

THE RULE OF THE FATHER: ABSOLUTIST MONARCHY AND CONTRACTUALISM IN THOMAS OTWAY'S *VENICE PRESERV'D*

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Abstract

Two opposing theories, namely absolutism and contractualism, dominated the political scene in England in the seventeenth century. The father as the symbol of absolute authority, in particular, found ample representations in the political writing of this period since the proponents of absolute rule theorised on hierarchies of power by repeatedly drawing analogies between the father's paternal authority over the family and that of the king's over the country. In keeping with the political imagination of the time, the playwrights turned to the familial and domestic issues, interconnecting the lives of the ordinary people with the larger issues of the state. It became commonplace to read the plays structured around family members and domestic issues as reflections of larger matters of political and social order. Written immediately after the Popish Plot, Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (1682) has been conventionally categorised as a Tory statement against the threat of a popular uprising. It is true that Otway structured the play around the events of contemporary popular politics. Yet, reading *Venice Preserv'd* from a strictly limited political viewpoint is to disregard Otway's dramatic power to reflect the diverse social and political dynamics prevailing in Stuart England. The aim of this paper is to analyse *Venice Preserv'd* against the socio-political backdrop of Stuart England as a country on the verge of a transformation from absolutist monarchy into a more egalitarian political structure.

Key Words: *Absolutism, Contractualism, Patriarchy, Restoration Drama*

BABANIN HÂKİMİYETİ: THOMAS OTWAY'İN *VENEDİK KURTULDU (VENICE PRESERV'D)* ADLI ESERİNDE MUTLAK MONARŞİ VE SÖZLEŞMELİK

Özet

17. yüzyılda İngiltere siyaset sahnesine iki karşıt politik düşünce hâkimdi: mutlakiyetçilik ve sözleşmecilik. Mutlakiyet yanlıları, iktidarın hiyerarşik bölüşümü hakkındaki kuramlarını, babanın ev halkı, kralın ise ülke üzerindeki etkin otoritesi arasındaki benzerlikleri vurgulayarak oluşturmuşlardır. Bu nedenle baba figürü mutlak otoritenin bir simgesi olarak dönemin siyasi yazılarında sıklıkla karşımıza çıkar. Dönemin politik tasavvurun etkisiyle oyun yazarları da eserlerinde ailevi sorunlara eğilerek, sıradan insanların hayatlarıyla önemli siyasi olaylar arasında bağ kurmaya çalışmışlardır. Aile bireyleri ve aile içi sorunlar etrafında şekillenen bu oyunları önemli siyasi ve toplumsal olayların bir yansıması olarak değerlendirmek yaygın bir eğilime dönüşmüştür. Thomas Otway'in 1682 yılında, Katoliklerce krala karşı düzenlenen bir komplonun (the Popish Plot) hemen ardından kaleme aldığı *Venedik Kurtuldu (Venice Preserv'd)* bu eğilimin en önemli örneklerinden biridir. Oyun kraliyet yanlılarınca halk ayaklanmalarına karşı yazılmış siyasi bir propaganda aracı olarak değerlendirilegelmiştir. Otway'in oyununu dönemin siyasi olayları etrafında kurguladığı bir gerçektir. Ancak, eseri sadece bu kısıtlı siyasi yorum çerçevesinde değerlendirmek, yazarın Stuart dönemi İngiltere'sinde etkin olan çeşitli sosyal ve siyasi dinamikleri betimleyen sanatsal gözlem gücünü göz ardı etmek anlamına gelir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Otway'in *Venice Preserv'd* adlı eserini tek taraflı, dar bir siyasi okumanın etkisinden kurtararak, 17. yüzyıl İngiltere'sinde mutlakiyetçi yapıdan daha eşitlikçi bir siyasi yapıya geçişin izdüşümü olarak incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Mutlakiyetçilik, Sözleşmecilik, Ataerkillik, Restorasyon Dönemi Tiyatrosu*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phrase 'Restoration drama' typically conjures up an image of a colourful stage peopled with flamboyant couples, fops, matchmakers and cuckolds, overshadowing the stylistic and thematic diversity of the period. The vibrant world of Restoration comedies may also mislead us to think that such light-hearted entertainment could only be produced in a politically peaceful and stable atmosphere. On the contrary, Restoration drama, in fact, belonged to one of the most tumultuous periods of English history, and it was altogether a political activity. In 1660, Charles II reopened the theatres that remained closed for eighteen years under Cromwell's puritan commonwealth regime. In other words, the restoration of monarchy also meant the restoration of the theatre in England. Before his coronation on 29 May 1660, Charles II gave license to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant to form the first theatre companies of the Restoration period (Salgado, 1980: 135). Of course, Charles II seized a political purpose in restoring the theatre, one of the few and powerful publicity machines of the time. The first fruit of this collaboration between the crown and the stage was heroic drama, which is, in its basic sense, the idealisation of historical figures, mainly the kings, through the presentation of their heroic deeds. Discussing the political function of heroic drama in Stuart England, Suzan Owen argues that "[i]n the divided society of the 1660s, in which Stuart ideology has to be reconstructed and reinstated after the rapture of interregnum, the royalist heroic play represents an attempt to paper over the ideological cracks" (Owen, 1996: 19). Heroic plays along with light-hearted comedy of manners represented the Janus-faced Restoration drama, "looking one way towards the glamorous patronage of the Court and another way towards its own

independent development as a commercial institution" (Powell, 1984: 147). The early years of Restoration drama were dominated by these two specific types of play that flourished in the atmosphere provided by the secularisation of cultural life with the restoration of monarchy. However, this secure atmosphere did not last long, and England was thrust into political strife once again, following the Popish Plot (1678) and Exclusion Crisis (1679-1681). The legitimacy and limits of king's sovereignty were once again brought into question. In this uncertain political atmosphere of the late seventeenth century, the playwrights started to experiment with traditional themes and plot structures to write political tragedies in blank verse. These playwrights owed their success and fame mainly to the political allusiveness of their plays, rather than their originality. "The dramatist," as Owen notes, "used old themes in new ways: in tragedy the long-standing association of political and sexual excess took new forms, as lust, rape and sexual perversion were associated with conspiracy and republicanism by Tories and with tyranny and popery by Whig playwrights" (Owen, 1996: 4).

Thomas Otway wrote *Venice Preserv'd; or, A Plot Discovered* (1682) amidst the treacherous world of politics and conspiracy of the seventeenth century. As the subtitle of the play indicates, it is the story of a failed conspiracy against the Venetian senate. Jaffeir, a young Venetian, has secretly married Belvidera, daughter of a senator named Priuli. Reduced to poverty, Jaffeir pays a visit to his proud father-in-law to solicit for money, but he is turned down with insults. Pierre, Jaffeir's close friend, is also in trouble with another senator, Antonio, who has stolen his mistress, Aquilina. Using these private wrongs, Pierre convinces

Jaffair to join the conspirators to take revenge from Priuli and Antonio. The conspirators intend to “[s]hed blood enough, spare; neither sex nor age / name nor condition” in the city of Venice (*VP*, 3.1., 374). Jaffair trusts Belvidera with the leader of the conspirators, Renault to prove his loyalty, but he does not make any explanations to his wife. When Renault sexually assaults Belvidera, she escapes to her husband and eventually discovers the hatching plot against the senate. To save her father’s life, she persuades Jaffair to betray the plot by informing the senate. She also exhorts him to demand pardon for the conspirators as a reward. When this is granted, Jaffair delivers the list of conspirators. However, the senators do not keep their promise and condemn all the conspirators to death. To save his friend from the indignity of execution, Jaffair stabs Pierre on the scaffold and then himself. In the final scene, Priuli appears on the stage with Belvidera, who has gone delirious. She sees the ghost of her husband and Pierre and dies.

Although there is no mention of regicide in the play, the English audience and critics immediately recognised the parallels between *Venice Preserv'd* and the contemporary politics, the incident of the Popish Plot in particular. This was also the beginning of a critical tradition that viewed the play as a Tory propaganda (Thompson, 1979: 107; Munns, 1995: 174; Belsey, 1985: 120, Hart, 1988: 347-49). The senate has been conventionally associated with the English court, while the conspirators have been viewed as the Whigs that designed the Popish Plot. To put it simply, political allusiveness of the play has been widely acknowledged and studied. What is less clear and merits further research is the political imagination that led Otway, like many of his contemporaries, to combine the familial and the political in the same

textual space. The aim of this paper is to analyse *Venice Preserv'd* in the context of early modern English politics characterised by the opposing theories of absolutism and contractualism. The patterns of patriarchal authority that dominated politics and family life in Stuart England, and the emerging demands for a new and more egalitarian social order are discussed with particular attention given to seventeenth-century political theories.

2. PATRIARCHAL POLITICAL THOUGHT IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Divergent political theories were circulated in the Stuart era. “To read the major political theorists of Stuart England,” as David Wootton puts it, “is to be plunged into a world in which many of our conceptions of political rights and social change are in process of construction” (Wootton, 1986: 9-10). It was a period of transition from a society where the political authority was located in the hands of a single person to a more egalitarian one where individuals have basic political rights and liberties. Particularly important in this respect is Otway’s implications about the decline of patriarchal ideals inscribed in the political thought of the century and the concomitant necessity to replace them with a social contract. In *Venice Preserv'd*, patriarchal authority fails to provide order and happiness for individuals. The burgeoning need for individual liberties dictate a new political order based on a social contract, or a constitution, rather than the supreme authority of a single ruler. An awareness of the transformation in the paradigms of authority in the seventeenth century is essential to an understanding of political imagination that inspired Otway and many of his contemporaries.

Therefore, the first part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of patriarchalism and the emerging theories of contractualism as laid out by the political thinkers in the seventeenth century, which is followed by a detailed analysis of *Venice Preserv'd*.

That patriarchalism became a fitting subject of political discourse in the unstable atmosphere of Stuart England should come as no surprise. It was a time when rebellion was not a mere speculation, or political fantasy but a serious threat to the king's sovereignty. From the 1570s, Presbyterians and Catholics published books to justify and incite rebellion against tyrannical rulers, particularly those who corrupted the principles of true religion. (Sommerville 10)¹ As a response to pleas for rebellion, some political thinkers, such as Sir Robert Filmer (1588-1653), Sir Francis Kynaston (1586ca.-1642), Peter Heylyn (1600-1662) forged absolutist doctrines, promoting the traditional view of the king as the father of the nation, only accountable to God. The image of nurturant father was not altogether a seventeenth century design. As Gordon J. Schochet points out, the equation between royal and fatherly power is firmly entrenched in Western philosophical tradition, and goes back to the arguments propounded by Aristotle in his *Politics*. In his survey of patriarchal thought in Western philosophy, Schochet recounts several philosophers from Plato to Erasmus, who used the metaphors of the family, household and father as a source for complex social and cultural associations. Yet, it was not until the seventeenth century that these metaphors, particularly the fatherly figure, were

employed instructively as part of political discourse by thinkers, magistrates, clergymen, and kings (Schochet, 1988: 18-19).

Christian doctrine of filial obedience was one of the key building blocks that helped construct the theory of absolute monarchy, or the divine right of kings. It would not be exaggeration to suggest that almost the entirety of theoretical discussion intended for the defence and consolidation of absolute monarchy was conducted in religious language. In highlighting the political power the church had in seventeenth-century England, David Wootton notes, "since over the two thirds of adult men were illiterate in 1642, it was from the pulpit that most people derived their political philosophy" and "what the parishioners heard from the pulpit were government-authorized homilies calculated to inspire an unquestioning obedience" (Wootton, 1986: 27). The Fifth Commandment of the Bible, "honour thy father and thy mother," was the main argument frequently used in political texts and homilies to exhort obedience to king as well as to natural fathers (Schochet, 1988: 6, Sommerville, 1986: 31). In other words, according to the seventeenth-century political imagination, subordination and obedience to authority extend from the family unit, and therefore it should be accepted as a natural part of human existence. For many of the patriarchal theorists, the rights of kings were identical to those of fathers, and the difference between the nation and the family was only a matter of size. Inviting subjects to obey their sovereign, Thomas Jackson, for instance, argued, "[a]rid how great soever a kingdom may be for circuit of lands, or multitude of persons, yet kingly authority and fatherly authority, as they are both the ordinance of God,

¹ *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* by Stephanus Junius Brutus and *De jure regni apud Scotos* by Scotsman George Buchanan are two of the notable examples that Sommerville refers to in his study. (Sommerville, 1986: 34)

differ not in nature or quality, but only in quantity or extent” (Jackson, 2013: 312). Another important advocate of patriarchalism, John Buckeridge, simply echoed Jackson’s ideas when he wrote, “paternal and regal power are the same in substance and essence, even if they differ in size and extent” (qtd. in Sommerville, 1986: 34).

With his *Patriarcha* (1680), Sir Robert Filmer elevated the disparate interpretations of Christian doctrines to justify patriarchalism into an influential political theory. Like many of his contemporaries, Filmer saw the Bible as a book of laws that governed every aspect of Christian life. He, therefore, claimed that it should be considered as a guide in addressing wider political and social matters as well. At the centre of Filmer’s theory of patriarchalism is the Christian understanding of creation, where human society descends from a single man: Adam. Filmer’s prime assumption was that as all humans came from the same source, they were related to each other and also subordinated to the first man created. In other words, for Filmer, society was a large family descending from a single father. In this divinely ordained hierarchy, paternal and royal authority derived their legitimacy from Adam’s privileged position. Filmer argues,

If we compare the natural duties of a father with those of a king, we find them to be all one, without any difference at all but only in the latitude or extent of them. As the father over one family, so the king, as father over many families, extends his care to preserve, feed, clothe, instruct and defend the whole commonwealth. His wars, his peace, his courts of justice, and all his acts of sovereignty, tend only to preserve and distribute to every subordinate

and inferior father, and to their children, their rights and privileges, so that all the duties of a king are summed up in an [*sic*] universal fatherly care of his people. (Filmer, 1949: 63)

As Peter Laslett points out, there are two immediate implications of Filmer’s view of society based on the Scripture: inferiority of women and primacy of male authority. Laslett states,

Eve had been created after Adam, she had been fashioned out of Adam and God had specifically subjected her to Adam. Therefore in any situation the female was always inferior to the male [...]. God by creating Adam first gave him authority over everyone who came after him. [...] All this meant that the concept of a free human being subject to no authority but his own will was absolutely impossible. All men were born, and always remained, unfree and unequal; they were subjected to their fathers and inferior to their elders. No theory of political association which started with free and equal individuals made any sense at all. (Laslett, 1949: 12)

Filmer’s political theory, like other interpretations of patriarchalism, leaves no room for individual consent to live in a certain society. Nor does it allow the idea of society constructed and ordered by a contract between free individuals and the state. The nature of social relationships is simply based on the laws commanded by God, and kings, as inheritors of Adam’s position, are appointed representatives of God’s on earth. Both in the political and cultural imagination of the century, the family served as a perfect metaphor for the divinely ordained hierarchy of power.

The father, the sole authority and decision maker in the household, prevailed over all the family members living under his roof.

In addition to political thinkers, the kings are known to have invoked the fatherly image, along with other powerful metaphors, in their political speeches and treatises to naturalise absolute monarchic power. This popular analogy drawn between the father and king found one of its earliest and powerful expressions in a treatise, titled “The Trew Laws of Free Monarchies” and published by James I in 1598. In this relatively short treatise written in defence of royal authority, James I argues,

The king towards his people is rightly compared to a father of children, and to a head of a body composed of divers members, for as fathers the good princes and magistrates of the people of God acknowledged themselves to their subjects. [...] And now, first for the father’s part [...], consider, I pray you, what duty his children owe to him and whether upon any pretext whatsoever it will not be thought monstrous and unnatural to his sons to rise up against him, to control him at their appetite, and, when they think good, to slay him or to cut him off and adopt to themselves any other they please in his room. Or can any pretense of wickedness or rigor on his part be a just excuse for his children to put hand into him? (qtd. in Wootton, 1986: 99).

As this brief excerpt suggests, the idea of absolute monarchy is founded on a simple yet powerful distinction between the sovereign and his subjects. While the former has the right to command, the latter is bound to obey. Under no circumstances, can subjects challenge or question the

sovereign’s exercise of power, for he is accountable to God only. The medieval tradition of absolutism that saw the individual as part of hierarchal power structure at the top of which stood the king, thus, made its way into the seventeenth century.

Yet, dissenting voices began to emerge, complaining of arbitrary rule of the king as early as 1627. (Wootton, 1986: 35).² It was John Locke, who, towards the end of the seventeenth century, forged one of the most influential political theories against the absolute monarchy in his *Two Treatises of Government*. In the first treatise, Locke sets out to refute the tenets of patriarchal monarchy defended by Sir Robert Filmer, who, he believed, “carried this Argument [divine right of kings] farthest, and is supposed to have brought it to perfection” in his *Patriarcha*. (Locke, 2003: 9). First, he rejects the scriptural argument that Filmer offers to support divinely ordained patriarchal hierarchy that descends from Adam to the father as the head of the household, and subsequently to king as the supreme head of the nation. In their natural state, Locke argues, all individuals are born free and equal, and they are subject to no one but God, which is also known as natural law theory. In other words, God did not grant Adam a privileged position over human beings, for he was simply one of his myriad creatures. For Locke, we are “all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign master [...] made to last during his, not another’s pleasure” (Locke, 2003:102).

² David Wootton points to a series of incidents, known as the Five Knight’s Case and Ship Money, which led to declaration of the Petition of Right (1627) intended to end absolutism by introducing a new contract between king and people. Although it proved to be inadequate document, Wootton argues that “[f]rom 1627 constitutional change was inevitable.” (Wootton, 1986: 35)

He condemns absolutism as abomination, for it undermines God's sovereignty by raising the ruler to a god-like status. He states,

In this last age a generation of men has sprung up amongst us, that would flatter princes with an opinion, that they have a divine right to absolute power, let the laws by which they are constituted and are to govern, and the conditions under which they enter upon their authority, be what they will; and their engagements to observe them never so well ratified, by solemn oaths and promises. To make way for this doctrine, they have denied mankind a right to natural freedom; whereby they have not only, as much as in them lies, exposed all subjects to the utmost misery of tyranny and oppression, but have also unsettled the titles, and shaken the thrones of princes: (for they too, by these men's system, except only one, are all born slaves, and by divine right are subjects to Adam's right heir;) as if they had designed to make war upon all government, and subvert the very foundations of human society, to serve their present turn. (Locke, 2003: 8)

Locke also rejects another key argument of the absolutist theory, namely the equation of paternal and political authority. He rebuts the emblematic role of the father as the sole authority in the family by pointing out the joint power that both parents, not only fathers, have over their children as defined in the Bible: "But grant that the parents made their children, gave them life and being, and that hence there followed an absolute power. This would give the *father* but a joint dominion with the mother over them: for no body can deny but that

the woman hath an equal share, if not the greater [...]." (Locke, 2003: 37). In addition, for Locke, parental authority is strictly limited, not absolute since parents have the right to exercise power over their children until they have grown capable of taking control of their own affairs. In other words, he underscored the fact that children cannot be seen as the property of their parents, for they are individuals with their own rights and liberties that should be acknowledged and respected.

In the second treatises, Locke expounds on his views concerning the aims and justification for civil government. Locke states that in the state of nature, society lacks a common legitimate authority with the power to end disputes, and thus if a war breaks out, it is likely to continue. He, therefore, argues that people need to abandon the state of nature by contracting together in order to construct a civil government. The concept of consent plays a central role in the formation of a civil government, which is in stark contrast with the unquestionable subjection to king's authority. Locke states;

Every man being, as has been showed, naturally free, and nothing being able to put him into subjection to any earthly power, but only his own consent; it is to be considered, what shall be understood to be a sufficient declaration of a man's consent, to make him subject to the laws of any government. There is a common distinction of an express and a tacit consent, which will concern our present case. Nobody doubts but an express consent of any man, entering into any society, makes him a perfect member of that society, a subject of that government. (Locke, 2003: 152)

With his radical ideas concerning paternal rights and social equality, Locke undercut the central principles of divinely ordained, hereditary absolute monarchy, which the Stuarts and patriarchal theorists strived to defend. His theory of civil government based on the individuals' consent was, in particular, the harbinger of modern egalitarian society, but the social transformation, it induced, was long and painful. In the remainder of this paper, the two controversial political trends, absolutism and contractualism that dominated the seventeenth-century English political scene will be analysed in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*.

3. ORDER, DISORDER AND THE FAILURE OF PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY IN *VENICE PRESERV'D*

As the foregoing survey indicates, political theory, as a system of principles drawn from abstract reasoning, was still in its infancy in the seventeenth century. Deprived of a distinctive language and terminology, the political thinkers employed familial images and metaphors, the household and the father in particular, to forge their theories. "The dominant political theories and metaphors of the age [the seventeenth century]," as Jessica Munns succinctly points out, "were still familial rather than contractual, and the political and the personal, the public and the private, combine in the late seventeenth century in the webs of interdependencies" (Munns, 1995: 176). This proximity between the political and domestic spheres of life is even more manifest in dramatic productions of the age. At a time when obedience to authority was regarded both as a private and public virtue, the plays structured around family members and domestic issues were inevitably considered to have certain political implications. Such a critical approach to literary texts is indebted to the Marxist critic Frederick

Jameson, who advocated the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. He saw "the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods [...] but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation" (Jameson, 1981: 17).

Viewed from this cultural materialist perspective that places literary texts on the same interpretive grid as social and political texts, the seemingly simple plot of *Venice Preserv'd* becomes laden with political meanings and implications. The play depicts a world of patriarchal order where women are regarded as an object of cost and exchange, and marriage is seen as a means of establishing and ensuring bonds in public domain. As the play unfolds, different interpretations of patriarchal authority provoke a series of confrontations between male characters, as they contest to affirm their masculinity and power by dominating women. The first of these confrontations takes place between Priuli and Jaffeir, who has secretly married his only daughter, Belvidera after rescuing her from drowning. In the opening scene, Jaffeir begs his father-in-law for assistance as he can no longer provide the sustenance for his family, but he is scornfully turned down. The quarrel between the two characters does not only expose the disorderly contest for power within a household, but also reveals the perception of women in seventeenth-century England. As Antonia Fraser points out, in seventeenth-century England "[a] woman was regarded as the 'weaker vessel' (a phrase taken from the New Testament)—a creature physically, intellectually, morally and even spiritually inferior to a man; therefore, the man had a right to dominate her" (Fraser, 1981: 1). Patriarchalism demeans women and children, allowing fathers and husbands to seek

confirmation of power through sexual dominance and control over them. In the play both male characters refer to Belvidera as an object to be possessed, rather than an individual with freewill. While Priuli accuses Jaffeir of “stealing” Belvidera from his bosom like “a thief” and thus staining “the honour of his

A sterile fortune, and a barren bed,
Attend you both: continual discord make
Your days and nights bitter and grievous still:
May the hard hand of a vexatious need
Oppress and grind you; till at last you find
The curse of disobedience all your portion. (VP, 1.1., 338)

Priuli's curse is enclosed within an exegesis of seventeenth-century religious and political thought that conceived patriarchal authority as a God-given right, and any resistance to it as a blasphemous act. In an almost identical struggle for

A soldier's mistress, Jaffeir, 's his religion
When that's profan'd, all other ties are broken;
That even dissolves all former bonds of service (VP, 1.1., 342)

Otway employs these different topoi of woman as daughter, wife and lover to demonstrate the dynamics of power in seventeenth-century English society, which requires possession and subordination of the female. The daughter is the procreative force that can only be given away with the consent of the father, while a courtesan is a desirable commodity to be fought for. Both have the power to create new bonds, or destroy the existing ones. In other words, the domestic and public spheres of life are founded on and regulated by the orderly circulation of women. Any threat to the traditional hierarchies brings about larger problems in the state mechanism.

Indeed, what begins as a domestic dispute culminates into a major political crisis when Pierre coaxes Jaffeir into joining the conspirators to avenge Priuli. The rebels are not, however, a political

house,” Jaffeir defends himself, claiming that she is a “rich conquest,” or “prize” that he has won by risking his own life (VP, 1.1., 338). At the end of the lengthy scene of quarrel, Priuli curses the couple with sterility, for they have undermined his paternal authority:

dominance over women, Jaffeir's friend Pierre, a disbanded soldier, confronts another senator, Antonio. Pierre believes that Antonio has insulted his honour by sleeping with his mistress, Aquilina. He thus complains to Jaffeir;

group in the modern sense of the word, coalescing around ideological principles. Rather, they are a loosely formed group of men, ready to take action in accordance with a gendered definition of honour, which is repeatedly affirmed in the play with a simple but powerful phrase: ‘be a man.’ *Venice Preserv'd*, in other words, is a perfect reflection of the pre-modern society – the one that is predominantly patriarchal in its social orientation. The view of woman as commodity circulated between males is further reinforced in the scenes where the conspirators discuss their plan of action. In an overtly symbolic scene, for example, Jaffeir trusts Belvidera with Renault, the leader of conspirators, as a pledge of his loyalty. With her, he also hands over his dagger, a phallic symbol of power and authority, and commands Renault to kill Belvidera if he fails to perform his duty.

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Jaffair: To you, sirs, and your honours, I bequeath her,
And with her this; when I prove unworthy — (Gives a dagger)
You know the rest—then, strike it to her - heart;
And tell her, he who three whole happy years
Lay in her arms, and each kind night repeated
The passionate vows of still increasing love,
Sent that reward for all her truth and suffering (VP, 2.3., 360),

Despite her protests, Belvidera is taken to the conspirators' headquarter to be kept as a pledge. Like Belvidera, Aquilina does not have the right to question her lover's decisions. When she asks questions about the identity of the rebels, Peter chides her: "How! A woman asks questions out of bed" (VP, 2.1., 349). Women are silent figures in the play. They are there to obey the male authority, not to take part in their decisions or actions. Ironically, women are also powerful enough to cause conflicts or even wars between men. The disorderly contest for dominance over women sparks conflicts that exceed the borders of the household. Through the intricate web of relations between the characters, Otway demonstrates how permeable the boundaries between the private and public spheres of power in seventeenth-century England were. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that Jaffair and Pierre do not represent a political ideology or identity. They are two ordinary men who resolve to take part in a bloody plot against the senate to seek vengeance.

Otway, however, does not confine himself to drawing attention to the crisis of patriarchalism as a social and political system. He also points to the exigency for a social contract to replace the traditional practices of forging bonds between individuals, such as swearing oaths and making pledges. According to Jessica Munns, a profound understanding of

political language and scepticism towards political mechanisms are at stake in many of Otway's plays, including *Venice Preserv'd*. Munns argues,

Restoration politicians believed in the power of oaths, which were important instruments regulating church and state. There was also, however, profound skepticism over the sincerity of oaths at a time when changes in government had required so many Vicars of Brays to swear to some many different things. What is on exhibition in Otway's dramas is never the singular power of the word to bind, but instead the plurality of language and of social practices, the contingency, and their dependence on specific needs and desires. (Munns, 1995: 195)

Munns' argument about the ineffectiveness of oaths as part of administrative mechanism can be extended to include the unwritten laws of patriarchalism, for they, together with solemn oaths, helped regulate social and political relationships in seventeenth-century England. In *Venice Preserv'd*, Otway repeatedly calls attention to the futility of patriarchal codes of conduct. The essential action of the play is based on a pattern of promise and betrayal. At the beginning of the play, Priuli and Pierre feel betrayed when they find out the illicit match

between the women they 'own' and other men. Similarly, the agreement between Jaffeir and the conspirators is broken by the violation of patriarchal laws. Jaffeir resolves to confess the plot against the senate when he discovers that Renault, the leader of the rebels, has assaulted his wife Belvidera – the pledge of his loyalty. All these unresolved disputes between the characters in the play help indicate the fact that certain political instruments of patriarchalism, such as solemn oaths and pledges have become obsolete and that they need to be abolished.

In the final act, Otway explores the political repercussions of breaking oaths in

Duke: Name your conditions.
Jaff. For my self full pardon.
Besides the lives of two and twenty friends (Delivers a list)
Whose names are here enroll'd: Nay, let their crimes
Be ne'er so monstrous, I must have the oaths
And sacred promise of this reverend Council,
That in a full assembly of the Senate
The thing I ask be ratify'd. Swear this,
And I'll unfold the secrets of your danger.
All. We'll swear.
Duke. Propose the Oath.
Jaff. By all the hopes
Ye have of Peace and Happiness hereafter.
Swear.
All. We all swear,
Jaff. To grant me what I've ask'd,
Ye swear.
All. We swear.
Jaff. And as ye keep the Oath, May
May you and your posterity be bless'd,
Or curs'd for ever.
All Sen. Else be curs'd for ever. (VP, 4.2., 384)

Patriarchal ethics, rather than the rule of law, is the seal of social justice in the play. A word of honour given by the sovereign is enough to save the lives of dozens of men. This distorted understanding of justice creates a society consumed by a

a ceremonial scene in which Jaffeir negotiates with the senators, demanding pardon for the conspirators. The arbitration between the two parties is based on patriarchal code of honour that requires keeping promises and honouring commitments. Hence, when the two parties eventually agree upon the terms of peace, they do not sign a written contract, for they think it will suffice to make pledges by giving their word of honour. Otway shows how deeply entrenched the practice of swearing and binding oaths was in seventeenth-century England through the verbal exchange between the two parties, which deserves quoting at length:

blind struggle for power and supremacy where might is right. Although Jaffeir seems to lead the negotiation by announcing the conditions of agreement, the final verdict rests with the authority.

The senators, despite their promise, execute all the rebels, which is a poignant reminder of arbitrary exercise of power with no legal consequences. The senators' breach of promise to forgive the rebels also indicates the ineffectiveness of oaths and pledges to establish social and political alliances. Slippery definitions of honour and shame can no longer help maintain social order. Nor can they enforce punishment for those who violate laws, or offend against public order. It can therefore be argued that with the tragic end of the play, Otway seems to emphasise the urgency of a social contract that shall end the arbitrary exercise of power by instituting the rule of law in its stead.

4. CONCLUSION

Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* has been conventionally held to be a Tory propaganda, condemning any act of resistance against the crown. The parallels between Otway's imaginary plot against Venetian senate and the Popish Plot would seem to confirm a political reading of the play from the Tory perspective. The eventual affirmation of the power of the state over the conspirators with scenes of confession, trial and execution further reinforces this specific political message. However, this traditional view of the play should not overshadow Otway's equally urgent intention to expose the crisis of patriarchal authority. His critical view of

seventeenth-century English society begins with the household and moves towards larger political issues. In the first part of the play, he explores the ills of patriarchal society through the intricate web of relations based on the orderly circulation of women. The patriarchal power structure starts to shatter as male characters contest for dominance over the same women. Patriarchal moral values, biding oaths and pledges fail to keep social bonds intact. As the tragic turn of events in the second half of the play, particularly the execution of the conspirators, indicates, patriarchal society cannot produce any solution to its existing problem by continuing to follow conventional practices. At this critical juncture in the play, Otway seems to suggest that only a new and more egalitarian social contract can end this state of deadlock by abolishing the arbitrary exercise of power. It can therefore be concluded that Otway's political message encapsulates but goes beyond the Tory perspective. A step towards understanding Otway's creative genius is to read *Venice Preserv'd* as a dramatic compendium of dynamics of patriarchal authority and emerging need for a social contract in seventeenth-century England, rather than as a mere document of royalist propaganda.

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