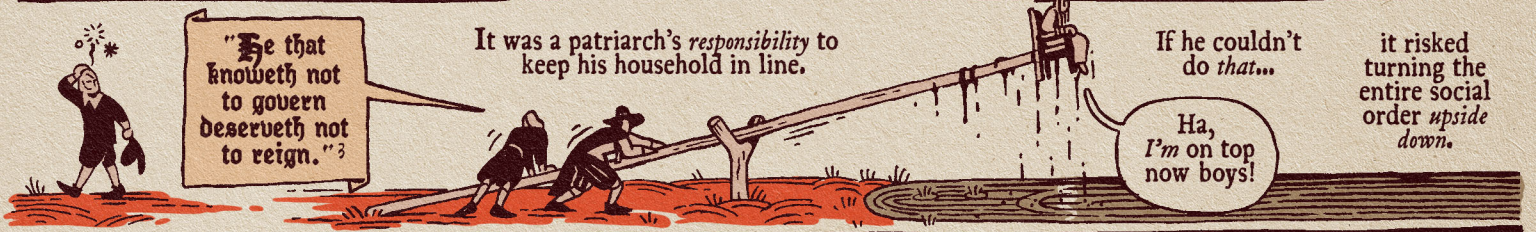
Of course, patriarchy had a flip side.



Behind every troublesome woman...



was a man who hadn't done his job.



"He that knoweth not to govern deserveth not to reign."³

It was a patriarch's responsibility to keep his household in line.

If he couldn't do that...

it risked turning the entire social order upside down.

Ha, I'm on top now boys!



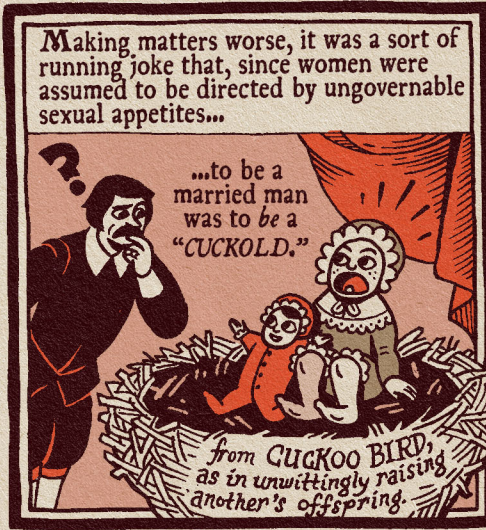
So if neighbors thought a woman was being dominant or unfaithful...

HORNS-Symbol of the Cuckold

You dropped yer horns! Haha!

Hen-pecked cuckoldly clown!

...it was the least they could do to subject the man of the house to a bit of ritual ridicule.



Making matters worse, it was a sort of running joke that, since women were assumed to be directed by ungovernable sexual appetites...

...to be a married man was to be a "CUCKOLD."

from CUCKOO BIRD, as in unwittingly raising another's offspring.



And to access the full benefits of patriarchy, you had to be a married man with property - giving authority to some men over not just women...

...but other men.

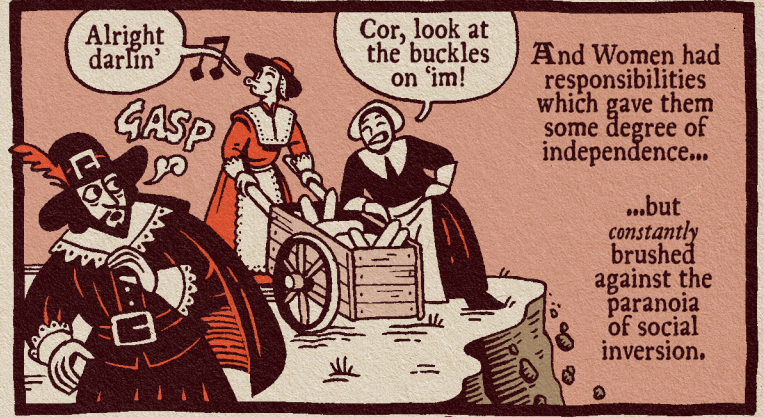
Even in a world built around male superiority, not all men were superior.

Both Cuckolds and Scolds expose the Catch-22s of Patriarchy: It was almost impossible for anyone to meet the patriarchal standards of the time.



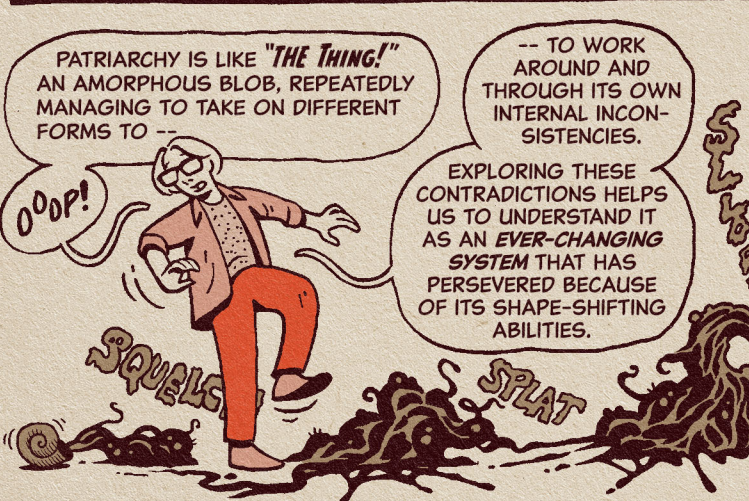
Men were responsible for the behavior of people who they could never fully control...

Uh... This looked a lot less complicated in the instructions.



And Women had responsibilities which gave them some degree of independence...

...but constantly brushed against the paranoia of social inversion.



PATRIARCHY IS LIKE "THE THING!" AN AMORPHOUS BLOB, REPEATEDLY MANAGING TO TAKE ON DIFFERENT FORMS TO --

-- TO WORK AROUND AND THROUGH ITS OWN INTERNAL INCONSISTENCIES.

EXPLORING THESE CONTRADICTIONS HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND IT AS AN EVER-CHANGING SYSTEM THAT HAS PERSEVERED BECAUSE OF ITS SHAPE-SHIFTING ABILITIES.



AFTER ALL, IT MAY LOOK AND SOUND A BIT DIFFERENT THAN IT USED TO...

DUDE, YOU'RE TOTALLY WHIPPED!



...BUT THIS IS STILL WITH US.

- Ice Queen
- Unladylike
- What about her kids?
- Bossy
- Shrill
- Difficult woman

³ A Godly forme of Householde Government by Dod & Cleaver, 1621