

Transgression and After: Fathers and Daughters in Susanna Centlivre's *The Busybody*

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By the end of the 17th century, the number of women who become professional writers begins to increase notably. These middle-class women stress in their writings the relevance of topics directly related to female domestic experience, like the conventions of courtship, the politics of marriage, and the family relations. According to Paula Backscheider in *Spectacular Politics*, these feminine versions constitute a “renegotiation” of women’s position in patriarchal society, which brings about a revision of their roles, and therefore, a re-ordering of male ones (Backscheider 83). This is precisely the case of Susanna Centlivre, a prolific playwright whose numerous works stand as points of reference to establish the connection between the theatrical tradition of the Restoration and a new concept of comedy—the “New Comedy”—, which will grow into the 18th century. Centlivre’s plays—nineteen in all, dated between 1700 and 1722—are listed as belonging to a transitional period, during which she would recuperate Renaissance and Restoration topics and adapt them to the changing times. In her works, Centlivre always turns to the theme of marriage, and the unfavourable circumstances it involves for women, regarding how it is usually enforced on them, how the situation is seen from the perspective of the implicated subjects, that is, the marriageable daughters themselves, who become commodities in the marriage market; and finally, how marital life is experienced by women living in a state of incarceration and banishment from the world (Frushell 17).

In *The Busybody* (1709), Centlivre’s most successful play, she focuses on the story of two young women, Miranda and Isabinda, who have to resort to cunning in order to avoid a marriage of convenience, and marry the suitors they have chosen for themselves, Sir George and Charles, respectively. To achieve their purpose, they will have to deceive Sir Francis, Miranda’s guardian, who plans to keep her and her large fortune for himself; and Sir Jealous, Isabinda’s father, who wants to marry her to a Spanish gentleman to whom she was betrothed at birth. The play exposes in a comic mood the daughters’ tricks to evade their fathers’ vigilance, the lovers’ furtive meetings, and the constant interference of a meddling character, Marplot or “the busybody”, who is about to spoil the happy end on each occasion.

In *The Busybody* Centlivre’s female characters go against their fathers’ will and marry their chosen suitors, without being chastised or censured by their transgression. In the play, however, the established order is not altered substantially—daughters get married in the end, and continue playing the roles assigned to them under the supervision of a male figure. Yet, in spite of the traditional end, Centlivre has managed to destabilize the foundations of patriarchy, by portraying a group of women who make mockery of the system. In this light, this paper aims at illustrating how their transgression entails the progressive modification of the male construction of femininity and of some of their assumptions about women, and how these changes will clear the way for the creation of a new female identity.

Due to the identification of the Christian divinity with male values, society has been usually structured according to a hierarchical principle by which power was exerted by figures associated with the image of the father, namely, God, the king, the priest, and finally, the father of a family. For those subject to their authority, obedience was seen as a duty, and the breaking of this equilibrium was considered as both a social disruption and a contravention of the divine plan. Therefore, by

“divine right”, fathers enjoyed an absolute authority over their descendants, after the image of absolute monarchies in the political structure. However, from the time of the Glorious Revolution onwards, in opposition to this doctrine, new philosophical and political ideas will set up the bases for the revolutionary changes which will take place later on in the century. The philosopher John Locke will promote in England the concept of Liberal State, according to which the body politic would not originate “by nature”, but by the will of individuals, whose patrimony the State must protect but never remove. Simultaneously, these political innovations are adopted by women writers and defenders of the female sex like Mary Astell, who applies them to the domestic scene, and particularly, to the frame of power relations between fathers and the female members of the family:

Again, if absolute Sovereignty be not necessary in a State, how comes it to be so in a Family? Or if in a Family why not in a State; since no Reason can be alledged for the one that will not hold more strongly for the other? If the Authority of the Husband, so far as it extends, is sacred and inalienable, why not that of the Prince? The Domestick Sovereign is without Dispute elected; and the Stipulations and Contract are mutual; is it not then partial in Men to the last Degree, to contend for, and practise that Arbitrary Dominion in their Families, which they abhor and exclaim against the State? For if Arbitrary Power is evil in it self, and an improper Method of Governing Rational and Free Agents, it ought not to be practis'd anywhere; nor is it less, but rather more mischievous in Families than in Kingdoms, by how much 100,000 Tyrants are worse than one (...). *If Men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?* (Ferguson 192-93)

In *The Busybody*, Sir Francis and Sir Jealous make use of their “divine right” over their daughters, by administering their fortunes, as Sir Francis does with Miranda’s inheritance, or by controlling all their movements, as Sir Jealous fails to do with Isabinda. The maximum expression of their power is their intention to marry their daughters to the suitors they have chosen for them, Sir Francis himself in Miranda’s case, and Don Diego Babinetto, a Spanish gentleman for Isabinda. Sir Francis’ motives answer two unnatural desires: to possess a nice young woman like Miranda, but above all, to seize her fortune, an illegitimate act strongly condemned in the play. He also exerts his control over his only son, Charles, hindering his progress towards economic independence. Yet, whereas Charles rejects his father’s suggestion of a marriage of convenience, Miranda and Isabinda are denied that opportunity. On the other hand, Sir Jealous plans to hand over Isabinda’s control to a more strict male figure, by marrying her to a Spaniard, whose rigid customs regarding women Sir Jealous has tried to import into England. Nevertheless, both women state on different occasions, and demonstrate at the end, that no absolute power can be exercised without a woman’s consent. According to Miranda, a tyrant’s efforts to impose his will on women will be in vain if they endeavour to prevent it (Centlivre 301). Isabinda also revolts against her father’s oppressive vigilance by voicing a defence of women’s right to be allowed to protect their own good name, and by warning Sir Jealous about the dangers of excessive fatherly cares:

ISABINDA: Sir, ‘tis not the restraint, but the innate principles, secures the reputation and honour of our sex.- Let me tell you, sir, confinement sharpens the invention, as want of sight strengthens the other senses, and is often more pernicious than the recreation innocent liberty allows. (318)

This act of self-determination will define the daughters’ stance in the play: both are provoked to offer resistance against the arbitrary rule their fathers try to impose on them (Chernaik 124). They will embody the emergence of the individual, and will define themselves in opposition to the authority figures of patriarchal society, reacting against commodification and passive acceptance of their fathers’ will.

Both Sir Francis and Sir Jealous are regarded as “blocking fathers”, who obstruct the progress of sons and daughters, and delay their emancipation, or in other words, postpone their development as individuals. In both cases, money is the weapon they choose to retain children, either by preventing them from having their inheritance at their disposal, or by forcing them back to a state of greater subjection. Miranda’s unnatural union to Sir Francis, a representative of the previous generation, would entail a step backwards in her struggle for independence, whereas Isabinda’s marriage to Don

Diego would confine her to a life of seclusion for good. Finally, the two heroines manage to marry the suitors they have chosen by outwitting their fathers.

Wit and invention become, then, the ideal virtues of the resourceful men and women of the new period, and female characters in *The Busybody* are especially gifted with them. As both Miranda and Isabinda affirm, they will have to use their intellect to escape from male control, but more significantly to have access to *their* money. Thus, from her first intervention onwards, Miranda appears as a woman in disguise, either literally, as in her walks through the park to meet Sir George, when she avoids being recognized; or in a figurative way, as when she feigns affection for Sir Francis with the purpose of getting her inheritance back. Similarly, the only way out for Isabinda consists in pretending: by playing the role of the dutiful daughter, she tries to counteract every of her father's accusations. Yet, even Sir Jealous' zeal will not prevent her daughter from having her own way and marrying Charles, as it will also happen to Sir Francis. When their authority is challenged and their plans frustrated, these father figures react to it differently. Sir Francis, moved by his unlawful desire for Miranda, and driven by an excess of avarice which thwarts the aspirations of the youth, cannot accept the unexpected turn of events, and refuses to take part in the wedding celebrations. In opposition to him, Sir Jealous learns from experience, and though outwitted, he approves of "the right of children to disobey their parents in matters of love" (Frushell 34). At the end, Sir Jealous blesses the newlyweds, representing, thus, the redeemable patriarchal figure:

SIR JEALOUS: Now let us in and refresh ourselves with a cheerful glass, in which we will bury all animosities, and:

By my example let all parents move,

And never strive to cross their children's love;

But still submit that care to Providence above. (Centlivre 363)

Yet, in Centlivre's play women's challenge of patriarchal authority goes further than mere disobedience. The success of the daughters' initiatives is built upon the first signs of a proto-feminist discourse, as the result of the creation of relational bonds among women, on the one hand, and of the dismantling of the male construction of the feminine, on the other. In the first case, female interaction arises from women's mutual recognition of belonging to the category of "the Other", and thus, from a need to share common experiences, both pleasant and toilsome. From the play's onset, Miranda and Isabinda are presented as two female figures in despair, who share a situation of oppression under the rule of authoritarian fathers. Out of female solidarity, however, Miranda sends her maid servant, Patch, to Sir Jealous' house, in order to defend Isabinda's interests and help her evade her father's vigilance. Patch allies herself with the daughter's cause, and will try to ruin Sir Jealous' designs for Isabinda. Instead of playing the part of the severe Spanish duenna Sir Jealous wants her to perform, she will use her authority to assist a woman in trouble. This fact is significant for the transgression it entails. In the play, power is bestowed on female hands as long as it serves the purpose of controlling other women, and Patch will risk her position of privilege to beguile male confidence instead.

Miranda and Isabinda will struggle for dismantling some of the traditionally accepted assumptions about women, as female natural promiscuity or the incompatibility of beauty and intelligence, and in this sense they destroy the male construction of the feminine subject, and as a result, male expectations about women are shattered. In the first scene, Sir George talks to Charles about his falling in love with two different women: a mysterious quick-witted woman, "Incognita", whose face he does not know, and a beautiful one, whom he presupposes a fool. Sir George will treat them differently, being arrogant and rude with "Incognita", and gentleman-like with Miranda. He expresses this distinction by means of food imagery: while Incognita is compared to a "dish of chocolate", Miranda deserves a full "set-meal" (Centlivre 304). His partiality also responds to the social status he assigns to each of them. According to manners, the good name of a woman like "Incognita" is threatened by the very act of speaking she performs: her witticisms are regarded as incompatible with innocence and feminine virtue (Gill 17). Besides, for Sir George, Incognita represents a woman of suspicious reputation, bold enough to frequent solitary places like the park, unchaperoned and disguised, with the purpose of seducing men. For him, then, she amounts to no more than a prostitute, and speaks to her in consequence. Miranda, however, embodies the respectable young woman, closely watched by a masculine authority, and who significantly has not

spoken so far, from what Sir George concludes that either she is too modest, or that she is a fool; and in spite of that, he prefers “sensual pleasure” (Centlivre 296). To his simplistic views, Miranda-Incognita answers with a warning, which will be premonitory of Sir George’s change in the future:

MIRANDA: They [women] are the worst things you can deal in, and damage the soonest; your very breath destroys ‘em, and I fear you’ll never see your return, Sir George, ha, ha. (304)

Miranda will finally thwart Sir George’s prospects when she reveals as both and the same woman: Incognita and Miranda herself. From that moment on, she will behave as the practical and judicious woman she really is, and will analyze the pros and cons of marriage and the alternatives left to her, cutting Sir George’s romantic flights short. On the other hand, Isabinda also states the principles upon which women should be judged. She declares the uselessness of parental vigilance to protect female honour, which can only be secured by women themselves (Centlivre 318).

The ultimate manifestation of the fathers’ obstinate control may appear in the cases of marriages of convenience, in which women become commodities that can be exchanged in the marriage market, as in Miranda’s example: “SIR GEORGE: But what does he [Sir Francis] intend to do with Miranda? Is she to be sold in private? Or will he put her up by way of auction, at who bids most?” (297). And this image would verily reflect Sir Francis’ purpose, hadn’t he already thought of himself as the best suitor for her, and of the £30,000 of her inheritance. For Miranda, as for the rest of women, marriage continues being the only choice. This contract is enforced on them, among other reasons, on the grounds of ethics and medicine: marriage is seen as the only “natural” state for both human beings and animals (Maclean 57). Yet, in spite of these arguments, female characters in *The Busybody* are reluctant to embark upon this hazardous and always uncertain adventure, and even more so in arranged marriages which lack love and mutual respect, and which usually end up in adultery (Centlivre 304). Miranda and Isabinda’s ambitions, then, will concentrate on changing the politics of the institution of marriage, turning it into a safer harbour for women.

In this light, both young women will carry out a process of re-education of their future husbands, with the purpose of preparing them for life in common. Sir George, for example, will have to accept the guidance of Scentwell, Miranda’s servant, through “many a dark passage” (343), admitting his need for redemption before arriving at Paradise and deserving Miranda’s affection. Sir George’s humiliation reaches its climax when, to avoid being discovered by Sir Francis, he hides himself behind the chimney-board, and passes off as a wild monkey Miranda has designed for her entertainment, and that will be tamed and chained very soon, implying their future marriage (346). In Charles’ case, Patch will be in charge of instructing him about the need to neglect male heroics on behalf of female cunning, a more reasonable and effective means of achieving the purpose of marrying Isabinda than brute force. In this way, the plan of impersonating the Spanish suitor before Sir Jealous, proves to be more successful than Charles’ first intention to kill Don Diego (342). Centlivre demonstrates that male instruction according to female principles, turns out to be an essential requisite for the play’s purpose, because only through male re-education changes will take place on a larger scale, and the initiatives for the improvement of women’s status will prosper in the future.

These female aspirations apply primarily to the institution of marriage. Daughters in *The Busybody* contemplate two aims—mutual respect and economic independence—, none of which suffices alone. Miranda and Isabinda resign themselves to the inexorability of marriage, yet they will try to approach it cautiously, and not without deep reflection:

MIRANDA: Well, let me reason a little with my mad self. Now don’t I transgress all rules to venture upon a man without the advice of the grave and wise? But then a rigid knavish guardian, who would have married me! To whom? Even to his nauseous self, or nobody. Sir George is what I have tried in conversation, enquired into his character, and satisfied in both. (343)

In spite of good intentions and ideals, Miranda cannot help seeing marriage as an imperfect state for both men and women, and as especially constraining for the latter:

MIRANDA: Well, Patch, I have done a strange bold thing; my fate is determined, and expectation is no more. Now to avoid the impertinence and roguery of an old man, I have thrown myself into the extravagance of a young one; if he should despise, slight, or use me ill, there's no remedy from a husband but the grave; and that's a terrible sanctuary to one of my age and constitution. (350)

Miranda and Isabinda are aware of the impossibility for women of escaping from marriage, but at least they will try to provide for difficulties with money of their own. Both of them display an astonishing practicality when love and money are concerned, and will not get finally engaged until they get their inheritances back, for as Isabinda declares "when ... a thousand requisites for life are wanting, love, who rarely dwells with poverty, would also fail us" (323).

It only remains for the characters and for the audience to know if their efforts have been worthwhile or in vain. Speculations can be made about the plausibility of their success, of which they are never completely sure, yet it can be argued that small changes have been taking place, and that they have sown seeds which will only ripen in the future. They have carried out a bloodless revolution, which actually threatens the status of the "petty tyrants" (Chernaik 123) of the domestic scene, and neutralizes their authority to a great extent. On the other hand, although marriage is inevitable, Centlivre defends woman's right to choose a husband, and to found a "companionate marriage", as Puritanism stressed, based on conjugal love and common respect, with the Centlivrean addition of financial security. Finally, daughters as well as their maid-servants experience a process of "mobilization" (Laclau, in Backscheider 72), by which they go from utter passivity to self-determination and action. Regarding this, dramatic characters reflect the same expectations of the new professional women writers of the period: "movement, free movement, freedom of movement, control of their bodies, control of the story" (Backscheider 146).

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