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E. D. E. N. SOUTHWORTH: A SISTERLY COMFORTER

Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte (E. D. E. N.) Southworth, born in 1819, scribbled for fifty years, and delighted the hearts of innumerable readers. She survived one unhappy marriage, and after Mr. Southworth deserted her in search of a more adventurous life, was left with two children to care for. She turned to writing as a means of support. Southworth wrote for popularity, and popularity she achieved. Her novels have fast action and are full of improbable, though exciting, situations. There are saintly orphans and evil step-mothers, abducted virgins and secret marriages, ghosts, madness, criminals, and even dirty old men! Her success, remembers Susan Coultrap-McQuin, has been described as "phenomenal".

In her lifetime, she published over sixty novels, some under several different titles, all serialized in newspapers or journals before publication. Issued in both cloth and paper in the United States, her works were also published in England and at various times were translated into French, German, Spanish, Icelandic, and Swedish. After she was established, her earnings from her writings may have been higher than \$10,000 a year, giving her an income that was unusually good for a nineteenth-century writer.

Everybody reads her, from "professors of colleges, ministers of the gospel, and senators on the one hand, [to] school boys and girls and little street gamins on the other"¹. Southworth loved to shock readers, but she did it with "tongue in cheek", and if she did include some "rebellious" or "unfeminine" messages in her writings, she made sure that the reader could safely choose not to feel scandalized. A typical example of this tactic is a potentially shocking passage from her major best-seller, *The Hidden Hand*. Here the heroine, Capitola, leads a kindly minister to believe that she is hiding someone of a different sex in her closet. It turns out that the male in Capitola's closet is a poodle, whom she brought there against the will of her uncle. Thus Southworth achieves her goal: she startles her readers with references to illicit sex, and gains their attention; however, by explaining the whole incident as a joke, allows them full enjoyment of the innuendoes without the risk of losing her respectability of a domestic writer.

Two novels in Southworth's incredibly large literary output were most popular: *The Curse of Clifton* (1852) and *The Hidden Hand* (1859). Since Southworth's primary motivation for writing was financial need, her novels were designed more for entertainment than instruction, and this can be seen clearly in these two examples: they are full of adventure, mystery, and fast-moving action.

Throughout all her fiction, the author expresses similar attitudes concerning her wariness towards men, her ambivalence concerning marriage, and her affection to women. Some men in her novels are classic villains devoid of human feelings, cruel,

¹ COULTRAP-McQUIN, S. M. *Doing literary business: American women writers in the nineteenth century*. Chapel Hill, 1990, p. 51.

greedy, revengeful, and without honor. They live by preying on others, especially females; a marriage with a rich heiress is normally the black character's chief goal. Apart from the women's money, sex is the villains' other interest. One Colonel Le Noir's intentions towards a chaste woman have not changed in spite of the passage of twenty years. Upon seeing her again, Le Noir thinks: "[Y]ears ago I swore to possess that woman, and I will do it, if it be only to keep my oath and humble her insolence. She is very handsome still; she shall be my slave" (236).

One would expect that in a sentimental novel the evil men should be counterbalanced by their ideal opposites, such as the heroines' guardians and lovers. In Southworth's case, it is not always true. Good men do happen in her novels, but they are surely not victorious heroes. They are often imperfect themselves, and usually less prominent than women.

The men most common in Southworth's novels are essentially kind, whose faults, nonetheless, bring a lot of evil. Such a man is Old Hurricane of *The Hidden Hand*. In many ways he is a comic character, a domestic tyrant who yells a lot but never means any harm. Even his servants know it, because he dismisses them almost every day, but never really expects them to leave. Yet Old Hurricane can do harm: it is because of his blind fury and stubbornness that his wife and son live in poverty for almost twenty years.

Southworth has made the attempt to create an ideal – and likable – male hero in *Self-Made* (or *Ishmael*, 1864). Ishmael was born poor and illegitimate, but thanks to his hard work and determination became a successful lawyer. This hero is an "insufferably good" young man, who devotes his career to helping women. Alfred Habegger finds the book "intolerable because it said that the best way to grow up was never in any way to say or do anything that would not be correct for a woman"². Southworth distrusted men: the only way she could describe one as good was to present him as a woman.

One notable exception is Black Donald, the criminal of *The Hidden Hand*, whom the author obviously likes. And yet there is nothing feminine or weak about Black Donald. He is described as a powerful, wild man. He is irreverent and cunning, and can be crude and brutal. Black Donald is never gentle; not even his infatuation with Capitola makes him so. Even though Southworth makes sure to inform the reader that Black Donald has never actually killed anybody, he advocates murder: "Just so, Colonel"; says Black Donald to Le Noir, when the Colonel is troubled by Capitola's reappearance, "the dead never come back; or, if they do, are not recognized as property-holders in this world! I wish your honor had taken my advice, and sent that woman and child on a longer journey" (148). Black Donald and his gang are reported to have raped a woman and her daughter, and his intentions towards Capitola are far from honest. Actually, it is very clear that Black Donald intends to kill her after abducting and "making her a wife".

What makes Black Donald so appealing to Southworth then? The answer might lie in his being a rebel and a "natural man". Black Donald rejects the society that made the laws, he answers to no authority but himself, and is comfortable with his instincts. Through this attractive criminal who despises the law, Southworth made a statement: a woman can accept a man even though he is animal-like, and love him because he is so, but she must not be victimized by the legal system which gives this type of man complete control over her.

² HABEGGER, A. *Gender, fantasy and realism in American literature*. New York, 1982, p. 206 – 207.

Although she was legally free to re-marry, Southworth never took advantage of it, possibly believing in the immorality of divorce. Yet the ordeal of her marriage (of which she had always been very discreet) found its expression in her writings. Marriage, for Southworth, was a state which a woman naturally desired, but which she should approach with caution. Marriage was simply not the safe place. In the ideal nineteenth-century marriage the woman guarded the home, and man provided the means. In this ideal state the woman did not need legal protection from the outside; her needs were satisfied by the protecting man. However, it is clear from the many examples in Southworth's novels that men were commonly poor providers, not only because of unfortunate failures in business, but also because of their own spiritual inadequacies. In Southworth's novels marriage, or the lack of it, is central. Perhaps her own negative experience inclined the author to investigate many kinds of possible unions, good and bad. She cautions mostly through the example of her secondary characters. Southworth warns women against entering into marriage with much older men, seeking financial security, as was the case of Georgia and old Mr. Clifton (in *The Curse of Clifton*). She warns against getting married to men of uncontrollable temper, as it happened to Marah Rocke of *The Hidden Hand*, who joined her life with Old Hurricane. She also warns against marriage with kind, young, loving, but thoughtless men--as in the case of Zuleime and Frank Fairfax (from *The Curse of Clifton*), who recklessly forgot to leave the marriage certificate to his wife before departing for war. (As a result, the pregnant Zuleime – apparently a fallen woman – runs away from her rich relatives, tries to make her living alone, falls ill, and dies in poverty.) Southworth is more merciful with her main characters. At the end of *The Curse of Clifton* Catherine's marriage to Archer Clifton is safe: through her moral superiority she subdues the man, and wins the upper hand. Southworth believes that in a happy marriage the man cannot rule.

Capitola, the extravagant, fantastic heroine of *The Hidden Hand*, may surprise with her choice of a conventional partner for her husband. Yet this is also Southworth's recipe for Capitola's future happiness. While sketching Herbert Greyson, Southworth admits his noble character, but denies him any prominence. Herbert is young, and neither his intellect nor financial position are superior to Capitola's. Again, the author makes sure that in this potentially happy union the heroine will rule. I dare say that in marrying Capitola to this rather dull Herbert, Southworth departed from the sensationalism of her writing towards a didactic message. It is obvious that the match for Capitola is Black Donald, the only interesting single man in the novel. Yet, Southworth loved her heroine too much to allow her the union with the exciting Black Donald. He would not be subdued; their characters would clash. Realistically, Capitola and Black Donald could not live together. Still, for a fairy tale one would wish it to be so.

While Southworth's men are "tyrannical and hypocritical or impetuous and self-centered, of limited intelligence and overwhelming vanity", her heroines have variety: "all shapes, sizes and colors, all equally beautiful"³. It seems that she never condemns a woman – they all have either an explanation for their evil features, or have positive traits that counterbalance the negative ones. Thus evil Georgia Clifton has been coerced into a repulsive marriage, cold and haughty Carolyn loves her sister Zuleime and is kind to an orphan, Catherine (Southworth stresses that Miss Clifton's coldness

³ BAYM, N. *Woman's Fiction: a guide to novels by and about women in America 1820 – 70*. 2nd ed. Urbana, 1993, p. 155.

is the result of her upbringing); even Dorky Knight, the sinister housekeeper of Le Noir's Hidden House, is – presumably – under the spell of the older Le Noir, who controls her every move.

Southworth loves her weak and feminine characters just as much as she admires the strong. Starving Zuleime, imprisoned Clara Day, and Capitola's destitute mother are the examples of conventional women, fragile and virtuous. Southworth respects them just as much as the other heroines, even though these girls can hardly help themselves. Her other conventional characters – Marah Rocke of *The Hidden Hand* and Mrs. Knight of *The Curse of Clifton*, can. These women suffer alone, but do not give up. They work and support their children, but remain moral and never openly rebel against the injustices of men or society in general.

Working women are those that Southworth admires the most. Catherine Kavanagh oversees her own plantation, and does it well and justly: "You'll be fair, young mistress! We ain't afeard o' you", yell her rejoicing black laborers (*The Curse* 407). Catherine also achieves great profits from the plantation. Similarly her mother-in-law, Mrs. Clifton of *Hardbargain*, is also an excellent manager of her property. Mrs. Knight works as an actress (retaining her impeccable conduct) to support her little daughter, and Marah Rocke sews for a living.

Southworth's women have this almost modern sense of sisterhood; since they cannot rely on men, they help each other. Instances of such help are very common in Southworth's novels: dependence of a weaker woman on the stronger one, friendship and reciprocal support, or even risking one's life for an unrelated female infant. The feeling of female unity includes black women more than once. When Aunt Darcy comforts the despairing Carolyn, she says: "We's all alike, 'cept 'tis de collar, an' dat's only outside show, skin deep" (*The Curse* 116). Even the women portrayed as egotistic and sinister, are ready to help: unless such aid would damage their own plans, of course. Southworth's women follow Margaret Fuller's advice: "I believe that, at present, women are the best helpers of one another"⁴.

The two main heroines of *The Curse of Clifton* and *The Hidden Hand* are different in the extreme. Catherine Kavanagh is the symbol of an ideal nineteenth-century woman, the True Woman: faithful, kind, loving, and respecting her husband, but also intellectual, industrious, and most importantly, moral. It is Catherine's high morality that makes her sometimes irritating. As a child, Kate lived with her grandfather, who was afflicted with this great misfortune, alcoholism. The grandfather has reformed, but now has fallen very sick:

When the physician had left the hut, the old man called his grand-daughter to his bedside.

"Kate, you heard what the doctor said"?

Kate nodded – her heart was too full for speech.

"My dear child – my dear, good Kate! – he says that unless I drink brandy I shall die. But Kate, if I taste brandy again, I feel I shall live – a drunkard! Kate, I know you are wise and good beyond your years. Kate, I have full faith in you! My child, I will do as you decide for me. Darling, shall I drink or die"?

"Dearest grandfather, do not ask me, a poor, weak, erring girl! Dearest grandfather, ask God"! (258)

Thus merging her authority with the Lord's, Kate condemns the old man to die, which he conveniently does within a week.

⁴ FULLER, M. *Woman in the nineteenth century, and kindred papers relating to the sphere, conditions and duties, of woman*. Boston, 1855, p. 172.

Before we let disgust overcome us, we should remember that alcoholism of men was a source of the greatest tragedies to women in the nineteenth century, who were legally dependent on men as providers. Before we laugh at ladies advocating prohibition, the ridiculed and shameful chapter in the American legal history, we should also remember that it was not morality, bigotry, or the will to "emasculate the male" that motivated female prohibition advocates; these women simply fought for their own rights, often amounting to survival.

It is harder to explain the other instance of Kate's controversially pious behavior. Her husband asks her to swear that she did not write the compromising letter; on that condition he will trust in her and love her again:

"I did not write that letter, Archer. I did not write that letter".

He twisted his hand rudely out of her grasp, and turned away, without reply. [. . .]

"Oh! what shall I say to convince you? Indeed, indeed I did not do it"!

"Come, perjure yourself! Swear it".

She was silent.

"I ask you to swear it".

She was still silent.

"Come, now--will you declare upon oath that you did not write that letter"?

"God sees me! I did not"!

"That's no oath! Here's the New Testament, swear upon the Holy Evangelists of Almighty God that you didn't write it, and, perhaps, I will believe you, for well I know that many unprincipled people have a sort of fearful respect for an oath, which in them is not piety, but superstition. I think you just such one! Come, now, swear that you did not write it" He paused for an answer, but she looked at him in great trouble. "Will you do it"?

"Major Clifton, I cannot! [. . .] I cannot swear, Archer. I mean I dare not swear, Archer, even to prove my innocence, and get back your love. [. . .] My Lord and yours has commanded us to 'Swear not at all'. I dare not break that command". (394 – 5)

Obviously, Catherine values her future happiness more than the one on Earth. Yet considering the fact of how unpleasant a character her husband is, one cannot help feeling some satisfaction at the girl's refusing his demand; especially since he insulted her by making this request, and did not guarantee his belief in her innocence should she swear it anyway.

Capitola Black is not pious. She is an anti-sentimental heroine, or, as Joanne Dobson called her, "the sentimental heroine turned inside out and upside down"⁵. Capitola herself declares she hates sentimentality, does not cry, is not easily moved, and regards declarations of love with great interest – but devoid of any romantic feeling. Thus after Craven Le Noir delivers his proposal.

Capitola looked up with surprise and interest; she had never in her life before heard an explicit declaration of love from anybody [. . .] "Well, I declare" said Cap, when he had finished his speech and was waiting in breathless impatience for her answer. "this is what is called a declaration of love and a proposal for marriage, is it! – It is downright sentimental, I suppose, if I had only the sense to appreciate it! It is as good as a play! pity it is lost upon me"!

"Cruel girl! how you mock me!" cried Craven, rising from his knees and sitting beside her.

⁵ SOUTHWORTH, E. D. E. N. *The hidden hand or, Capitola the Madcap*. New Brunswick, 1992, p. 234.

"No, I don't! I'm in solemn earnest! I say it is first rate! do it again! I like it!" (356).

The Hidden Hand has met with renewed critical interest in the last few years⁶: the heroine has been compared to Huck Finn, named a prototype of American tomboy, or Southworth's great joke. Capitola is a heroine who is very acceptable to twentieth-century readers: she knows how to take care of herself (is street-wise in New York slums), performs heroic and courageous deeds (rescues innocent virgins, outsmarts villains, catches criminals hiding under her bed), and in general is not dependent on anybody – neither physically nor mentally. This mental independence is very interesting, even though the novel ends in marriage. Cap's love for her chosen man is never stressed, but rather downplayed by the author. After Herbert's departure to the war.

She cried every day of the first week of Herbert's absence; every alternate day of the second; twice in the third; once in the fourth; not at all in the fifth, and the sixth week she was quite herself again, and full of fun and frolic and as ready for any mischief or devilry that might turn up (350).

Capitola enjoys life and does not worry about eternity; she neither asks God for help, nor thanks him for deliverance from evil; *The Hidden Hand* is therefore not a religious novel. Cap's enjoyment of life includes her love of excitement and indulgence in luxury. When removed from New York to the quiet Southern plantation, the girl complains of boredom, and misses the adventurous life she had led before. Her other "vice" is the love of costly articles, and Southworth does not censure it either.

Capitola [. . .] did not fail to indulge her taste for rich and costly toys, and supplied herself with large ivory dressing-case, lined with velvet, and furnished with ivory-handled combs and brushes, silver boxes and crystal bottles; a papier mache work box, with gold thimble, needle-case and perforator and gold-mounted scissors and winders; and an ebony writing-desk, with silver-mounted crystal standishes; each of these – boxes and desk – were filled with all things requisite in the several departments. (79).

The girl even uses bad language (within limits, of course): her "damson" being a substitute for a more controversial word. Finally, Capitola is proud in less than a feminine way, and Southworth mocks the stereotypical male pride: "be a woman"! Cap says when encouraging herself to action (384).

Yet, it is difficult to call Southworth a "rebellious writer". Capitola seems too much of a joke, a myth, impossible to imitate in life, to take her rebellion at face value. Southworth makes sure that her heroine would not be offensive to the moral standards of her times. Although Capitola is aware of sex (she supposes Old Hurricane to be her illegitimate father), she is "innocent". The only time the author lets her heroine cry is the episode in the courtroom, when the girl is trying to convince the judges of her purity. Southworth's attitude towards sex makes her more than anything else a conventional nineteenth-century writer on the one hand, and sensationalist on the other. In neither *The Hidden Hand* nor *The Curse of Clifton* is there a really promiscuous woman or an illegitimate child. Yet Southworth delights in sexual innuendoes: Zuleime's secret marriage and pregnancy, which in the eyes of the

⁶ HABEGGER, A. A well hidden hand. *Novel*, 1981, vol. 14, p. 197 – 212; DOBSON, J. The hidden hand: subversion of cultural ideology in three mid-nineteenth-century American women writers. *American Quarterly*, 1986, vol. 38, p. 223 – 242; CARPENTER, L. Double talk: the power and glory of paradox in E. D. E. N. Southworth's „The hidden hand“. *Legacy*, 1993, vol. 10, p. 17 – 30.

world makes her a fallen woman; Le Noir's threats of "disgracing" Clara Day unless she marries him; the rude jokes of journalists listening to Capitola's court case. When Capitola challenges Craven Le Noir to a duel, it is specifically for slandering her morality, which gives Southworth an opportunity to describe more of Craven's depravity. He writes an offensive note to Capitola, mockingly agreeing to the duel. Southworth duly explains the core of the offense: "he could not of course meet a lady in a duel, but he had taken advantage of the technical phraseology of the challenged party, as to time, place, and weapons, to offer her a deep insult" (374). The author does not quote Craven's actual letter, but from the above description the reader is free to guess the content rather clearly.

Southworth is worthy of the modern readers' attention for at least two reasons. The first of them is that Southworth is a talented story-teller; her skill in awakening the reader's interest is undoubtable. Her love of sensation, improbable plots, and even her bombastic style strengthen the appeal of her novels. Southworth's enthusiasm for her own writing is apparent, and this enthusiasm is very catching. For a more demanding reader, however, Southworth is interesting from the cultural and feminist point of view. Notwithstanding her apparent lack of subversive message, Southworth can be read as a feminist writer. On the one hand, it is clear that she accepted the morality of her times, and never seriously challenged the "woman's lot". Yet her great sisterly love to all other women is very apparent in her writing. The writer tells her sisters about the ways of dealing with the adversities of life, comforts them in their sorrows, and never condemns the weak, the silly, or even the bickering ones. Southworth's novels were meant for women to read and be comforted. Her compassion and sympathy to those of her sex rather than any call for radical action are Southworth's feminist ways.

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E. D. E. N. SOUTHWORTH: SESERS PATARIMAI IR PAGUODA

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje norėčiau pristatyti ponią Southworth – XIX amžiaus vidurio Amerikos melodraminių bestselerių autorę. Pagrindinės Southworth kūrinių herojės – moterys. Daugelyje savo romanų rašytoja pavaizdavo įvairius moterų charakterius, kurie buvo įdomesni ir įtaigesni nei kitose to meto melodramose. Ponia Southworth jokia būdu negali būti traktuojama kaip rašytoja maištautoja ar rašytoja revoliucionierė, dėl to feministinė jos romanų tema intriguoja daugelį.

E. D. E. N. Southworth romanai skirti moterims. Feministinę poziciją autorė išreiškia užjauta bei simpatija moterims, tačiau jokia būdu nekviečia imtis radikalių priemonių.