Love, Death, and Mrs. Barry in Thomas Southerne's Plays

Helga Drougge

Comparative Drama, Volume 27, Number 4, Winter 1993-1994, pp. 408-425 (Article)

Published by Western Michigan University
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1993.0030*

Love, Death, and Mrs. Barry in Thomas Southerne's Plays

Helga Drougge

Thomas Southerne's tragedies were once held in great esteem. Sophocles might have profited if he could have heard the "moving Moan" of Isabella in *The Fatal Marriage*, wrote Elijah Fenton in 1711:

> If Envy cou'd permit, he'd sure agree
> To write by Nature were to Copy Thee:
> So full, so fair thy Images are shown,
> He by Thy Pencil might improve his own.[1]

A modified version of this view lasted a long time: Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage: Or, The Innocent Adultery* (1694) and *Oroonoko: Or, The Royal Slave* (1695) remained repertory plays into the nineteenth century.[2] On the other hand, Fenton's panegyric epistle makes no mention of Southerne's comedies *Sir Anthony Love: Or, The Rambling Lady* (1690), *The Wives' Excuse: Or, Cuckolds Make Themselves* (1691 or 1692), and *The Maid's Last Prayer: Or, Any Rather than Fail* (1693). These comedies at present enjoy respectful critical attention, especially *The Wives' Excuse*,[3] but in 1711 it was no more than tactful to ignore them. They had never been revived after their initial runs, and, although Southerne included them in his *Works* of 1713, their sexual outspokenness would by then have been unacceptable to many readers as well as all audiences.

Sadly, it seems unlikely that Southerne's comedies will be staged in the twentieth century either. Milhous and Hume, who praise *The Wives' Excuse* highly, nevertheless describe it as "probably too complicated, unfamiliar, and dependent on its original social and dramatic context to be more than a curiosity on the twentieth-century stage."[4] This reservation is applicable to all three of Southerne's comedies. They are strikingly original, but it is an originality which emerges from deep within Restoration dramatic convention. Southerne shows a true Restoration

fondness for such familiar trickery as forged letters, fake assignations, and bedtricks. He recycles plenty of standard comic material and also various specific borrowings, in *Sir Anthony Love* particularly from Aphra Behn, in *The Wives' Excuse* and *The Maid's Last Prayer* particularly from Wycherley.[5] But the comedies and comic subplots (in the following, I will use the term "comedies" to cover both) which Southerne builds on these old chestnuts give a far from conventional view of Restoration sexuality and gender roles. The popular stock characters of Restoration comedy walk his stage—the compulsive Don Juan, the would-be bully who turns out to be a coward, the well-jointured widow on the lookout for a toyboy—but are critically modified. There are no charming rakes anywhere in Southerne's plays, and maidenhead-chasing and cuckolding are not honorable sports. Active virility is never equated with "honor" or wit but is either dreary, as with the copulation machine Wilding in *The Wives' Excuse*, or ludicrous, as with the callow Jack Stanmore in *Oroonoko*, who goes on rather like the man in the Monty Python "Say No More" sketch. The men in Southerne's comedies worry more about their reputation (as heroic fornicators, of course) than the women and are liable to miss the substance for the shadow: "Was that a Woman to throw away upon the vanity of being talk'd of for her?"[6] Their vanity of being talked of seems an even more powerful social motive force than the women's vanity of not being talked of.

Such modifications all tend towards the de-glamorization of male sexuality, that gold standard of Restoration comedy, and generally towards greater realism in the field of sex. But it is Southerne's women characters that are the most innovative. Female sexuality is as aggressive as male in his comedies, and forceful women are notably unpunished. Southerne's Widow Lackitt in the *Oroonoko* subplot, for instance, is in many ways the sister of Wycherley's Widow Blackacre in *The Plain Dealer*, with an equally mother-pecked "minor" in tow. But Southerne's treatment of her is quite free from Wycherley's contempt. Although Widow Lackitt is broadly comic (the "itt" that she lacks being that which widows in Restoration comedy can never get enough of), the person who looks foolish in the context of her sexuality is not she herself but her bedmate Jack Stanmore, who is unable to leave off boasting of his stamina.[7] Southerne neither ridicules Widow Lackitt nor undermines her maternal power over her minor. By contrast, we recall how Jerry Blackacre's rebellion against his mother's tight apron-strings provided a belated rite of

passage to adult manhood in Wycherley's *Plain Dealer*. Even when he marries, Southerne's Daniel Lackitt remains caught in a powerful matriarchal orbit, which merely expands to include wife-pecking.

Southerne's comic heroines are of particular interest. I have written elsewhere of his subversion of the double sexual standard in his comedies and of how the strength of some of his unusual heroines comes from their incorporation of patterns of Restoration masculinity. Thus Lucia/Anthony in *Sir Anthony Love* is no conventional breeches part but a girl who has constructed a new, genuinely virile identity for herself, while Lady Trickitt in *The Maid's Last Prayer* has learned emotional aloofness from the male libertine.[8] My concern here is not with these invulnerable heroines but with the equally unusual women characters who hover between strength and weakness and who move between tragedy and comedy. Mrs. Friendall in *The Wives' Excuse* and Lady Malepert in *The Maid's Last Prayer* are basically tragic heroines placed in comic surroundings. Far from learning anything of the men, they bring with them into comedy that perfect "femininity" enshrined in Restoration pathetic tragedy: the femininity of passivity and masochism. Such vulnerable figures gain unexpected depth when displaced into the cruel world of comedy. The combination of tragic heroines and comic tricks is also capable of throwing a coldly critical light on both the heroines and the tricks. This may be the reason why Restoration audiences, who were extremely fond of tragic heroines and comic tricks when properly separated, tended to dislike seeing them together. The medium through which they were joined in Southerne's comedies was the great actress Elizabeth Barry.

Barry was a successful comedienne who played a variety of comic roles throughout her career, but her greatest impact on Restoration drama was as a tragic actress.[9] Her capacity for projecting pathos was obviously an inspiration to Otway and Southerne in the three famous pathetic roles they wrote for her: Otway's Monimia in *The Orphan* (1680) and Belvidera in *Venice Preserved* (1682), and Southerne's Isabella in *The Fatal Marriage*. These three roles, wrote Downes, "gain'd her the Name of the Famous Mrs. Barry, both at Court and City, for when ever She Acted any of these three Parts, she forc'd Tears from the Eyes of her Auditory, especially those who have any Sense of Pity for the Distress't."[10] Colley Cibber many years later recalled the power of her voice: "when distress of Tenderness possess'd

her, she subsided into the most affecting Melody and Softness. In the Art of exciting Pity, she had a Power beyond all the Actresses I have yet seen, or what your Imagination can conceive."[11] Cibber's "Tenderness," intimately connected with "distress," connotes both pity for others and an erotically colored vulnerability. "Oh thou art tender all!" exclaims Castalio fondly in *The Orphan*:

> When a sad story has been told, I've seen
> Thy little breasts with soft Compassion swell'd,
> Shove up and down, and heave like dying Birds.[12]

Otway's Monimia and Belvidera are both too "tender" to bear a frown. Belvidera's fearfulness is emphasized rather than qualified by her brief spell of "Roman Constancy": "Where's now the Roman Constancy I boasted?/ Sunk into trembling fears and desperation!"[13] "Apprehension shocks my timerous Soul," complains the delicate Monimia.[14] In a passage of not very highly motivated despair (before she knows of Polydore's bedtrick), Monimia is seen masochistically enjoying the thought of degradation irradiated with charity and pity:

> When in some Cell distracted, as I shall be,
> Thou seest me lye; these unregarded Locks,
> Matted like Furies Tresses; my poor Limbs
> Chain'd to the Ground, and 'stead of the delights
> Which happy Lovers taste, my Keeper's stripes,
> A Bed of Straw, and a course wooden dish
> Of wretched sustenance; when thus thou see'st me,
> Prithee have Charity and pity for me.
> Let me enjoy this thought.[15]

Elizabeth Howe has recently shown how "the move towards voyeurism in the late seventeenth-century theatre's use of actresses," obvious in the passages I have quoted, tended to strengthen the traditional literary equation of female virtue with chastity, passivity, and silent suffering.[16] Howe argues that Barry's success in the pathetic role of Monimia "clinched the movement away from heroic drama and started the establishment of 'she-tragedy' as a popular genre"—a genre in which the actress is presented as a sexual object and frequently as the victim of sadistically colored male lust.[17] In the obsessive Restoration "Art of exciting Pity" for a suffering heroine, Barry may be regarded as the creative collaborator of Otway, and her gift for subsiding into softness informs the character of Southerne's Isa-

bella. The fragile heroine in whom compassion is linked with eroticism ("thy little breasts") and with dying ("dying Birds") was ready to Southerne's hand when he wrote *The Fatal Marriage* in 1694.

The central theme of *The Fatal Marriage* is of course sex, not death: as in Otway's *Orphan*, the central tragic event is a bedtrick, not a murder. Isabella, long widowed (she thinks), is forced by destitution to marry again. Immediately after the wedding night which consummates her innocent adultery, her real husband Biron turns up. Both the husbands and Isabella herself are equally victims of a plot concocted by Biron's younger brother, yet the impression left by the play is that hostile fate, rather than any particular person, has played the bedtrick of this *fatal* marriage. After the real tragedy, the loss of the heroine's virtue in the most technical sense—of the purity of her body, while of course that of her soul reains intact—her death is a mere formality.

The "most injur'd innocence" of Isabella is the center of the play. Around her, four men are symmetrically arranged in larger-than-life goodness or wickedness, as in a fairytale. Two are good, selfless beyond ordinary humanity, and full of melting pity for her predicament: Isabella's lover Villeroy and her husband Biron. Two others are ruthless, also beyond realism: her father-in-law Baldwin, due for fifth-act repentance, and Biron's brother Carlos, an "honest" Iago figure whose false pity and real scheming are transparent to the audience.

> I must abhor my Father's usage of you.
> And from my bleeding honest Heart, must pity,
> Pity your lost Condition. (II.ii.71–73)

"I thank your pity," responds Isabella guilelessly (there is a good deal of *Othello* in this play, as in *Oroonoko*). Extremes of cruelty and false pity are insistently contrasted with the softness of true pity and gentle, passive suffering. Brutal power exulting over humble helplessness is focused in a long scene early in the play where Isabella kneels with her little boy to the implacable Baldwin. Baldwin claims to enjoy her ruin "Beyond all other Pleasures" (I.iii.178), a sadism shared in various degrees by all the male characters. The returning Biron's love for Isabella may be called gently sadistic. When Isabella faints on recognizing him, he misinterprets the nature of the shock she has had and is overjoyed at such an "exstasie" of welcome:

> I was to blame
> To take thy Sexes softness unprepar'd:
> But sinking thus, thus Dying in my Arms,
> This extasie has made my welcom more
> Than words cou'd say. (IV.iii.36–40)

Isabella is wholly passive and negative. She has nothing to give to her faithful lover Villeroy (I.iii.62), she has "nothing to expect on Earth" (I.iii.165), and she can and will do nothing to help herself, whatever the urgency:

> *Nurse.* [They] are come to plunder your House, and seize upon all you have in the World: They are below, what will you do, Madam?
> *Isabella.* Do! Nothing, no, for I am born to suffer. (II.ii.63–66)

The one action Isabella performs in the play is her suicide. But as she stabs herself in an Ophelia-like trance, she is emphatically unhinged by despair, not "herself," not really acting but in the grip of automatism. It is not the dagger that kills but the bed-trick, the night with Villeroy. Isabella has already "sunk" and "died" in the arms of the returning Biron. After the moment of recognition she is psychically dead, claustrophobically static, her very movements emblems of immobility, as when the stage direction "*Throws her self on the Floor; after a short pause she raises her self upon her Elbow*" (V.ii.16) punctuates a soliloquy of despair.

Isabella's suffering is as stylized and extreme as her gestures. So is that of Oroonoko and his virtuous wife Imoinda in *Oroonoko*.

> [O]ur Fortune must
> Be wonderfull, above the common Size
> Of good or ill; it must be in extreams:
> Extreamly happy or extreamly wretched. (III.ii.18–21)

It seems safe to assume that the part of Imoinda was also written for Barry, although she never actually played it.[18] *Oroonoko* with its unusual black hero is not of course a she-tragedy but a heroic tragedy, complete with conflict between love and honor (V.v.1–19) and with a large element of pathos. The central pathetic scene where Oroonoko repeatedly tries and fails to nerve himself to kill his wife is drawn out in an excruciating lengthening of the moment of horror, an eternization of climax, before Imoinda and Oroonoko at long last *together* bury a dagger in her breast: "*Go-*

ing to stab her, he stops short, she lays her hands on his, in order to give the blow" (V.v.274 *s.d.*).

The togetherness of this act points to the heart of the play. The center of *Oroonoko* is not a female "most injur'd innocence" but a "most injur'd Prince," unjustly enslaved. Yet the focus is double, since Oroonoko himself is only vulnerable through threats to the "softness" of Imoinda. These threats are of course defined in terms of sex, like those to Isabella; Imoinda is continually on the point of being raped, the helpless victim of male lust and her own beauty. The central disaster of this play, affecting hero and heroine equally, is Imoinda's pregnancy: an uncontrollable burgeoning which menaces the royal pair with the birth of a slave. "Kill me, kill me now," exclaims Imoinda.

> Dry up this Spring of Life, this pois'nous Spring,
> That swells so fast, to overwhelm us all. (III.ii.162–63)

In *The Fatal Marriage* and *Oroonoko* female sexuality is split into its deadly and its nourishing side. Sex is death for the tragic heroine, annihilated by a fatal bedtrick like Isabella in *The Fatal Marriage* or menaced by cancer-like pregnancy like Imoinda in *Oroonoko*. But sex is good and energizing for the comic female hero just as it is for male Restoration rakes. The comic subplots to both these plays feature "breeches" heroines who behave a good deal like Restoration rakes and younger brothers. Victoria in *The Fatal Marriage* and Charlot Welldon in *Oroonoko* travel and roam, plot and plan, lie and cheat, make their fortune and choose their husbands. Like the passive tragic heroines, these active tomboys have a Restoration pedigree: in this case Southerne may be said to be borrowing from himself. The original of Victoria and especially of Charlot is his own Lucia, the transvestite heroine of *Sir Anthony Love* (1690). This picaresque comedy, Southerne's first stage success, had delighted its Restoration audience, and the performance of Susanna Mountfort in the character of Lucia ("Sir Anthony") had established that versatile comedienne as a superlative "breeches" actress.[19] Closely modeled on a traditional kind of male hero, Lucia/Anthony is a self-made man: "thou mak'st all, thou'rt all in all; the whole Company thy self, thou art every thing with every body; a Man among the Women, and a Woman among the Men" (II.i.81–82). Lucia/Anthony is a fantasy for women: the personification of adventurousness and carnival freedom, through imitation of a male pattern, and appropriately displaced to a foreign country

(France).

The subplot to *The Fatal Marriage* is a highly physical farce, based on a story from the *Decameron* which recounts the various humiliations inflicted on one of nature's cuckolds by his wife and children. The undutiful daughter Victoria, a breeches heroine played by Anne Bracegirdle, is in this conventional story a rather more conventional character than Lucia/Anthony. Victoria is strictly virtuous, but plays various typical breeches-girl tricks: she teases her father by flirting with her own mother, and she brags to her own lover of an affair with herself ("I lye with her every Night in her Fathers House" [II.v.23–24]), of course in order to test his faith in her virtue.

The streetwise breeches heroine of the *Oroonoko* subplot, Charlot Welldon, is more obviously the sister of Lucia/Anthony and is appropriately also played by Susanna Mountfort. Charlot extends the same invitation as Lucia to women in the audience to enjoy vicarious rakishness: she has traveled even further, to Surinam, where she seduces and "marries" the plantation owner Widow Lackitt, leaving the actual bedwork to stupid Jack Stanmore. There is something ghostly about the transformation and rejuvenation of Lucia/Anthony and Charlot, women who are by London standards past it, "used" like Lucia or "decaying and unfit for the Town at One or Two and twenty" like Charlot (I.i.40–41). In a fabulous "France" or "Surinam" they become instead sexual revenants, traveling into the butterfly life of the Restoration culture-hero, the very young man. This ambiguously transformed figure is one of Southerne's polar types of female sexuality, and the other pole is of course the tragic victim, the "Barry heroine."

In *The Fatal Marriage* and *Oroonoko* the two kinds of heroine appear on the same stage. London audiences in the 1690's enjoyed such roller-coasters between high plots with passive female masochism and pathos, and subplots with active female sexuality and female boyishness.[20] Naturally both these types purvey specialized sexual titillation for men in the audience,[21] but they were also deeply interesting to a female audience. The ladies actually liked *Sir Anthony Love* so much that they were even willing to overlook its being a bawdy play, something of which they would normally disapprove.[22] Southerne's audiences, men and women both, clearly enjoyed seeing his tragic Barry heroine and his comic breeches heroine[23] in the same play but in different plots, separate and polarized, the one impossibly passive and victimized, the other impossibly taboo-crossing and suc-

cessful. They apparently did not like his attempts to present both poles in a single woman and to create female characters who combine the two kinds of heroine, a strategy which brought the two plots together and the impossible into the realm of possibility. This he did in his bleak comedies *The Wives' Excuse* and *The Maid's Last Prayer*.

Several critics have linked Southerne's "dark" comic roles for Barry—Mrs. Friendall in *The Wives' Excuse* (season of 1691–92) and Lady Malepert in *The Maid's Last Prayer* (1693) —with her unique success in affective tragedy.[24] Of course audience expectations of these heroines would also be conditioned by Barry's comic repertoire, but I will try to show that *The Wives' Excuse* and *The Maid's Last Prayer* gain an extra dimension through Southerne's skillful use of audience expectation of how a tragic Barry heroine will behave. Both Mrs. Friendall and Lady Malepert also illustrate Southerne's special interest, less prominent in Otway, in the deadly, life-denying passivity of the tragic heroine. In a setting of comic social realism, such passivity is both dangerous and absurd.

The Wives' Excuse is indeed dark in mood. Although it is full of epigrams, disguises, bedtricks, false assignations, bullies and cowards who are shown up, etc., etc., it scarcely amuses. The introductory scene where servants discuss their masters sets the keynote of inversion and subversion, and the topical problems of late seventeenth-century London-style marriage and marital separation inform the play.[25] Its heroine Mrs. Friendall is unhappily married to a typical Restoration comedy wimp. Mr. Friendall lacks everything which the Restoration macho culture demanded of a man, i.e., wit, virility, and courage (the last a quality which in Restoration comedy invariably takes the stylized phallic form of readiness for dueling). Friendall's gaudy display of the opposite qualities—silliness, ineffectual philandering, and fear of fighting—undermines his wife's status and self-respect since her "honor" is subsumed in his. A wife was neither legally nor ideologically the keeper of her own self, and Mrs. Friendall has entered the immanence of marriage in exchange for the protection of marriage. Not receiving it, she reflects on "How despicable a Condition must that Matrimony be, when the Husband (whom we look upon as a Sanctuary for a Woman's Honour), must be obliged to the Discretion and Management of a Wife, for the Security of his own!" (II.ii.75–78) Mrs. Friendall's "Management" on behalf of her husband's honor consists of

writing a challenge in his name and other standard comic counter-plotting. Through familiar comic tricks like the forged letter, she energetically attempts to solve her tragic situation. This is a trapped Barry heroine who is not content to be born to suffer.

Mrs. Friendall's admirer Lovemore tries to persuade her to make use of "the wives' excuse" for adultery: i.e., that the husband deserves no better. She cannot comply without losing her self-respect, but she does reject immanence and dependence on Mr. Friendall's "protection" and acts for herself.

> I won't justifie his Faults, but because he does not take that care of me he shou'd, must not I have that regard to my self I ought? What I do is for my own sake: Nay what is past,
> Which, by your hints, I know you do suspect,
> I own I did it;
> Not for the Commendation of your Wit,
> Nor as a Debt to him, but to my self,
> Foreseeing a long Life of Infamy,
> Which in his Follies I was Marry'd to;
> And therefore sav'd my self by saving him. (IV.i.134–44)

In this speech to her lover, making claims for "my self . . . my own sake . . . my self . . . my self," Mrs. Friendall admits no "Debt to him, but to my self." Nor will she, however attractive she finds Lovemore, merely change one subordination for another and act "for the Commendation of your Wit."

But these brave words also show the barrenness of such a saving of self. Only the negative satisfaction of avoiding infamy remains, since Mrs. Friendall is not prepared to scrap the idea of "virtue" as vital to female identity and self-esteem. A few years later, Vanbrugh was to let the provoked wife in *The Provoked Wife* (played by Barry) do just this, debunking millennia of male propaganda and female creduluosness:

> Lord what fine notions of Virtue do we Women take up upon the Credit of old foolish Philosophers. Virtue's its own reward, Virtue's this, Virtue's that—Virtue's an Ass, and a Gallant's worth forty on't.[26]

By contrast, Mrs. Friendall's often quoted speech to *her* "Gallant" demonstrates that she has thoroughly internalized the philosophers' fine notion of virtue:

> Mr. *Lovemore*, some Women won't speak so plain,
> But I will own to you, I cannot think

> The worse of you for thinking well of me:
> Custome has fashion'd it
> Into the way of living among the men;
> And you may be i'th' right to all the Town:
> But let me be i'th' right too to my Sex
> And to my self: thus far may be excus'd:
> You've prov'd your Passion and my Vertue try'd;
> But all beyond that tryal is my crime,
> And not to be forgiven:
> therefore I intreat you, don't make it impossible to me for the future,
> to receive you as a friend, for I must own,
> I wou'd secure you always for my Friend:
> Nay more, I will confess my heart to you:
> If I cou'd make you mine-
>
> *Lovemore.* For ever Yours.
>
> *Mrs. Friendall.* But I am Marry'd, only pitty me—
>
> [*Goes from him.* (V.iii.83–100)

We note that Mrs. Friendall sees nothing intrinsic about the predatory virility of the Restoration rake: "Custome has fashion'd it/ Into the way of living among the men." But, regarding female "Vertue" as natural and absolute, she ignores the interdependence of the social roles of the macho hunter and his virtuous prey. In her speech the male role appears as created by the contingent perspective of "the Town," while the female is defined through the absolutes of sex and self: "you may be i'th' right to all the Town:/ But let me be i'th' right too to my Sex/ And to my self."

Mrs. Friendall's simple language here shows us what contemporaries meant when they praised the purity of Southerne's diction,[27] especially if we compare it with the fustian which other playwrights wrote on the same theme in the sententious 1690's (e.g., Amanda's speech virtuously rejecting Worthy in Vanbrugh's *Relapse*). Sliding into blank verse, Mrs. Friendall sounds increasingly like Monimia and Belvidera—and still more like the tragic Isabella, who is a couple of years later also to exit impressively on the words "pity me" (*The Fatal Marriage* IV.iii.271). But when Mrs. Friendall calls for the sympathetic tears that are the tragic Barry heroine's due ("But I am Marry'd, only pitty me—"), Lovemore trenchantly refuses to shed them:

> Pity her! She does not deserve it, that won't better her condition, when she may.

This rake has no intention of being "redeemed" by transcendent

female virtue. Generally, there is very little uplift in Southerne's comedies. No rakes are reformed in the fifth act, the good are unrewarded, and the punishment of the bad is casual at best. In *The Wives' Excuse*, we even see the usual audience pleasure of pity for a female victim nastily undercut: "She does not deserve it, that won't better her condition, when she may."

The way this exchange is interpreted is obviously central to any reading or production of the play. Critics, who do not generally think with Lady Brute that virtue's an ass, invariably quote Mrs. Friendall's speech with admiration and Lovemore's words as a self-serving sneer which gives the audience all the more reason to feel sorry for Mrs. Friendall. Lovemore is visualized as "smiling sardonically" while he voices his "heartless reaction,"[28] thus revealing himself as an "icy manipulator and predator."[29] Peter Holland, in analyzing the implications of the play's casting and emphasizing the role of Betterton as Lovemore, suggests that "Betterton still embodied the cynical single-minded egocentric rake better than any other actor" and therefore improved the audience's perception of Lovemore as "a rake whose presence and persistence becomes increasingly irritating to the audience as his attempts on Mrs. Friendall's virtue continue."[30] "But exactly how," inquire Milhous and Hume, "is Mrs. Friendall to 'better her condition' via adultery?"[31] This is surely a reductive definition of her problem. Indeed Mrs. Friendall cannot better her condition permanently no matter what she does, but which of us can? If she were to embark on an affair with Lovemore her condition would be for some time a great deal better in that she would have a lover, a state which in most of literature and life offers greater emotional resonance than is suggested by Milhous and Hume ("She might enjoy the sex for a while" [p. 243]). As it is, her "virtue," as absolute and deadly as Isabella's, will ensure her loneliness. Lovemore's comment, straight from the world of Lucia/Anthony, is extremely resonant when applied to Barry the suffering, the star-crossed and the passive. Do sufferers who will not help themselves deserve pity? Why won't women better their condition when they may? Is there a life beyond masochism?

Eugene M. Waith has analyzed the appearance in Southerne's comedies of "admirable" characters like Mrs. Friendall, borrowed directly from heroic drama and coming to no happy end. Waith concludes that what distinguishes Southerne's comedy is "its simultaneous appeal for admiration and for an awareness that the admired virtues may never bring happiness, never be properly re-

warded."[32] It seems to me that the comic context in *The Wives' Excuse* subverts Mrs. Friendall's appeal for admiration more radically than Waith allows, although the passive Barry heroine was clearly irresistibly interesting and in a sense admirable to Southerne. Miserably and comically married to Friendall, Barry keeps her pathos but is also forced to be much more active and enterprising, to defend herself in new ways. To suffer and be still is not enough in the comic world. Mrs. Friendall throws herself into the fray of comic tricks, but, Barry still and mortally threatened by the "pois'nous Spring" of sex, she dare go no further. Southerne's next Barry heroine does.

In *The Maid's Last Prayer*, Elizabeth Barry plays another tragic young wife in a comic situation, Lady Malepert. Unlike Mrs. Friendall she does commit adultery, and like Isabella and Imoinda she "dies" of it. Of course nobody dies physically in a comedy; but the psychic killing of Lady Malepert, "every way undone," is painful beyond most Restoration tragedies.

Lady Malepert in *The Maid's Last Prayer* is not the first tragically fallen Barry heroine in a comedy. Elizabeth Howe has argued that Barry from 1680 onwards created a distinctive Barry comedy heroine, a sister of the tragic Barry heroine with the same "powerful combination of pathos and eroticism" as her Monimia. This category, including for instance La Nuche in Behn's *The Rover, Part II* (1681), Howe designates "the suffering prostitute."[33] It obviously does not include the virtuous Mrs. Friendall, and I have tried to show that Southerne in *The Wives' Excuse* exploits audience expectation of the tragic Barry heroine rather than expectations drawn from Barry's comic repertoire. The "fallen" Lady Malepert in *The Maid's Last Prayer*, on the other hand, owes something to such pathetic comedy heroines as La Nuche; yet the understatement and restraint of Lady Malepert principally evoke the tragic Barry heroine rather than the wild emotionalism and emphatic pathos of Behn's "suffering prostitutes."[34]

Again Barry's husband is comic and impotent. Lord Malepert is a court hanger-on, de-virilized by a love of dancing, shopping, and harmless flirtation. He tends to trip himself (malapertly) into damning double-entendre, as when he praises the way his helpful wife "picks up all the News of the Drawing-Room, to inform me of at Night; for her whole Business, you must know, is to make me rise" (I.i.171–73). The lady's efforts, his listener pertinently ripostes, must be "lost Labour very often, my Lord; for, after all,

you don't look much like a Man of Business." As the play on the word "Business" suggests, *The Maid's Last Prayer* is about commercialized sex. Everybody is "mercenary" (a key word), everybody is corrupt here (except two very pale and shadowy good people, Maria and Garnish). Political corruption and the ins and outs of court favor are part of the play's framework.

Younger and weaker than Mrs. Friendall, Lady Malepert is under the sway of her former governess Wishwell, who persuades her into expensive prostitution. Lady Malepert unthinkingly accepts the privileges of young womanhood without expecting to pay anything for them. She expects to be able to cheat without guilt:

> *Sir Ruff.* Madam, I have some Doctors in my Pocket, if you please to use 'em.
>
> *Lady Malepert.* What Doctors, Sir?
>
> *Sir Ruff.* Why, don't you know the Doctors? The Dice that only run the high Chances. I'll put them into your Box, and no body the wiser.
>
> *Lady Malepert.* You shou'd ha' don't, without telling me. (III.iii.181–86)

This immature character has a fatal tendency to do what she is told. First she marries Malepert because her relations tell her to, and then she is ruled by Wishwell who sells her to rich cullies. Her admirer Gayman is an unusual character in a Restoration play: a gallant who does not regard a "fallen" woman as beyond the pale of romantic interest. Students of Restoration comedy will appreciate the rarity of such an attitude, contrasted with that of the libertine Granger:

> *Gayman.* But can you Love without esteem?
>
> *Granger.* Why, you Court Lady Malepert; you can have no real esteem for a Woman of her mercinary Character.
>
> *Gayman.* Cou'd I reclaim her, I shou'd be happy: At least the Tryal will be pleasant. (I.i.99–103)

The eventual reclamation is successful, but "pleasant" only to a strong stomach. It consists of a devastating bedtrick, whose force comes from the fact that Gayman and Lady Malepert were mutually attached before her marriage. Gayman himself takes the place of the rough Sir Ruff, who has paid dearly for a night with Lady Malepert (not so much for the night as "the Reputation of a Quality-Entriegue," without which "a Man in this Town is no body" [II.ii.12]).

After the act we see Gayman entering dressing as he quotes verses and remembers "this Night's Pleasures" with lingering delight and with resentment at being taken for Sir Ruff: "The furious riot, the expense of Charms, the prodigality of Life, and Love (too vast for Nature's Bounty to support another hour) might have inform'd her better" (V.i.20–22). After him comes Lady Malepert, entranced and transformed by the expense of charms and speaking in blank verse:

> I have slept away my life,
> My better part of it, my life of Love:
> He's gone from me: Was this an hour of rest?
> Sleep had been welcome in a Husband's Bed;
> But in a Lover's Arms! (V.i.25–29)

Nowhere in Southerne's plays is the contrast between tragic emotion and comic convention starker than in the scene which follows. As the stage begins to fill up for the standard fifth-act ensemble ending, and while the lover is with traditional comic panache outwitting the stupid returned husband, Lady Malepert realizes with whom she has slept and shows in asides her sense of the annihilation of all self-respect: "O every way undone." Southerne recklessly mixes farce and tragedy to produce one of the most humiliating moments in Restoration comedy.

In *The Wives' Excuse*, the meeting between tragic and comic had primarily undermined the tragic Barry heroine, but in *The Maid's Last Prayer* the same meeting brings out more forcefully the opposite: the destructive and humiliating potential of the sexual comic trick, notably the bedtrick. In both plays, meaning can enter in the rifts which open between character and predicament, between the way these women are and the kinds of things that happen to them. As tragic heroines in comic situations, both Lady Malepert and Mrs. Friendall gain depth and ambiguity. The character of Mrs. Friendall especially, in combining the intensity and inwardness of the tragic Barry heroine with the worldly wisdom of the comic breeches heroine, achieves what neither of these Southerne types has separately: a fusion of feeling and action.

Something about these two brilliant comedies failed to appeal to audiences. Perhaps the fusion as such was inherently alarming to both men and women in the audience. As we have seen, Southerne went on, in *The Fatal Marriage* and *Oroonoko*, to dissociate the two sides of female sexuality briefly integrated in

Mrs. Friendall and Lady Malepert. In the tragedies he offers two separate plots, and two heroines who are poles apart: a pathos-evoking, passive heroine, and an active, resourceful female hero. The tragic heroine has all Mrs. Friendall's masochism ("only pitty me"), while the comic female hero has all her self-esteem ("What I do is for my own sake"). All feeling is in one plot and all action in the other. Sex, the "Spring of Life," is "pois'nous" in the high plots, truly life-giving in the subplots. From the male point of view, both kinds of heroine have their dark, obsessive aspect, appealing respectively to the sadist and the bisexual. Yet they are both much simpler than Mrs. Friendall and Lady Malepert, those rare heroines who offer possibilities of identification to a female audience. Tragic and comic, Mrs. Friendall and Lady Malepert are exposed to the threat as well as the promise of sex.

University of Uppsala

NOTES

[1] "An Epistle to Mr. *Southerne* From Mr. *Fenton*" (1711), in *The Works of Mr. Thomas Southerne* (London, 1713), I, sig. a1^{v}.

[2] See *The Works of Thomas Southerne*, ed. Robert Jordan and Harold Love (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), II, 5–8, 89–97.

[3] Recent discussions include Anthony Kaufman, "'This Hard Condition of a Woman's Fate': Southerne's *The Wives' Excuse*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (1973), 36–47; Eugene M. Waith, "Admiration in the Comedies of Thomas Southerne," in *Evidence in Literary Scholarship: Essays in Memory of James Marshall Osborn*, ed. René Wellek and Alvaro Ribeiro (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 89–103; Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume, *Producible Interpretation: Eight English Plays 1675–1707* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 228–59; Harold M. Weber, *The Restoration Rake-Hero: Transformations in Sexual Understanding in Seventeenth-Century England* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 162–78; Robert Jordan, "Inversion and Ambiguity in *The Maid's Last Prayer*," *Restoration*, 15 (1991), 99–110.

[4] "It is, however, one of the toughest, most serious, and most original comedies of the seventeenth century. Its Chekovian ellipticality and detachment are unique in its time" (Milhous and Hume, *Producible Interpretation*, p. 256).

[5] See my article "'We'll learn that of the Men': Female Sexuality in the Comedies of Thomas Southerne," *SEL*, 33 (1993), 545–63.

[6] *The Wives' Excuse* V.i.9–10. All quotations from Southerne's plays are from the edition of Jordan and Love and will be hereafter identified by parenthetical act, scene, and line references.

[7] *Oroonoko* IV.i.1–37.

[8] See Drougge, "We'll Learn that of the Men," pp. 545–63.

[9] See Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 108–28.

[10] See *Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*, ed. Philip Highfill, Jr., Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward Langhans (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1973–), *s.v.* "Elizabeth Barry."

[11] *An Apology for the Life of Colley Cibber*, as quoted in ibid.

[12] III.275–77; *The Works of Thomas Otway*, ed. J. C. Ghosh (1932; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), II, 41.

[13] *Venice Preserved* IV.391–92.

[14] *The Orphan* I.207.

[15] *The Orphan* IV.209–17.

[16] Howe, *The First English Actresses*, p. 47.

[17] Ibid., p. 109.

[18] See Southerne, *Works*, II, 89. After the division of the United Company in 1695, Southerne decided to give *Oroonoko* to Rich's company at the old theater, where Jane Rogers took the part.

[19] See ibid., I, 161–62.

[20] Southerne himself, apologetic about bumping audiences and readers up and down between tragedy and comedy in this unclassical way, blames audience taste and commercial pressure after the division of the "United" theater company in 1695. See, e.g., the Epistle dedicatory to *The Fatal Marriage*: "I have given you a little taste of Comedy with it, not from my own Opinion, but the present Humour of the Town" (*Works*, II, 10).

[21] Howe, whose study is not concerned with subplots, discusses the exploitation of actresses' sexuality in the case of the high tragedy plots with their eroticization of suffering (*The First English Actresses*, pp. 37–65).

[22] See Southerne, *Works*, I, 161, 171–72.

[23] We might call her his "Mountfort heroine," except that Victoria was actually played by Anne Bracegirdle and that Mountfort complicated matters further by taking various different roles in Southerne's comedies (Mrs. Wittwoud in *The Wives' Excuse* and Lady Susan Malepert in *The Maid's Last Prayer*).

[24] Jordan and Love suggest that Southerne's "sense of [Barry's] powers as a tragic actress was one of the factors influencing him towards a darker, more thoughtful kind of comedy" (*Works*, I, 265). See also Howe, *The First English Actresses*, pp. 108–28.

[25] For the much publicized Parliamentary divorce cases in the 1690's, see Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530–1987* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 313–22.

[26] *The Provoked Wife* I.i; *The Complete Works of Sir John Vanbrugh*, ed. Bonamy

Dobrée and Geoffrey Webb (1927; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1967), I, 117.

[27] Thus Dryden saw reincarnated in the young Congreve "*Etherege* his Courtship, *Southern*'s Purity:/ The Satire, Wit and Strength of Manly *Wicherly*" ("To my Dear Friend Mr. Congreve On his Comedy, call'd, The Double-Dealer," in *Comedies by William Congreve*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée, World's Classics, 276 [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972], p. 118).

[28] Kaufman, "This Hard Condition," p. 46; see also Weber, *The Restoration Rake-Hero*, p. 173.

[29] Milhous and Hume, *Producible Interpretation*, p. 243.

[30] Peter Holland, *The Ornament of Action: Text and Performance in Restoration Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 146–47.

[31] Milhous and Hume, *Producible Interpretation*, p. 243.

[32] Waith, "Admiration in the Comedies," p. 99.

[33] This type is the joint creation of Barry and Aphra Behn: starting with Corina in Behn's *The Revenge* (1680), Barry acted "a striking series of wholly original heroines, prostitutes and mistresses who are passionate, seduced and consequently doomed to unhappiness" (Howe, *The First English Actresses*, p. 129).

[34] There is even an explicit reference to Monimia in *The Maid's Last Prayer* when Lady Malepert's clownish husband, overjoyed at being for once favorably received, addresses her in Castalio's famous words to Monimia: "Where am I? Sure Paradise is round me: To touch thee's Heaven, but to enjoy thee! Oh!—" (IV.i.83–84).