## Violence and Persecution in the Drawing-Room: Subversive Textual Strategies in Riccoboni's Miss Juliette Catesby

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The resurgence in the popularity of Jürgen Habermas's constitution of eighteenth-century space into public and private spheres has led to a lively discussion of women's place in society. Joan Landes argues that women were excluded from public participation while others posit a more active participation on the part of women in the ancien regime. Deena Goodman explains that the private and the public sphere intersected and overlapped making the division not as hermetic as is sometimes presented (2). She shows that the two larger divisions can each be subdivided into a public and private area. I propose to look at women's place in the subdivisions of the larger category "private" in Marie Jeanne Riccoboni's Letters of Miss Juliette Catesby to her friend Miss Henriette Campley (1768).

Public, private and feminine space all intersect in the epistolary novel. This intersection is exploited by Riccoboni who demonstrates the dangers and fallacy of the traditional notion of the drawing-room or private salon as a safe authorized area for women's contact with the larger world. Although Juliette Catesby is considered to be a "typical" popular novel written to meet consumer demand for light romance, the conventional plot is doubled by two story lines that protest social practices, double standards and the danger inherent in any benign social situation. Riccoboni is original and innovative in the manner in which she exposes the fallacy of the cultural supposition that letters, in the words of Ruth Perry, "kept people at a safe remove—that in a letter a woman could hold her place" (70).

The theme of the danger to women inherent in the love letter was not new. In fiction almost any correspondence with the opposite sex was, in fact, dangerous—look at what happened to Clarissa. The problem of women writing letters to members of the opposite sex resides in allowing men access to their private imaginative

space. This in turn accustomed women to an intimacy with the opposite sex normally denied them. However, Juliette Catesby is not writing letters to her love interest, for most of the novel she refuses to have any contact with him, she writes to her friend Henriette. It is in these letters that we see the increasing pressure to confine her physically as well as to limit her access to communication outside of male control. In Juliette Catesby, the heroine has trouble keeping the ostensibly private space of her letters uncontaminated. Specific textual strategies underscore the difficulty of female expression and show the divergence between convention and practice through the use of an authorized mode of female expression, the epistle. Riccoboni's particular use of citation shows the pressure to collapse women's "public" and "private" into one space, thereby limiting her voice. Her message is not one-sided however. As much as the reader is impressed with Juliette's frustrated desire to speak freely. Riccoboni simultaneously warns of the dangers of socially "unacceptable" modes of female expression which, in this novel, takes the form of transgressive and liberating laughter.

Riccoboni's Juliette Catesby was her most popular work and tells the story of a young widow, Juliette, who falls in love with Lord Ossery. He unexpectedly breaks off their engagement to marry another young woman, Jenny Monfort. After Jenny's death, Ossery returns to Catesby and they marry. It is the unconventional secondary plot lines that point to the struggle for autonomy figured in the fight over space, physical territory.

The first of these secondary stories is that of Sir Henry's love for Catesby. He is the brother of one of Catesby's friends at whose home she is staying. The sentimental letters that Catesby writes to her friend Henriette are literally disrupted by this parallel plot line. She feels persecuted by him and, although many incidents are quite amusing, there is an undertone of violence that cannot be denied. Catesby's letters are witty. She uses humor and irony to create a distance between her and events in order to

retain some sense of control. This control, as demonstrated by the unfolding events, is illusory.

Juliette Catesby is a sophisticated woman who knows what can and cannot be expressed publicly. Respectful of and restrained by the rules of polite social intercourse, these letters to her friend are the only forum in which Juliette may express herself. This authorized space for the expression of women's thoughts is increasingly under attack and is realized by a graphic incursion into Juliette's narrative. The body of her letters is penetrated by someone who has no independent voice in the novel and yet is very present: Sir Henry. Ludicrous yet threatening, he is the locus of one sort of violence and comedy in the novel that mirrors the aggression acted out in the story of Ossery and the young woman: Miss Jenny who is violated by Lord Ossery. The parallel behavior of Ossery and Sir Henry is not explicit, but is suggested by their juxtaposition. Through Juliette's relationship with Sir Henry, Riccoboni demonstrates the constraints public decorum puts on female resistance to private persecution.

From the moment Catesby introduces Sir Henry, they are in conflict, physically as well as verbally. Catesby's letters are most amusing and she gives us this sketch:

His natural bent is to be attentive, officious even; he loves to be in the middle of everything, to make himself necessary. We have already quarreled two or three times. He was to suffocate me in my carriage, for fear of my catching cold, I lower the carriage window, he raises it and I lower it again; he gravely makes his case, I carefully explain my wishes; he insists, I persevere, he concedes with chagrin and when I've put him in a horrible mood, he pouts and I breathe. (emphasis added)<sup>1</sup>

Under the light tone, the confining presence of Sir Henry's will is felt in the enclosed space of the carriage.

Catesby can breathe literally and metaphorically only when Sir Henry is silent. In the coach incident Sir Henry, present in Catesby's letter, is under her authorial control. He soon becomes more than the object of her narration. In one of the letters to Henriette, Catesby begins by writing of Ossery, her ex-fiancé: "I don't ever want to speak to him, I never want to see him." This is interrupted by "Here is Sir Henry, he is pressuring me, he does not know how to wait." Juliette's attention turns from one man, Ossery, to the other, Sir Henry. Interestingly enough the comments directed at Ossery, in this instance, can be applied to Sir Henry and vice-versa. The men at this narrative level are interchangeable oppressive agents. Acting in accordance with the established pattern, Juliette terminates the letter to her friend under the officious and overbearing presence of Sir Henry.

Sir Henry's presence displaces Ossery as the topic of the letter as more and more space is given over to ruminations on the interloper. After a description of Sir Henry's tender, but unwanted, ministrations, Catesby rationalizes her feelings for him, thinly disguising her anger and resentment: "What makes his presence so annoying and his tenderness so trying, is the notion that deep in his heart he finds me ungrateful" (XIX). She demonstrates this resentment in her use of mockery and humor: "Oh fine, I'll receive him. But what to talk about? I will ask him for some snuff, about the weather, the time, let my hankie fall to the ground so that he may have the pleasure of picking it up. One must oblige." By the mockery in her letters and by her disguised aggressive behavior, Juliette foils Sir Henry's pretension to sentiment and points to his coercive nature. The "one must oblige" is ironic in more than one way. Through her condescension, she states a truth. Social practice really does oblige her to receive him.

This interruption in the letter has been considered to be the result of faulty technique. One critic, for example, cites it as an example of "writing to the moment" so popular in the wake of Richardson's novels and considers this obstinate persistence to write in the face of interruption to be an "annoying" habit of Juliette's (Stewart, 50). But if looked at in a slightly different way, this awkward and overused writing to the moment can be seen as more than just faulty technique or the exploitation of a popular trend. In this context it illustrates graphically the problems of epistolarity as a "feminine" mode of writing and demonstrates the appropriation, or attempted appropriation, of the feminine space by the masculine. In a very physical way, it shows the struggle of women to keep this locus for her voice inviolate. The invasion of the private space of her communications is soon figured as a structural violence to her letters.

Sir Henry, in letter XVIII, increasingly and literally gains terrain. One half of the content of this letter is devoted to Sir Henry. Catesby writes:

But someone is coming in...who is it? Oh, who else could it be but Sir Henry? But who subjects me to Sir Henry's importunities? Why do I have to receive him? What right does he have to annoy me? Ah my dear Henriette! What enemy of the human race invented the falseness, which, under the name of politeness, tears from us this consideration, forces us to constrain ourselves? Here is the sullen person established in my drawing room, imperceptibly, he is gaining ground; he is right next to me... he is almost reading what I write. I want him to read it, so that he learns...I continue deliberately... *Milord*, pardon, vous permettez... He bows, sighs and remains, in truth, he remains. In the mood that I'm in, I'd like him to speak, to tell me that he loves me...I'd give a thousand guineas to have him make this avowal. Since my destiny makes him stay, I have to take leave of you.

In this instance Juliette's public voice disrupts her private text and this disruption is signaled by italics and punctuation, graphically distancing the public voice from the private one.

This interruption of direct quotation is surprising. Riccoboni's normal style is to imbed the other's words in her sentence, indicated by italics but not set off or separated by points de suspension. There are no quotation marks. Thus she retains control over the other voice. This technique of imbedded quotation lends itself to irony—a position of superiority—and is a distinguishing characteristic of her style. When Sir Henry encroaches on her text as usual, she takes leave of Henriette. Her personal voice is silenced however hard she struggles against this invasion of her space. But this time her feminine public voice displaces her private one. She expresses annoyance but it is in the submissive voice of the social woman. "...My lord, you permit me..." He does not "permit" her to continue. The verbs Catesby uses to describe her position are those of aggression: to be forced, to tear, to constrain.

Another example of this is found in letter X; Catesby rails against Sir Henry and in a long string of verbs describes her reaction to his behavior: "He obsesses me, fatigues me, I see nothing but him, he seeks me out, finds me, follows me, and meets me everywhere." The paratactic construction creates an impression of Sir Henry's inescapable presence. Catesby is the object in the clauses with one exception, "I see nothing but him," where her vision is circumscribed by his presence. "He comes, goes, returns, gesticulates, tears out of Betty's hand anything that he wants" and so on. She is surrounded by his action. There is but one third person masculine pronoun for all his action: one subject and it is masculine. By letter XIX, the escalation of pressure exerted by the unwanted suitor reaches a peak, Sir Henry's words as well as his presence appear in the text: "...Milady is writing. . ." Contrary to Catesby's usual practice, his words stand alone. He has successfully penetrated the body of her letter.

Juliette is outspoken in her displeasure but this is confined to her letters, which makes the contrast with her behavior all the more striking. She resists Sir Henry, but it is not in words exterior to the letter. Her speech is strictly circumscribed by social decorum. In letter III, Catesby writes to Henriette of Sir Henry's attempt to bribe her personal maid, Betty. Catesby has this information second hand, from Betty.

He noticed my long involuntary sighs; he is sure that there is a secret hidden in my boots; and he offered 10 guineas to find it out. Well, well, well, if it isn't Sir Henry himself? Oh what a face he makes! He surely guesses I am speaking of him, It is my letter that puts him in such a foul mood. I promise you, Sir Henry, that I'll write every day: please have the goodness to get used to this.

Juliette for all her ostensible outspokenness can only write to Henriette of her resolution to persist in the face of Sir Henry's displeasure, but she can do no more than write of it. She cannot speak her mind to him directly. She is reduced to addressing him in a letter to her female friend, Henriette, who bears a feminized version of his name. Catesby can only demonstrate her resistance indirectly through passive aggressive behavior. In letter XXIV, Sir Henry is reported to have had a fit of the vapors. Catesby, in guise of helping, takes out a bit of her suppressed aggression in a bit of payback.

Doesn't it just happen that Sir Henry had himself a fit of the vapors, and begin to faint just like a woman? this morning he was with me; he was taken by vertigo; I didn't have anything to bring him to himself. I had nothing but a flagon filled with ambered water; I threw it all over his face. His sister cried that I was poisoning him... I hope he won't recover.

The portrayal of Sir Henry as a sentimental man,

subject to vapors, is belied and rendered ridiculous by his insensitivity to Catesby's desires. Catesby, as a woman, is limited to the few responses available to resist Sir Henry. When the occasion arises, she seizes it and then can, more or less acceptably, respond by expressing her aggressivity. She cannot be faulted for her behavior, for although it pushes at the boundaries of acceptable conduct, it is still in the guise of aid. The ironic distance and playful tone that often pervades in Catesby's letters comes up against the continual presence of Sir Henry. She seems empowered through her writing, the reader hears her ironic voice, and yet her writing demonstrates the factitiousness of this empowerment.

The resistance to the encroachment on Juliette's space is often painful. In letter V, Sir Henry takes exception to a bouquet of flowers given to Catesby by one Sir James, another unwanted suitor.

Since I received the bouquet, Sir Henry can't breathe; he brings me twenty examples of problems caused by the strong odor of jonquils, he assures me that it is dangerous for the head. As for me, who sees his insolent jealousy, I'll keep the bouquet; I will keep it even should it give me a migraine...

This passage echoes Sir Henry's attempt to keep Juliette's body sequestered during the coach ride. This is symptomatic of the constant pressure to objectify Juliette. Although the situation is amusing, it is alarming that the only way for a woman to mark her displeasure is indirectly and passively at the potential cost of physical pain.

The problematic nature of the circumscription of Juliette's speech is manifested through her body in the same way as it is seen through her writing. The fragmented and disjointed interruptions in her letters are mirrored in episodes of fainting and bursts of tears when Juliette is faced with her social impotence. The oppressive nature of Juliette's social

intercourse with the opposite sex is underscored in a tertiary episode belonging neither to the main story of Ossery nor to Sir Henry's plot line, but which links both of them. In letter XVI, Sir Henry is absent from the country house and Catesby decides to take advantage of Sir Henry's absence to enjoy a walk alone. "At the end of a lane which I had taken to reach the park, I found Sir James. He had followed me surreptitiously; this meeting displeased me greatly; I thought that this time I would not be able to pretend not to understand him." She breaks into tears not only out of frustration at his declaration but because it reminds her of a similar but welcomed scene with Ossery. Sir James is a benign version of Sir Henry repeating a sentimental scene enacted by Ossery.

Riccoboni uses inverse images of Catesby's ongoing relations with Sir Henry and Ossery. Cornered inside by Sir Henry, she is followed outside by Sir James. Where she wants Sir Henry to declare openly his intentions, she pretends not to understand Sir James to avoid a scene. Where she welcomed Sir Ossery's attentions, she flees Sir James. As customary, the scene ends comically as the couple hear someone approach: "Sir James plunged into the woods and your crazy friend cut across a small lane in order not to be seen." Embarrassed at her emotional response in front of Sir James, Catesby ends her letter lamenting: "I must see him in a moment. The idea is unbearable."

Unlike Sir James, Catesby wanted to speak to Sir Henry but could not until he had declared himself interested. She writes to Henriette in letter XXVII, "You were dying to have Sir Henry speak, well here he is declared, proposed, and refused." Juliette, using the passive voice, neatly reverses their respective positions. Catesby falsely believed that Sir Henry would curtail his attentions to her when she was able to refuse his proposal. This proved to be wrong, her speech, when she is allowed to speak her mind, signifies nothing.

By letter XXX, the takeover of space and voice is no longer confined to the epistolary, it is extended to the

physical. Catesby writes to Henriette of a fever she has had which prevented her writing. At the time of her illness and non-writing, Sir Henry takes over. "I was bled despite my wishes. Sir Henry didn't want to miss a chance to demonstrate his officious zeal, he took over my room, did the honors." Although it is not specifically Sir Henry who had Catesby bled ("On m'a saignée malgré moi") the use of the indefinite pronoun "on" and the juxtaposition of the unwanted medical treatments practiced on her body with the takeover of Catesby's room by Sir Henry make connection between them too obvious to be ignored. The penetration of the body of Juliette's letter foreshadowed the breaching of her physical boundaries through the leeching. This intrusion is also mirrored in Miss Jenny's tale which can be read as a cautionary tale. The subversive humor that Juliette confines to her letters to Henriette is acted out by Miss Jenny. Riccoboni shows the dangerous consequences of socially inappropriate speech and reactions in the form of unbridled female laughter in the inset story of Miss Jenny.

Miss Jenny is raped by Ossery in her own home, in her drawing room. Her parents were absent and her older brother invited some friends to dine. Jenny, a very young and inexperienced girl, met her brother's friends in the dining room and then retired to read. Ossery, made uncomfortable by the men's carousing and drink, conscious of the inappropriateness of Jenny's meeting them, decides to take some air. Unfamiliar with the house, he comes upon the drawing room where Jenny is reading. She, startled by Ossery, knocks over the lamp. She is metaphorically and literally in the dark. They stumble around looking for the door when they collide and fall on the floor on top of one another. Here is the problem. Jenny thinks this is amusing, she laughs. It is this unfeminine/unconventional laughter that causes Ossery to lose his head and he violates her. Catesby encloses a copy of the letter which recounts the episode to Henriette. Jenny's story is told from Ossery's perspective where the blame is shifted to the young girl. If she had not laughed, if she had produced a "feminine" reaction (fear?), he would have behaved in a civil manner. It is her freedom from convention and her ignorance of the appropriate response that caused her downfall. When she does start screaming, Ossery runs away. Ossery's explanation of these tragic events does not go without ironic comment as Catesby remarks "Ah, yes, men have these slips" ("Ah, oui, les hommes, ils ont de ces oublis.")

Through juxtaposition of the two stories, Riccoboni shows the continual pressure to circumscribe women's speech and the continual masculine invasion of the authorized and protected female space on all levels, while demonstrating the importance of social "knowledge" as a tool to protect women at the same time as it oppresses them. Juliette's reaction to Miss Jenny's story is quite interesting in that it proposes an alternative to the conventional "death" of the violated heroine; she would have had Ossery, Jenny's child and her all live together. We shouldn't forget that all this is accomplished in a conventional "happy-ever-after" love story.

The novel concludes with a communal letter to Henriette announcing the marriage of Ossery and Catesby. And as Susan Lanser remarked in Fictions of Authority, the reader perceives that, once again, Catesby's independent voice is compromised (25-41). The parallel behavior of the two men suggested before has been literalized. Only now Ossery has replaced Sir Henry in the space of Juliette's letter, and he actually takes up her pen. He has succeeded where Sir Henry has failed. Ossery writes; "She is mine, forever mine." Now it is Osserv who is jealous of the two women's "amitié." Juliette's body has replaced Jenny's in name and function; she is Lady Ossery and mother of the "little Juliette" thereby collapsing the two women's stories into one. We have come full circle. And we are left with, to use Susan Lanser's words "the final image of Juliette, writing while Ossery looks over her shoulder and follows her pen with his eyes." Which is just where the story began.

## Notes

- 1. For a discussion of this topic see Dena Goodman's article "Public Sphere and Private Life: Toward a Synthesis of Current Historiographical Approaches to the Old Regime" History and Theory. February 1992: 882-910," along with Joan Landes Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution, Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988; Daniel Gordon "Philosophy, Sociology, and Gender in the Enlightenment Conception of Public Opinion" French Historical Studies, Fall 17.4 (1992); David A. Bell, "Public Sphere,' the State, and the World of Law in Eighteenth-Century France," French Historical Studies, Fall 17.4 (1992): 912; S. Maza "Women, the Bourgeoisie and the Public Sphere: Response to Gordon and Bell," French Historical Studies, Fall 17.4 (1992): 935.
- 2. This and the following translations are my own.

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