

Sir Anthony Love and Contemporary Feminist and Gender Theories

JESSIE GOMBERG

ABSTRACT

Thomas Southerne (1660-1746) was an Irish playwright, and remains one of the most well-known playwrights of the English Restoration period, which began with the restoration of King Charles II to the English throne. Before he was restored, England underwent a tumultuous period during which theatres were closed down. Restoration comedies - the literature most often studied from the period - are stage plays characterized by many characters, witty language, complex plots, and farce. Southerne wrote *Sir Anthony Love* in 1690. In this play, Lucia, the female protagonist, disguises herself as Sir Anthony. Her motives are unclear and remain unexplained. What is clear is that she experiences freedoms that before were not possible as a woman. She befriends her love interest, Valentine, garners the affections of ladies (although never engages with them sexually), and eventually robs a man she previously worked for as a house servant. Although it seems as though Lucia uses her male persona to get closer to Valentine so she can marry him later, she annuls the marriage, complicating her motives even further. Eventually, she disappears from the play, leaving other characters and the audience confused. Lucia's boldness as a woman and donning of a male costume make *Sir Anthony Love* apt for analysis using contemporary feminist and gender theories. Judith Butler's and Luce Irigaray's theories are used to analyze not only Lucia's emancipation, but her simultaneous and problematic interpolation into an already constructed world of gender binaries.

Thomas Southerne's *Sir Anthony Love* is not a typical Restoration comedy. Its plot is complex, and it leads readers on a curious journey; at first readers may not be aware that Sir Anthony is, in fact, the character Lucia, posing as a man. A second curiosity, not quite spelled out clearly, involves a question of motive. Why does Lucia act as Sir Anthony? Southerne thrusts forth to readers an atypical female character, Lucia, who introduces complexity into typical notions of gender within Restoration comedy. She blatantly refuses to follow a typical feminine trajectory of either being married or reformed despite a relatively typical Restoration comedy backdrop. Southerne includes elements that can be found in other comedies of the period: two romance plots, farce, tyrannical masculine villainy, and marriage. He massages these elements, however, in order to foreground Sir Anthony, the gender-bending female protagonist: the "no[t] conventional breeches

part but a girl who has constructed a new, genuinely virile identity for herself".¹ Lucia's representation stands out as unique from the scope of comedies wherein male and female characters are allotted very specific roles in relation to one another. Although these roles vary in plot and circumstance, they all highlight the differences between masculinity and femininity in Restoration life, and ultimately underscore a binarized gender system wherein there is room only for males and females to exist in opposition to one another. These binarized representations tend to evoke different situations that bring forth woman's powerlessness in the face of gendered constraints. In Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, the witty rake, Horner, is opposite to the young, curious Margery, forced into a marriage with a husband who threatens her with bodily harm. Margery's violent husband, Pinchwife, stands as the tyrannical, cuckolded villain. Aphra Behn's *The Rover* paints the tragic plight of women by rape and by love, as courtesan Angellica is disturbingly driven to murderous madness by a rebuked love for Willmore. Southerne's heroine, however, puts a unique spin on gender; not only does she dress as a man, but she embodies masculine wit. She sets her own trajectory, and conclusively rejects marriage with the man she originally says she desires. Most importantly, she consciously performs a masculine gender that she is acutely aware is powerful in attaining whatever her goals are that she would be unable to achieve were she to be constrained by femininity. In this sense, Lucia/Sir Anthony is doubtlessly groundbreaking in her autonomy.

It is ultimately quite simplistic, however, to argue only for Lucia's strength in breaking gendered barriers for women. Her marriage to Sir Golding at the end of the play is problematic, as he is the very person she robbed and escaped from in order to achieve her goal as Sir Anthony. It would be a more complex and ultimately fruitful pursuit not to pigeonhole Lucia as feminist heroine, but to explore the complex motives behind her gender performance, and how the concepts of love and desire are rendered by such a pursuit. Furthermore, it is important to consider contemporary feminist theories that recognize the feminine as subdued within a masculine symbolic order, and gender theories that conceptualize the individual subject as always interpolated into

1 Drougge, Helga. "Love, Death, and Mrs. Barry in Thomas Southerne's Plays," *Comparative Drama* 27 (1994): 410.

a system that produces effects on him or her, rather than he or she exacting effects on social structures that already exist. In this sense, Sir Anthony provides a unique example of the struggle to break free from constraints imposed by her female sex and her rejected feminine gender. She simultaneously, however, cannot emancipate herself as an independent subject; this inability to totally destabilize or abandon her social system puts her in a place quite between complete subordination and full emancipation.

It is necessary to examine Sir Anthony's motives behind her masculine gender performance, as many scholars and critics have done, in order to flesh out what exactly is occurring throughout the play. If read closely, one can notice the intrigue in Sir Anthony's unique reasoning behind her keeping company with eligible ladies. Waitwell tells her, "An honest Man might be thankful for half your Fortune with the Women. But what pleasure can you find in following 'em?"". ² This question begs more than it seems, as it asks Sir Anthony not only why she takes pleasure in courting women although she cannot have sex with them, but also evokes the larger question of why she is even acting out a masculine fantasy overall. Helga Drougge assesses the freedom Lucia can enjoy as Sir Anthony: she gets to become "a female rake who is successful in all her schemes, loves liberty above all things, and does mean lewd liberty". ³ The answer Sir Anthony gives to Waitwell's question is even more curious, and, I would argue, less obvious than Drougge's original assessment in its implications. She replies to Waitwell that she intends to make her pleasures "The same that some of the men find". ⁴ Sir Anthony assesses a notion about courtship that seems to be a microcosm of her experience posing as a man. She here illuminates the chase in heterosexual courtship as being more desirable than the catch; her own "accidents of the chase, the hedges, and ditches" turn out to be more of the elements that drive her own pursuits. ⁵ Drougge again is apt in her conclusion that Sir Anthony's pursuit, or her "chase", is a tough one to carry out; she argues that "the difficulty of this project is

² Thomas Southerne, "Sir Anthony Love." in *The Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth-Century Drama*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield, (Toronto: Broadview Press Ltd., 2001), 1216-1277.

³ Drougge, "We'll Learn That of the Men": Female Sexuality in Southerne's Comedies," 549.

⁴ Southerne, "Sir Anthony Love," (l.i.38)

⁵ *Ibid.*, (l.i.45)

precisely its point. It is the energy and aggressiveness of the male sex role that she enjoys".⁶ At the end of the play, Lucia's separation from Sir Gentle Golding proves to annul their marriage and allow Lucia to live somewhat independently. Her alleged motives to "be better employ'd; to recommend [her] to Valentine" are also proven complicated, as winning Valentine's sexual desires becomes a mere side dish to the delicious identity she has concocted.⁷ Valentine marries, but not to Lucia, and this is completely fine with her.

With her complex motives for gender play examined, it then becomes pertinent to analyze what gender is for Lucia/Sir Anthony – how she perceives it, if and/or how she uses it, and the complexities of the subject's pursuit to redefine a gendered identity. Waitwell asserts to Sir Anthony that she "so perfectly act[s] the cavalier, that cou'd you put on our sex with your breeches, o' my conscience you wou'd carry all the women before you".⁸ In this poignant observation, Waitwell attests to Sir Anthony's gender being something that she can change at will, with a certain high degree of control. In order to see Sir Anthony as something other than fully autonomous, it is crucial to note how Waitwell misses the mark with this statement. The control for identity expression is not solely in Sir Anthony's hands. It seems a natural move, then, to turn to Judith Butler's gender performativity theory to attempt the examination of this theme of contrived gender expression. Sara Salih breaks down Judith Butler's notion of the performativity of gender, ensuring that any reading of gender performativity does not conflate it with the performance of gender. Lucia's donning of breeches, her appropriation of masculine wit, or her adoption of other masculine characteristics are not representative of gender performativity, even though they are performances. The key idea that Salih teases out is that "performance presupposes a pre-existing subject, [while, conversely,] performativity contests the very notion of the subject".⁹ For scholars and critics to whom Lucia/Sir Anthony appears the ultimate maker of her own new identity, this notion may be troublesome as it suggests that Lucia, even as she chooses the images and language that communicate her identity,

6 Drougge, "We'll Learn That of the Men": Female Sexuality in Southerne's Comedies," 550.

7 Southerne, "Sir Anthony Love," (l.i.54-55)

8 Ibid., (l.i).

9 Sara Salih, Judith Butler (London: Routledge, 2002), 63.

is still fundamentally restricted. She is restricted by the “script [. . . that is] always already determined within this regulatory frame”; Lucia is a “subject” who “has a limited number of ‘costumes’ from which to make a constrained choice of gender style”.¹⁰ Salih pinpoints the problems with assuming that the construction of a certain gender is fully autonomous.

When Waitwell notes to Sir Anthony that “you are young and handsome in petticoats; yet are contented to part with the pleasures of your own Sex, to Ramble into the Troubles of ours”, he unconsciously reveals a double entendre that does justice to the very problem Salih explores by splitting apart performance and performativity.¹¹ To “Ramble into the Troubles” is precisely what Sir Anthony does. She not only rambles into the territory of masculinity, but she rambles into the business of attempting to construct an identity that is already constricted by the discursive domain in which it exists, and which cannot escape such a domain easily. As Salih argues, “the manner of taking up the tool will be determined as well as enabled by the tool itself – in other words, subversion and agency are conditioned, if not determined, by discourses that cannot be evaded”.¹² Lucia, by pushing back on the constraints of gender, still engages with the very discourse of gender itself, and does not simply burst through into another discursive realm. Drougge’s aforementioned focus on the virility of Lucia’s new identity as Sir Anthony here lingers as a sort of masculinized discursive cloak thrown over her, no matter how strongly readers desire to consider her gender play as emancipatory. Salih notes that Butler’s gender performativity theory does, however, open certain activist prospects; she does not argue for the full death of the subject. Lucia, as subject, may not be a “pre-existing metaphysical journeyer”, but rather a subject that “is not exactly where we would expect to find it – i.e. ‘behind’ or ‘before’ its deeds”.¹³ Rather than seeing Lucia as transcending gendered boundaries, one may instead see her as a female subject continuously trying on her discursive cloak in different ways, performing speech and actions that alter this cloak so that it fits her better and also appears more

10 Ibid.

11 Southerne, “Sir Anthony Love,” (l.i)

12 Salih, Judith Butler, 66.

13 Salih, Judith Butler, 45.

fashionable to her society. If Drougge's assessment of Lucia's actions is correct, if "the adventurousness of men, she argues, is not intrinsic but constructed from a combination of example, custom, and even diet", then Lucia is undeniably working within the confines of a gendered spectrum that is already in place.¹⁴ She grabs hold of the masculine characteristics she requires to propel her pursuits, but does not propel herself completely out of any framework.

Another way of seeing Lucia's inability to completely break free of the constraints of gender discourse would be to address her sexuality. She is undeniably sexually attracted to Valentine, and assures him that marriage to him is not what she desires. Instead, they flirt with the idea of her being his mistress; she poses, "Floriante, I grant you, would be a dangerous rival in a mistress", to which Valentine replies, "Nothing can rival thee".¹⁵ Luce Irigaray considers feminine sexuality, and the definition of femininity itself, as being always and already interpolated into a masculine discourse. Irigaray pinpoints the problem of female sexuality as immersed in the phallic symbolic order – that it "has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters".¹⁶ The act of sexual intercourse between man and woman becomes a metaphor for femininity's reliance on masculinity, or on the comparison between it and masculinity, for definition. In relation to the protruding penis, the female vagina becomes a space of "lack" – a space that can only serve to be penetrated by masculinity, and to provide pleasure for man. Sir Anthony's travels through her social environment with the mask of masculinity suggests that in her adoption of masculinity, she leaves herself, but also cannot escape the "primacy of the phallus"¹⁷ that dictates her social operation. It cannot go ignored that the primacy of Valentine's male sexuality appears to dictate the course of Lucia's relationship to him once he discovers that her portrayal of Sir Anthony is a disguise. When she reveals herself as a woman, he exclaims, "How many opportunities have I lost,/That you have giv'n me, and must answer for!"¹⁸ More interesting is her response, wherein she tells him not to fret, because "[t]here are as many more to come" and "you shall command

14 Drougge, "We'll Learn That of the Men": Female Sexuality in Southerne's Comedies," 550.

15 Southerne, "Sir Anthony Love", (IV.ii.112-114).

16 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23.

17 Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 31.

18 Southerne, "Sir Anthony Love", (IV.ii.77-78)

them all”.¹⁹ In Lucia’s complicity with Valentine’s ability to maintain control over their sexual endeavours, she sends a sort of invitation to him into the realm of her sexuality. Her sexuality will be released for him at his “command”. This sexual exchange hinted at by words might propel one to recall Irigaray’s theory that woman’s autoeroticism, the constant continual touching of the vaginal lips, is “disrupted” by the “violent break-in [. . .] by a violating penis, an intrusion that distracts and deflects the woman from this “self-caressing” she needs if she is not to incur the disappearance of her own pleasure in sexual relations”.²⁰ To say that Lucia was not enjoying sexuality on her own terms without masculinity infringing upon that autoerotic enjoyment would be too far a stretch for this text, just as it would be preposterous to ignore her desires. Valentine does not simply and violently intrude, but Lucia assures him that she actively desires it. Her surrender of her sexuality, however, to Valentine’s “command” ultimately reflects a certain dependence on masculine sexuality to define or to release the sexuality of the feminine.

Lucia’s appropriation of male characteristics to create a fundamentally masculine persona – Sir Anthony - doubtlessly hints at the destabilization of gendered constraints, but she is still more complex than the arguably impossible woman shattering the barriers that keep femininity separated and subordinate to masculinity. While she appears to aggressively shake up the notion that woman “attempts by every means available to appropriate [a penis] for herself”²¹ as she never actually appears to want to remain a man and adopt his sexual organs, Lucia complicates the attainment of full feminine autonomy. As she adopts masculinity because she believes that her goals will be more efficiently attained in this manner, she embodies Irigaray’s assertion that the feminine in relation to the masculine can never truly appropriate “the other for herself [. . .] Ownership and property are doubtless quite foreign to the feminine”.²² Even in the proposed ownership of her new identity, this new identity is predicated on something other than what she has in herself. Her body is the clay that she attempts to mold into a replication of masculinity, but the fundamental ownership properties that dictate her survival in society

19 Ibid.

20 Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 41.

21 Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 23.

22 Ibid., 31.

are not hers, due to both the more abstract and masculine discursive order within which she operates, but also the very circumstances of her marriage and subsequent separation agreement at the end of the play. Her marriage to Sir Gentle Golding results in a separation agreement that guarantees her an annual subsidy of five hundred pounds, but she is essentially still tied to the masculinized economy that she never escaped from even when she robbed the same Sir Gentle before the play's beginning. In the play's final lines, Valentine encourages Sir Gentle to pay Lucia a "rent-charge of five hundred, and she shall never trouble you more, not so much as to be a godfather to another man's child upon her body, which may otherwise inherit your acres".²³ In Valentine's statement it is all too evident that Lucia is Irigaray's "use-value for man, an exchange value among men; in other words, a commodity [. . .] the locus of a more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of mother earth".²⁴ Sir Anthony takes pleasure in the taking of Golding's fortune, as she perceives him to be the best husband a woman can have: a "coxcomb".²⁵ However, Sir Gentle is allotted the final utterance that ends the play, and a rhyming couplet no less: "When we have mistresses above our sense,/ We must redeem our persons with our pence".²⁶ Sir Anthony may have witted Sir Gentle out of five hundred pounds, but she has now shed her appearance as Sir Anthony, and is now Lucia – woman still commodified, still thought of as heir-bearer, and still complexly complicit with it all.

Within Lucia's adoption of a fundamentally masculine narrative to propagate her adventures as Sir Anthony, there is some room for the reformation of a positive space for femininity. Irigaray aptly assesses that the vagina produces in woman a distinct sexual plurality; it is the female sex organ's ability "to touch itself over and over again, by itself" that produces a multiplicity within feminine sexuality.²⁷ As Sir Anthony, Lucia introduces quite a similar multiplicity; she intertwines her female body, albeit covered with male garb, with a masculine presence. She represents a conjoining, a continuous rubbing of her physiological sex with a socially constructed gender. She ultimately has the power to cast

23 Southerne, "Sir Anthony Love", V.vii.160-164.

24 Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 31-32.

25 Southerne, "Sir Anthony Love", V.vii.171.

26 *Ibid.*, V.vii.174-175.

27 Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 26.

off her masculinity at the end of the play. Irigaray might argue that this is precisely the problem – that even as Lucia can get rid of her feigned masculinity, she still remains within the masculine narrative that cannot be eradicated by her move to “reverse the order of things”.²⁸ Lucia’s revitalization of masculinity, however, is not as simple as to produce some sort of futile reversal. Lucia inserts her personal agenda into a pre-existing masculine realm. She appropriates virility, is sexual without reprehension, and does not end up fully trapped in a marriage wherein she faces the threat of disenfranchisement. She throws a wrench into the gears of masculine machinery, but it would be too simplistic to hail her as a completely autonomous, free female character – one that can both transcend paradigms of masculinity and gender.

WORKS CITED

- Drougge, Helga. “Love, Death, and Mrs. Barry in Thomas Southerne’s Plays.” *Comparative Drama* 27:4 (1994): 408-424.
- Drougge, Helga. ““We’ll Learn That of the Men”: Female Sexuality in Southerne’s Comedies.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 33 (1993): 545-563.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Salih, Sara. *Judith Butler*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Southerne, Thomas. “Sir Anthony Love.” *The Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth-Century Drama*. Ed. J. Douglas Canfield. Toronto: Broadview Press Ltd., 2001. 1216-1277.

²⁸ Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 26.