

“Ich bin für nichts gut”

Assessing the Functionality of Paradigmatic
Behavior Models for Women
in *Emilia Galotti*

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Lessing's 1771 play has fueled scholarly debates for centuries. Over all, conventional interpretations of *Emilia Galotti* fall into three basic categories: traditionally, scholars associate the bourgeois tragedy with the much older Roman legend of Virginia (Woesler, McInnes), some read it as a father's dilemma in protecting his daughter's innocence (Schenkel, Witte, Prutti), whereas still other scholars view the play as a testimony to the bourgeois struggle for emancipation (Janson, Wittowski, Bollacher). However, reexamining the drama in the context of women's socialization, while bearing in mind the manner in which eighteenth-century women of the middle class were conditioned to negotiate interior and exterior spaces unveils further exciting narrative perspectives.

To be sure, an analysis of the play must be firmly rooted in the understanding that characters such as Emilia and Orsina are “Kopfgeburten,” and as such they signify “Wunsch- und Erinnerungsbilder eines anderen, besseren Lebens, [...] der gemeinsam geträumte Traum von Männern, die, [...] einem Ideal nachjagen” (Stephan 4). Given the paradigmatic dimension of such images, a close reading of them may help us gain a more

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complete understanding of the bourgeois tragedy and—more importantly—of the socio-historical importance such texts place on comprising behavior models for women.

In an effort to contribute to discussions on ideological implications of eighteenth-century gender production centering on the bourgeois subject's quest for political and economic autonomy, this paper directs attention back to the character Emilia Galotti after which G. E. Lessing named his tragedy. I contend that *Emilia Galotti* reads as a negotiation of two paradigms, the image of the moralistically constrained petit-bourgeois subject portrayed in the character of Emilia and its enlightened opposite, the shrewd and assertive character of Countess Orsina. My understanding of the term “subject” is indebted to Paul Smith's definition of the term referring to “the complex but nonetheless unified locus of the constitution of the phenomenal world” that enters into “a dialectic with that world as either its product or its source, or both,” and “is the bearer of a consciousness that will interact with whatever the world is taken to consist in.”¹

To assess Lessing's paradigmatic behavior models for women in terms of their functionality (i.e. *Anwendbarkeit*) as products of and sources for a socio-historical context, I examine the extent to which both Emilia and Orsina are able to navigate and shape exterior and interior spaces, specifically, the manner in

¹ Paul Smith understands the “subject” as a product or producer of its socio-historical context; its “motives and intentions are bound up with – indeed, in part built by – a singular history” while its “actions [...] are also and equally engagements or interventions in everyone's history and have real effects there” (Smith 158). In this context, self-interest, is “the product of the ‘subject's’ heterogeneous constitution and the ‘subject's’ experience [...], the process of simultaneous and momentous, dialectical negotiations between heterogeneous self-narratives and heterogeneous social processes” (158).

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which the characters can mentally and physically negotiate the dramatic landscape. Furthermore, my close reading of Emilia's self-assessment "Ich bin für nichts gut" (I am good for nothing) includes an examination of her missed opportunities to develop autonomy before and even after her maiden voyage (*Brautfahrt*) and it is this missed opportunity that is the crucial component of my argument, since such evidence points to deficiencies in the protagonist's socialization. Particularly, a focus on Emilia's negotiation of both language and physical landscape reveals a central criticism in Lessing's drama; the play is the tragic narrative of a kept subject hampered by the internalization of a rigid behavior model that systematically prevents the heroine from assuming agency.

Emilia's inability to transgress the boundaries designated for bourgeois women, her dependence on male figures of authority, paired with the heroine's subsequent erasure from the stage, gain in significance when contrasted with the self-assured, combative survivor Countess Orsina. Emilia's compliance, her dependence, passivity, and exaggerated domesticity make it all the more plausible that her only sanctioned excursion to the exterior, the interrupted relocation or transition from her father's to her husband's domain, inadvertently precipitates the character's downfall. Emilia Galotti's tragic demise therewith also negates the functionality of the paradigm after which she models her life.

Before analyzing the female characters directly, it may be useful to cast a side-glance at their positions within the dramatic world of Lessing's play. The opening scene, known as the 'Kunstgespräch' between Hettore Gonzaga, prince of Guastalla, and the artist Conti, depicts the male characters comparing and contrasting the portraits of Emilia and Orsina. The critics

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literally dissect the images in order to determine the value not only of the depiction but also the worth of the originals (the women) by their exterior “qualities” (6-11). In fact, much of Inge Stephan’s analysis of *Emilia Galotti* focuses on the women’s objectification encapsulated in the mercantile exchange of the portraits.² Stephan specifically points out that both Emilia and Orsina inevitably lose “Verfügungsgewalt” over the images once the artist captures their likeness. Next to Stephan’s observation, the subtext of this trade between prince Hettore and artist Conti provides clues yielding a much broader perspective on the characters’ backgrounds than the male protagonists offer in their mercantile assessment of the women.

Lessing assigns to Emilia the following background: She is raised and educated in the spirit of her very protective father, Odoardo Galotti. Conti’s comments concerning Emilia particularly underscore the extent to which the young woman complies with her father, who commissioned the painting (10). According to the artist, Emilia endures multiple sittings in order for him to capture her image, a circumstance that may imply that the protagonist is too young and inexperienced to question authority. In contrast to Emilia, the courtesan Orsina “hat, seit drei Monaten, gerade einmal sich entschließen können, zu sitzen” (my emphasis, 6). These remarks made by the artist also suggest that unlike Emilia’s case, where an exterior force (Emilia’s

² Inge Stephan elaborates not only on the usurpation of the feminine in context with the ‘Kunstgespräch’ but also regards the newly emotional and sentimental portrayal of the father figure as a means serving to compensate for his weakening position within society (“So ist die Tugend ein Gespenst” 3). See also Gail Hart, “A Family without Women: The Triumph of the Sentimental Father in Lessing’s *Sarah Sampson* and Klinger’s *Sturm und Drang*.” More on the function of the sentimental father figure can be found in Karin Wurst’s “Abwesenheit-Schweigen-Tötung.”

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father) initiates the sitting, it was Orsina's decision to eventually sit for the artist. In fact, Orsina's single sitting ("gerade einmal") additionally discloses a degree of reluctance on the part of the courtesan to render her image for she may understand that upon capturing her likeness she will lose the disposal rights to it.

In fact, the age and maturity (*Mündigkeit*) of the women are key elements in the comparison between what Hettore refers to as the accommodating woman represented by the compliant Emilia, and the uncooperative one, represented by the outspoken veteran courtesan Orsina ("Behäglicher oder nicht behäglicher," 7).³ In the context of Emilia's compliance and Orsina's suspicion, Karin Wurst argues that eighteenth-century society imbued sexuality and its domestication with fearsome fascination. In literary texts of this time period virgins frequently become associated with "Nicht-Wissen" whereas women's "Wissen und Erfahrung mit dem Verlust der sexuellen Unschuld [...] in Verbindung gebracht [...] und somit ideologisch abgewertet [wurde]" (Wurst 115).⁴ While the "Nicht-Wissen" of Lessing's childlike Virginia version (i.e. Emilia) promotes compliance, the experienced, knowing courtesan rarely complies. Particularly, the tone in which Orsina directs Conti not to make her look any uglier ("Conti. Ich bin zufrieden, sagte die Gräfin, wenn ich nicht häßlicher aussehe [...] Und mit einer Miene sagte sie das – von der freilich dieses ihr Bild keine Spur, [...] zeigt" 8) communicates her distrust and simultaneously reiterates the differing complexity of the two women characters.

³ Simonetta Sanna also points out that Orsina's love for reading and her analytical skills are reasons for the prince's loss of interest in her (42).

⁴ Fritz Brüggemann asserts, "Sie weiß von der Liebe so wenig wie Hunderte von anderen Bräuten im Gegensatz zu anderen, die, auch ohne Braut zu sein, zu wissen vermögen. Sie ist ein Kind, ein ganz unerfahrenes Kind" (112).

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Prince Hettore confirms discrepancies between the original and its depiction as he admits that the women's portraits are primarily subjective projections of the spectators' changing sentiment toward the depicted subject, "Denn sagen Sie selbst, Conti, läßt sich aus diesem [Orsina's] Bilde wohl der Charakter der Person schließen? [...] Stolz haben Sie in Würde, Hohn in Lächeln, Ansatz zu trübsinniger Schwärmerei in sanfte Schwermut verwandelt" (8). This comment paired with Orsina's emotional vulnerability to the prince's escapade ("wenn Sie wüßten, [...], wie überschwenglich, wie unaussprechlich, wie unbegreiflich ich von ihm beleidiget worden" 64), and her demonstrated empathy for other women falling victim to Hettore's shifting sentiment ("Doch was kann ihre Tochter dafür?" 64) serve as evidence that the countess is *not* a heartless, fearsome Medusa, as her former lover claims (58, 64). In the same vein, Emilia's moral wavering, "Ich stehe für nichts. Ich bin für nichts gut" that follows her visit to the "Haus der Freude" apparently not only negates Conti's 'angelic' depiction of the heroine, but also challenges Hettore's claim that not art, but a man's mind and heart are able to capture all aspects of the subject's "character" ("Denn dem Ideal hier [*mit dem Finger auf die Stirn*] – oder vielleicht hier [*mit dem Finger auf das Herz*] kömmt es [das Bild] doch nicht bei" 8-9, 77). Further, Count Appiani, Emilia's husband-to-be, confirms that the feminine images men conjure in their imaginations, whether positive or negative, carry more importance than reality. To Emilia, the count states, "ich sehe Sie in Gedanken nie anders als so; und sehe ich Sie so, auch wenn ich Sie nicht so sehe" (30).

If a voyeur's imagination gives little insight into a subject's character, the degree to which Orsina and Emilia explore the

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landscape, however, may provide more reliable evidence of their differing complexity. To be sure, the eighteenth-century socio-historical landscape confirms that dramatic juxtapositions of contrasting women characters pivot on the differing ‘terrain’ or sphere to which the representatives of gendered behavior models are tied.⁵ The prince’s delight in Emilia’s “Augen voll ... Bescheidenheit” provides clues to the heroine’s circumstance (11). Conditioned to embody the rigid moral ideal for bourgeois women, we may assume that Emilia restrains from returning the voyeur’s gaze. Focusing on the heroine’s conduct during the harassment scene in church, Simonetta Sanna interprets Emilia’s imposed “Blindheit” as part of the persistent “Abweisung von Blut und Sinnen” that illustrates her adherence to “über-individuellen Vorbildern” which foreshadow the protagonist’s fate (Sanna 40-41).⁶

The explicit restraint that prohibits Emilia from displaying any curiosity towards her surroundings sharply contrasts with Orsina’s demeanor while sitting for the portrait. The courtesan’s tendency to confront and analyze the environment earns Orsina the dubious (for an eighteenth-century woman) epithet “Philosophin” (55). She inspects, even scrutinizes, the observer “Aug’ in Auge,” thereby positioning herself as both spectacle as well as spectator (59). It is the insubordination, pride, and

⁵ Karin Wurst summarizes the opposing behavior models for women as follows: “Dem ansatzweise zumindest auf geistigem Gebiet gleichberechtigten Frauenbild der Frühaufklärung wurde durch die empfindsame Ideologie die Berechtigung erneut abgesprochen. Die Frau wird aufgrund ihres ‘Geschlechtscharakters’, ihrer natürlichen Anlagen, (nicht mehr durch ihre gesellschaftliche Rolle) ideologisch auf die Privatsphäre festgelegt” (114).

⁶ Karin Wurst also primarily concentrates on the silent heroine and concludes that her inability to communicate signals “die schweigend/fraglose Anerkennung der familialen Werte” (117).

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derision of a “Frauenzimmer, das denkt” that alerts Hettore and prompts him to attribute the courtesan with “stiere[n], starre[n] Medusenaugen,” which he believes warrant caution (55, 8). The impression the prince associates with images of the knowing woman prompts him to assign Orsina’s portrait to the public sector, “Es soll in der Galerie aufgestellt werden,” while he reserves Emilia’s depiction for his private quarters (11). While this designation associates the younger woman with the private, domestic sphere, the countess is excluded from it.⁷

These sweeping designations of the women situate the characters at opposite ends of the social spectrum and perhaps for this reason readers learn nothing of Orsina’s family. As “öffentlich-politische Alternative” to Emilia, capable of communication reaching beyond that of the family, the countess embodies the outsider to the domestic orientation of the bourgeoisie (Sanna 43).

Such unique modes of exchange are not open to Emilia as we learn from a conversation between her parents, Odoardo and Claudia Galotti. While Emilia’s unsupervised excursion to church may appear to us a harmless outing, the text reveals that it causes Odoardo (and also Emilia) great distress.

⁷ I concur with Simonetta Sanna’s argument that the character of Orsina signifies “ein ethisch-politisches Erfassen der Umwelt” promoting “die Hinwendung zu einer neuen bürgerlichen Öffentlichkeit” (42). In Orsina’s quest to understand and even name her circumstance, the countess stands alone among her peers. Hoping to overcome this loneliness, Orsina confides in Odoardo (44). Given the attempt to unite forces with the bourgeois patriarch, Sanna simply interprets the countess as “das dritte Modell des Bürgers” (42) which neglects to account for her status as outsider and her rural aristocratic origin. For a more detailed discussion of Lessing’s treatment of class, refer to Paul M. Lützeler’s “Die marxistische Lessing Rezeption” and Peter Weber’s “Lessing’s ‘Minna von Barnhelm.’”

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Odoardo. Wo ist Emilia?

Claudia. [...] Sie ist in der Messe. – [...]

Odoardo. Ganz allein?

Claudia. Die wenigen Schritte –

Odoardo. Einer ist genug zu einem Fehltritt! – [...] sie sollte nicht allein gegangen sein. (19-20)

Odoardo's apparent display of anxiety gives primary indication of not only his tendency to identify "den unschuldigen Gegenstand des Verbrechens mit dem Verbrecher," but also his excessive distrust of the public sphere consequently fuels his daughter's trepidation toward the world beyond her home (26). Odoardo's aversion to the social reality of Emilia's city life that does not exclude exposure to the Court draws attention to the core dilemma of his class, namely the petite-bourgeois' sole focus on a rigorous moral code untouched by the political specificity of its historical situation. In this light, Emilia's reaction to a visit at Chancellor Grimaldi's home highlights the young woman's susceptibility to the trifling language of the world while it also depicts her ignorance in conversing with the upper classes, "Es ist das Haus der Freude. Eine Stunde da, unter den Augen meiner Mutter – und es erhob sich mancher Tumult in meiner Seele, den die strengsten Übungen der Religion kaum in Wochen besänftigen konnten!" (77).

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Fearing the moral corruption of his daughter, Odoardo, who, unlike his family, has forsaken city life, desperately seeks to shield Emilia from the world outside of the private realm, that is, “die Nähe des Hofes” (22). “Das gerade wäre der Ort, wo ich am tödlichsten zu verwunden bin!—Ein Wollüstling, der bewundert, begehrt” (24). Odoardo’s frequent absence—he grudgingly consented to afford his daughter an education in the city—threatens to limit his control over the family, and the patriarch’s fixation on his daughter (“wo *ich* am tödlichsten zu verwunden bin!”) confirms that Emilia progressively becomes “das Opfer einer Fetischisierung der Reinheit” (Stephan 9).

For the eighteenth-century, Odoardo’s guarded position appears to be the central point that divides the bourgeoisie from the nobility. Given his behavior, one might simply conclude that he, as a representative of the middle-class, values morality and humanity over sensuality, force, and power, while the nobility is trifling, amoral, and more concerned with pseudo-aesthetic values. However, on closer examination, *Emilia Galotti* (along with Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise*) undermines such simplifications and supports a more differentiating view on values associated with class. Not only does a member of the gentry, Countess Orsina, oppose the court’s scheming, but it is Marinelli, a representative of the rural aristocracy, who makes the prince’s conniving possible.⁸ In addition, middle-class rejection of force and power contradicts Odoardo’s fixation on control over Emilia. Unlike Lessing’s character Nathan, Galotti (and his

⁸ For a more detailed reading of the relationship between Marinelli and the prince, refer to Simonetta Sanna’s *Lessings ‘Emilia Galotti.’* In addition, Fritz Brüggemann points out that Marinelli respects the bourgeois moral code only in that he preserves its appearance and uses it as a vehicle to put his sinister plan into place (“Lessings Bürgerdramen un der Subjektivismus als Problem”

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peer, Appiani) lacks “die Loslösung vom besonderen Boden, vom besonderen Stand, [...], Toleranz gegen Anders-Denkende, Anders-Geborene” that constitutes “vollendete Humanität” (Wiese 173-174).

In essence, *Emilia Galotti* directs specific attention to Odoardo’s intolerance and exaggerated self-reference during encounters with Orsina, and as I will demonstrate, this juxtaposition further questions the humanity in the patriarch’s fixation on petite-bourgeois (*kleinbürgerlich*) moral rigors that define his domain and that of Emilia’s future husband (Appiani).⁹ A critique of Odoardo’s restricted worldview emanates by extension from the naive heroine. Even the prince’s collaborator, Marinelli, refers to the ‘product’ of Galotti’s education as “Schäfchen” (45). Lessing depicts Emilia as a sacrificial lamb that proves unable to reevaluate her circumstance, panics, and takes her life before the “wolf” (i.e. the prince) can lead her astray (45). In this vein, we may draw direct correlations between the defects in bourgeois concepts of morality and the heroine’s sentimental passivity (Huysen 165). As a consequence of her father’s flawed guidance, Emilia fails to become an “aufklärerisch-bürgerlich denkende[r] und sozial antihöfisch gesinnte[r] Mensch [...], der seinen—vielfach gefährdeten—Freiraum des Privaten nutzt zu vernunftbestimmtem humanem *Wirken*” (my emphasis).¹⁰ For this

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⁹ Given the differing training Emilia and Orsina have undergone, Wolfgang Wittkowski points out that the language of the Galottis seems direct and consistent, whereas the language at the court, much like the mask at costume balls, serves to coerce and deceive (“Emancipation or Capitulation of the Middle Class?” 151).

¹⁰ For a discussion of Lessing’s implementation of ideas such as humanity and virtue, see Wolfgang Albrecht’s “Was ist ein Held ohne Menschenliebe.”

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reason, one may read Lessing's drama as a testimony to the self-destructive petite-bourgeois that morally constrains its women, predisposing them to succumb to (rather than combat) the challenges of a modern, urban society.

The above argument would hardly hold ground if only Odoardo had attempted to shield Emilia from the city. But Appiani also voices concerns, when upon his visit he encounters his fiancée, Emilia, in the entrance hall rather than tucked away in her private quarters. It is telling that Emilia's response to the appearance of her soon-to-be husband constitutes the heroine's "einzigem Moment von Spontanität, Heiterkeit und Natürlichkeit" (Sanna 41). The fiancée, however, seems alarmed by her unexpected presence in a room with access to the street: "Ah meine Teuerste!—Ich war mir Sie *hier in dem Vorzimmer* nicht vermutend" (my emphasis; 28). Initially, one may discard this statement as insignificant, yet shortly thereafter Appiani also finds Claudia, the girl's mother, in the entrance hall and addresses her with comparable concern: "Ha! Auch Sie hier, meine gnädige Frau!" (29). The count's subtle but continual reprimand blocks any spontaneity on the part of the women while it also reiterates the assumption that the opposite sex ought not to dwell in spaces open to the street but rather remain in the safety of the private quarters.

Given the limited exposure to the public sphere, it is not surprising that Emilia internalizes a skittish view of the world. She particularly expresses trepidation regarding her impending maiden voyage, the relocation from her father's to her husband's domain. "Ich habe heute, *mehr als jeden anderen Tag*, Gnade von oben zu erleben," says Emilia (my emphasis; 19). The wish to suppress this anxiety prompts the protagonist to attend mass.

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On this occasion, because the young woman ventures out without supervision, she does not find a safe haven in church. As part of Enlightenment pedagogy, Emilia's brief separation from the family provides the heroine with an opportunity to assume agency without explicitly violating the rigid enforced moral code.¹¹

However, Emilia is unprepared to use this challenge to her advantage. It becomes apparent that Lessing's Virginia can only survive as long as she remains removed from social reality (Wurst 119). To emphasize Emilia's dilemma, the author imbues her recollection of the harassment in church with explicit claustrophobic images. She feels obligated to listen to the prince's lewd language, literally loses her senses, and becomes immobilized.

Ich konnte weder vor noch zur Seite rücken ... O daß laute Donner mich verhindert hätten, mehr zu hören! [...] Aber ich *blickte nicht* um, ich wollte tun, als ob ich es *nicht hörte*. – Was konnt' ich sonst? Meinen guten Engel bitten, mich mit *Taubheit* zu schlagen; und wann auch, wenn auch auf immer [...] ich zitterte, mich umzukehren. [...] Ich glaubte, *in die Erde zu sinken*. (my emphasis; 25-26)

Emilia's resigned "Was konnt' ich sonst?" speaks for the limited choices her internalized code of conduct leaves her. "Blinded, deaf, and paralyzed," the heroine awaits the conclusion of mass

¹¹ In *Widersprüche im bürgerlichen Frauenbild*, Hannelore Scholz asserts that only attempted seduction can substantiate or undermine virtue as an individual's moral value (75). Moreover, it is telling that specifically in a religious setting, namely in church, Emilia fails to confront the prince's seduction. This circumstance suggests that mere faith lacking individual activism is an ineffective tool against Hettore's scheming.

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in hopes of regaining her senses.

Emilia. Ich floh—

Claudia. Und der Prinz dir nach—

Emilia. Was ich nicht wußte, bis ich in der Halle mich bei der Hand ergriffen fühlte [...] Aus Scham muß' ich standhalten: mich von ihm loszuwinden würde die Vorbeigehenden zu aufmerksam auf uns gemacht haben. [...] Meine Sinne hatten mich verlassen. [...] Ich finde mich erst auf der Straße wieder, und höre ihn hinter mir herkommen, und höre ihn mit mir zugleich in das Haus treten, mit mir die Treppe hinaufsteigen. (26-7)

The heroine's recollection of the pursuit illustrates her apprehension to simply take flight for fear of also falling victim to the community's prying eyes. Emilia's physical restraint, epitomized in the prince holding her back, corresponds with her internalized moral rigidity—she can neither shift to the front nor to the back, she cannot raise her eyes and turn around, nor can she run away. The absolutist pursuit of moral perfection expected from her precludes any assertion. The young woman remains frozen in place, literally fused to the ground ("Ich glaubte, in die Erde zu sinken," 26). The claustrophobic, defeatist images Emilia conjures of a treacherous exterior populated with lascivious gazers echoes the skewed worldview of Odoardo (Wollüstling[e] 24). Explaining Emilia's passivity, Simonetta Sanna concludes that "Die Tugend ist immer noch waffenlos gegenüber einem Gegner, der seinerseits ohne Skrupel

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zur Waffe der Verführung, der List und der direkten Gewalt greift” (38). In essence, Emilia lacks the tools to survive eighteenth-century urban reality.

Not only does the above description speak to Emilia’s fear of being singled out as prey (“Schäfchen”), the scene additionally confirms that the boundaries between the public sphere (with its representative, the prince) and the private (Emilia’s home) are fluid, given that—at least in the heroine’s imagination—the “wolf’s” (Hettore’s) pursuit extends beyond the boundaries of the “barn” (i.e. Galotti home). At least in Emilia’s mind, the prince even ascends the stairs en route to her private quarters (“höre ihn hinter mir herkommen, [...] mit mir zugleich ins Haus treten, mit mir die Treppe hinaufsteigen,” 27).

While merely entering the world outside of her home jeopardizes both the physical and moral well being of the naive heroine, her clever nemesis Orsina seems to flourish in the public sphere.¹² The opening scenes of Lessing’s play establish the countess as an avid traveler. To simply locate his former mistress, Prince Hettore must first enquire, “Wo ist sie? In der Stadt? Oder in ihrer Villa?”(6). Not only do the frequent relocations of the countess keep her abreast of recent social and political events—after all, it is she who breaks the news of Appiani’s death—Orsina additionally draws information from an efficient network of strategically placed informants (63). It is perhaps this unique blend of mobility and communication reaching beyond the domestic realm, this lack of familial and paternal definition, that allows Orsina to achieve a heightened

¹² The countess hints that Orsina’s designation to the public sphere comes at the cost of exclusion from her family. “Guter, lieber Vater! – Was gäbe ich darum, wenn Sie auch mein Vater wären”(62).

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level of consciousness regarding the politics of the Court and the oppression of her sex. A conversation between Odoardo and Orsina reveals that, unlike Galotti, the countess expresses compassion for Emilia, but she also sees herself as *one of many* women victimized by the prince: “Ich bin Orsina, die betrogene, verlassene Orsina.—[...] Doch was kann Ihre Tochter dafür? Bald wird auch sie verlassen sein.—Und dann wieder eine! Und wieder eine!” (58, 64). Both Orsina and Emilia succumb to the prince’s scheming, but, unlike Emilia, Orsina can face the circumstances and responds to them. The fact that the countess abstains from retaliation against Emilia, but rather identifies with her peer, suggests that the courtesan’s actions are not exclusively motivated by personal but also by political reasons.¹³ The image Lessing conjures in the character of Orsina is so compelling that today’s readers may consider her a “mover and shaker,” all the more so as Emilia’s helpless “Was soll ich tun?“, “Was kann ich tun?“ stands in stark contrast to Orsina’s determination to question convention (26, 43).

Lessing’s stage instructions render explicit examples that serve to illustrate the degree to which Orsina assumes agency. The countess dominates the stage and—as I will demonstrate—even governs the physical movement of lesser characters. Frustrated by difficulties in gaining access to the prince, the countess angrily puts Marinelli “in his place,” and even threatens to break protocol and search the castle on her own: “Was gilt’s, er ist in dem Zimmer, wo ich das Gequieke, das Gekreische hörte—Ich wollte herein, und der Schurke von

¹³ For a more detailed argument, refer to Fritz Brüggeman’s “Lessings Bürgerdramen und der Subjektivismus als Problem” and, as a counterpoint, to the interpretation of Robert Hippe’s *Erläuterungen zu Lessings ‘Emilia Galotti.’*

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Bedienten trat vor. Es war ein weibliches Gekreische. Was gilt's, Marinelli? [...] Ich werd es ja wohl sehen. *Will gehen*" (54). Responding to Orsina's persistence, Hettore cautiously enters the room. While hurrying through the space "*ohne sich im Reden aufzubalten,*" the prince dodges the dreaded confrontation: "Ein andermal, meine liebe Gräfin! Ein andermal—Jetzt halten Sie länger sich nicht auf" and swiftly escapes to another room (57). It is telling that Orsina's perseverance in confronting and questioning her former lover affects the prince in such a way that he initially hides from his opponent, then remains on the margins of the room and fends off the dreaded confrontation with a flood of words before rushing off. Stage instructions, specifically the hurried pace in which Hettore's evasive maneuver unfolds, frame the courtesan as a formidable adversary to the prince's sinister plot.

The text also suggests that the countess is one, if not the only one, who fully understands and openly criticizes the prince's scheming. Even eighteenth-century observers such as Herder respond positively to Orsina's candor "wenn sie nicht den Mund öffnet, wer soll ihn öffnen?" (Dvoretzky 155). The countess identifies Hettore as Appiani's murderer and calls Marinelli the diabolic "Helfershelfer des Prinzen," the brain driving Hettore's escapades ("Liebster, bester Marinelli, denken Sie für mich," 16, 59-60).

Orsina's disgust at the conduct of her former lover motivates the countess to plot his murder. Yet, the prince's evasive behavior undermines this plan. Without losing sight of her goal, Orsina literally shoves the dagger into the hand of Emilia's father: "Mir—wird die Gelegenheit versagt, Gebrauch davon zu machen. Ihnen wird sie nicht fehlen, diese

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Gelegenheit, und Sie werden sie ergreifen, die erste, die beste—wenn Sie ein Mann sind—Ich bin nur ein Weib, aber so kam ich her! Fest entschlossen” (64). Passing the dagger to Odoardo, the countess prompts him to extend his passive protest to active intervention (“Weiter als zum Wollen,” 68). Yet, in Orsina’s absence Galotti reverts to compliance. Differentiating his motives from Orsina’s, “Was hat die gekränkte Tugend mit der Rache des Lasters zu schaffen?” Odoardo resigns from undermining Hettore’s scheming (68). In a similar vein, he later plans to steal away before having to rescue his kidnapped daughter: “Wer sie unschuldig in diesen Abgrund gestürzt hat, der ziehe sie wieder heraus. Was braucht er meine Hand dazu? Fort!” (68, 75).

When Lessing conceives Orsina thrusting the dagger in Odoardo’s hands he calls explicit attention to Galotti’s lack of political activism. Wurst rightfully traces this passivity from Odoardo to Emilia’s “Erwartungshaltung, daß die Lösung ihres Konflikts von außen an sie herangetragen wird, ohne eigene aktive Beteiligung [...]. [Emilia] zeichnet sich durch ihren Mangel an echter, aktiver Selbstkritik und Korrekturbereitschaft aus” (Wurst 122). To break this cycle, Orsina literally appoints Odoardo agency over the plot (“diese Gelegenheit [...] Sie *werden* sie ergreifen, [...] – *wenn Sie ein Mann sind*,” my emphasis), and therewith inevitably undermines the petite-bourgeois practice of defining itself (and its symbolic representative, the woman) as victim rather than perpetrator. The courtesan’s protest draws attention to the inhu-man-ity of middle-class men such as Odoardo, Appiani, and even Marinelli who refuse to challenge the prince, and thus facilitate his rule.

In this context, Lessing’s characters are not merely products

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but also producers of the socio-political landscape they occupy. Individual deed (and in the Galottis' case, the lack of initiative) drives the dramatic world of *Emilia Galotti*—little is left to chance. Orsina's debate with Marinelli, who attributes Emilia's abduction near the prince's castle to coincidence, exemplifies this notion. "Ein Zufall?—Glauben Sie mir, Marinelli: Das Wort ist Gotteslästerung. Nichts unter der Sonne ist Zufall—am wenigsten das, [...] was so offenbar dein Werk, wohl gar dein unmittelbares Werk ist!" (56). The courtesan's statement stands in opposition to the trust that Odoardo and Emilia place in transcendence (Sanna 45). Unlike the Galottis, Orsina seeks to impact—or at least hopes to understand—her environment; it is apparent from her critical analysis (of Marinelli's deception) and from her wish to encourage others to become engaged (in the dagger exchange scene) that she leaves little to chance or coincidence. The fact that critical engagement forms the basis for Orsina's negotiation of her environment explains why the veteran courtesan has little trouble unraveling Hettore's sinister plan.

There can be little doubt that the countess seeks to confront and change exterior circumstances, whereas her petite-bourgeois counterpart Emilia resigns herself to subduing interior (sexual and emotional) impulses. Lessing draws particular attention to this contrast when he highlights Emilia's repression of her initial inclination to make a scene in church. The text juxtaposes her silence with Orsina's deliberate choice of a public forum to direct community attention to the prince's wickedness. "Morgen will ich es auf dem Markte ausrufen;" with these words the courtesan's protest assumes political dimensions (60).

As the countess freely travels between her home, the castle,

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and the city, the activities of Emilia remain primarily restricted to her father's domain. However, wedding day arrangements, specifically the maiden voyage from the Galotti to the Appiani estate upset this regiment and put Emilia's physical and moral integrity in jeopardy. Inevitably, the ambush on her carriage scatters the very parties put in place to safeguard the bride. Reminiscent of the incident in church, Emilia is unsure of how to confront the challenge. The heroine awakens from this traumatic experience only after a servant lifts the girl out of her "house on wheels" (the carriage) and removes her from the violent scene (42). Emilia's breathless stutter upon entering Hettore's castle, "Wo bleibt meine Mutter? Wo blieb der Graf? – Sie kommen doch nach? Mir auf dem Fuß nach?" once again expresses trepidations amidst an unfamiliar environment (41). Recognizing Emilia's helplessness, Hettore deliberately prolongs her isolation in an attempt to coerce the girl into sexual compliance. Deprived of the only support system she knows, Emilia faces the decision of whether or not to trust the prince. She eventually exclaims in bewilderment, "Was soll ich tun? (*Die Hände ringend*)" before fainting into the arms of her captor, who carries the young woman into his private quarters (43).

The way in which Lessing communicates Emilia's impending doom is telling. She seems good for nothing ("für nichts gut") but suffering, given her inability to move about the stage on her own. In fact, there are only a few instances in which the heroine actually walks. She remains primarily under "besondere Verwahrung," and consequently is either driven, carried, or escorted, modes that epitomize her inability to fend for herself (74). What I identify as Emilia's inability to physically progress, Inge Stephan and Bettina Matthias label inanimation, an inert state signaling the imposed purity requirements that

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literally drain the life force out of the heroine (Stephan 17; Matthias 251). In other words, “Emilia stirbt aus Furcht, sich dem Wandel vom Typ zum Individuum zu stellen” (Sanna 39). With these assumptions in mind, the concluding act surrounding the tragic death of Emilia remains open for further investigation.

The final scene of *Emilia Galotti* affords the heroine a last opportunity to assume agency. In the constrained world of eighteenth-century petite bourgeoisie, Emilia—now in the hands of the prince—once again faces a narrow range of options. Either she succumbs to Hettore’s wishes and is, according to moral code, “schlimmer als tot,” or she must die (63). Emilia identifies the latter as the only viable option. The trouble arising from this conclusion consists not in Emilia’s fear of ending her life, but rests in the wavering of her father, who refuses to take action. Given Odoardo’s reluctance, Emilia’s only alternative is now to take matters into her own hands, an option that causes the young woman to lash out in resentment (“*in einem bitteren Ton*,” 78).

Much like Orsina, Emilia questions Odoardo’s uncertainty and even his moral integrity. Their demands for action, however, differ in the interpretation of the dagger’s target. Orsina hopes to turn the dagger against the prince, whereas Odoardo’s child seeks to forego her vulnerability to the prince’s gallantry. With her father’s help, she seeks to end her life, and thus once again take flight.

Warum zauderten Sie sonst? [...] Ehedem wohl gab es einen Vater, der seine Tochter von der Schande retten, ihr den ersten, den besten Stahl in das Herz senkte—ihr zum zweiten Male das Leben gab. Aber alle solche Taten sind

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von ehemdem! Solcher Väter gibt es keinen mehr! (78)

The scene not only highlights the “impotence” of the father (“Emilia. Aber was nennen Sie ruhig sein? Die Hände in den Schoß legen?” 76), given his wavering, but it also articulates Emilia’s resentment for having to assume what she perceives to be Odoardo’s responsibility for her life. If we accept that the dagger is endowed with phallic connotation, given that the weapon affords Odoardo the opportunity to subdue his princely tormentor (“diese Gelegenheit, [...] Sie werden sie ergreifen, *wenn Sie ein Mann sind,*” 64; my emphasis), then the text depicts the petite-bourgeois male as a miserable failure. The child’s attempt to wrestle the weapon away from her father after falling short of calling him a coward (“Solcher Väter gibt es keinen mehr!”) at best bestows the impending scene with comically Freudian overtones.

Emilia. Geben Sie mir ihn, mein Vater, geben Sie mir ihn.

Odoardo. Und wenn du ihn kenntest, diesen Dolch!—

Emilia. Wenn ich ihn auch nicht kenne! Ein unbekannter Freund ist auch ein Freund.—Geben Sie mir ihn, mein Vater, geben Sie mir ihn.

Odoardo. Wenn ich dir ihn nun gebe—da! (*Gibt ihr ihn.*)

Emilia. Und da! *Im Begriffe, sich damit zu durchstoßen, reißt der*

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Vater ihr ihn wieder aus der Hand. (77–8)

As convention dictates, the patriarch reluctantly takes charge of the situation, ending his daughter's life. Odoardo's initial plan to abandon his daughter ("Was braucht er meine Hand dazu? Fort!" 75) suggests, however, that the father merely seeks to limit the damage to his reputation, as he believes Emilia's suicide compromises not only her moral integrity, but by extension his own ("Das gerade wäre der Ort, wo *ich* am tödlichsten zu verwunden bin," 24; my emphasis). Considering Odoardo's religious background, his daughter's suicide would in his mind diminish the distinction between the Galotti's and those he considers depraved. By extension, Emilia adheres to the same belief ("Dieses Leben ist alles, was die Lasterhaften haben," 77), whereas the father who lifts his daughter from the clutches of vice responds to divine calling and awards her "zum zweiten Male das Leben" (78).

After Odoardo initially hesitates to turn the dagger against his daughter, Emilia signals that she now plans to act independently, "Gut, lassen Sie mich nur, lassen Sie mich nur.—Ich will doch sehn, wer mich hält—wer mich zwingt—wer der Mensch ist, der einen Menschen zwingen kann" (76). In spite of her display of determination to finally take responsibility for her life, agency is taken away from the heroine. The struggle over the weapon concludes with Odoardo taking credit for Emilia's death while redesignating his daughter to the role of the passive victim, a role from which she sought to escape in this scene (Stephan 16). Read in this light, Emilia's reaction to the question of who bears responsibility for the fatal injury simultaneously under-scores the young woman's seeking credit for her death and the patriarch's resistance to grant it to

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her.¹⁴

Emilia. Nicht Sie, mein Vater—Ich selbst—ich selbst—

Odoardo. Nicht du, meine Tochter—nicht du—Gehe mit keiner Unwahrheit aus der Welt. Nicht du meine Tochter! Dein Vater, dein unglücklicher Vater! (78-9)

The closing scenes of *Emilia Galotti* place additional weight on Odoardo's resistance to surrender control over his daughter while refusing to take political responsibility. Lessing's stage instructions explicitly underscore the patriarch's overbearing presence. When the fading heroine descends to the ground, Odoardo holds on to her body (*Sie will sinken und er faßt sie in seine Arme*, 78) and only after Emilia succumbs to her injury does he let go (*sie stirbt und er legt sie sanft auf den Boden*, 79), releasing her: "Zieh hin!" (79). When he now consigns the corpse to decay, Odoardo claims to have opened for Emilia the gates of eternity, the only realm that in his mind remains closed to the prince.

Both father and daughter drive *ad absurdum* the renunciation of political and social responsibility. To be sure, Emilia's murder is as much a perverted show of self-destruction (on Emilia's part) as it is an act of fruitless retaliation against the prince (on Odoardo's part). The inefficacy of the murder gains in importance once we consider the scene in which the patriarch summons the spirits of both the murdered Emilia and her husband to haunt Hettore's dreams, petrifying the prince with

¹⁴ Alexander Mathäs and Hannelore Scholz claim that Emilia's willful death demonstrates the protagonist's autonomy seems overstated, given Emilia's hyperbolic implementation of the gendered code of conduct (Mathäs 43).

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the scornful laughter of hell.

Genug für mich, wenn dein [Emilia's] Mörder die Frucht seines Verbrechens nicht genießt. – Dies martere ihn mehr als das Verbrechen! ... In jedem Traume führe der blutige Bräutigam ihm seine Braut vor das Bette, und wann er dennoch den wollüstigen Arm nach ihr ausstreckt, so höre er plötzlich das Hohngelächter der Hölle und erwache! (68)

Odoardo's response to despotism is flawed because he convinces himself that if not by day then by night, in Hettore's dreams the otherwise scrupulous prince will have to assume responsibility for his deeds. A more realistic consequence of Emilia's death, however, is that the Court will indict Odoardo for murder, while the prince resumes his escapades. *Emilia Galotti* exposes not only the imperfections of despotism, but also the self-absorbed and demonstrably self-absorbing petite-bourgeois manner of dealing with that despotism. The dramatic conclusion depicts the tragic defect inherent in the Galottis' inner-directed value system projected onto the feminine figure which becomes carrier-supreme of its ideology of passive, suffering virtue, an eighteenth-century emblematic representative of male bourgeois vulnerability (Wickert 50).

In this context, Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* also traces a shift from one behavioral paradigm for women to another, from the autonomous, savvy survivor to the passive, sentimental (empfindsam) victim. Beyond their differences, the "Kunstgespräch" reminds the reader that both behavioral models in their own way are eighteenth-century objects of negotiation in a world dominated by men. While the autonomous, sensual woman seeks opportunities to overtly resist compliance,

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questions conventions, and therefore survives domination, the passive, repressed petite-bourgeois falls victim to the struggle to possess her. In contrast to Orsina, Emilia internalizes a debilitating behavior model for women that renders her virtually incapable of fending for herself. Lessing depicts this flaw in the heroine's silence and inanimation which turn Emilia into a victim rather than an autonomous, complex human subject. Given the heroine's affliction to be "für nichts gut," the conclusion of Emilia's self-description may ultimately suggest the positive contribution of an aristocratic heritage while it presents petite-bourgeois concepts of purity and virtue as passive-masochistic stoicism that, if imposed on human beings, cannot withstand the demands of an increasingly competitive urban landscape (77).

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