



## Article

# Sibling Rivalry, (Dis)Inheritance and Politics in Aphra Behn's *The Younger Brother* and Susanna Centlivre's *The Artifice*

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**Abstract:** Behn and Centlivre used their comedies about the rivalry between an elder and a younger brother concerning an inheritance to make a political statement. Primogeniture was customary in early-modern England, and if an estate was entailed (rather than held in fee simple), it was difficult, though not impossible, to will it away to another person. The reasons meriting disinheritance were widely discussed, but in the two plays, the Tory fathers disinherit their Whig elder sons for political reasons. As *The Younger Brother* was staged posthumously and altered by Charles Gildon, it is arguable what Behn's manuscript looked like, but there are indications that the elder brother was meant to be a downright republican and that Behn saw to it that the estate would go to the Tory younger brother, whose political stance she shared. In *The Artifice*, the father disinherits his upright elder son because he punished a Jacobite clergyman (whom the Whigs would have considered traitorous), but Centlivre—a zealous Whig herself—engineered an ending that reinstates the elder brother but also provides the younger with a comfortable income. Both dramatists also dealt with the inheritance prospects of women and the power of disposal they have over their portions.

**Keywords:** Aphra Behn; Susanna Centlivre; primogeniture; (dis)inheritance; early-modern women dramatists



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## 1. Introduction

The rivalry between elder and younger brothers—occasioned by their different inheritance prospects—was a recurring topic in early-modern drama. Playwrights often sided with the younger son; for instance, Shakespeare in *As You Like It* (perf. 1598 or 1599, pub. 1623), Thomas Shadwell in *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688) or John Vanbrugh in *The Relapse* (perf. 1696). In Aphra Behn's comedy *The Younger Brother* (1696), too, the spectators are invited to sympathize with the eponymous younger brother. In contrast, in John Fletcher's *The Elder Brother* (perf. probably 1625), William Congreve's *Love for Love* (1695) or Susanna Centlivre's *The Artifice* (1722), the elder brother is the more likeable one. In Behn's and Centlivre's comedies, plenty of space is given to comic action and surprise turnabouts, but the two women writers also use their (dis)inheritance plots to make a political statement, a fact that has been largely neglected in the existing scholarship.

## 2. English Inheritance Practices and Behn's *The Younger Brother*

In the early-modern period, the fate of younger sons was thought to be wretched (Austin 1999, p. 17). Primogeniture was only a custom, but one so strong that it was followed by an overwhelming number of aristocrats (English and Saville 1983, p. 24). Younger sons received an annuity during the father's lifetime, which was to establish them in life, but basically they were expected to earn their livelihood in some profession. However, army commissions were expensive, the clergy had low prestige, and there was no extensive bureaucracy. Trade seemed to offer an outlet, but one that came with a social stigma (Fawtier Stone and Fawtier Stone 1984, pp. 234–37)—from which the eponymous protagonist in Behn's play is smarting.

In *The Younger Brother*, Sir Rowland's younger son, George Marteen, has, to his mortification, been apprenticed to a trader, but he secretly continues to lead the life of a gentleman, accumulating high debts. Upon his return from Paris, where he was sent as a factor, he finds that his former mistress, Mirtilla, has married a rich fool and shows no interest in renewing their affair, turning her attentions to George's aristocratic friend, Prince Frederick, instead, but also casting an eye on her page boy—who is, in reality, George's sister Olivia in disguise. George plots revenge, but then falls in love and marries Teresia, an heiress whom his father wants for himself, while George was supposed to marry her aged but wealthy grandmother. Sir Merlin, George's elder brother, a rakehell and drunkard, is finally disinherited by his father, who bequeaths the estate to George, but as a conciliatory gesture, he grants his elder son an annuity when he marries.

In Restoration plays, fathers and guardians frequently threaten their insubordinate offspring with disinheritance but generally do not carry out their threats. *The Younger Brother* is one of the few plays where an angry father actually acts upon his threats. While the anger of some fictional fathers toward prodigals is understandable, most playwrights tend to be sympathetic toward the son if the father tries to force the affections of his children, threatening to leave the estate to someone else or to marry again to beget more dutiful sons. Especially, infatuated old men who want to leave their fortune to a new wife and to disinherit the rightful heir are invariably criticized and their dotage is ridiculed. In John Caryl's *Sir Salomon* (1671), the testator is warned that "it will be strongly presum'd, that whenever you Seal such a Conveyance, you are not *Compos Mentis* . . . [to] disinherit an only Son, who has so fair an esteem in the World" and to settle the property on an unknown woman (Caryl 1671, I, p. 2).

As I will explain below, for a political reading of the play and an understanding of how the elder son in *The Younger Brother* could have been disinherited and what Sir Rowland's reasons for such a drastic punishment might have been, it is important to note that the play was probably drafted in the 1680s, against the background of the Exclusion Crisis and determined Whig resistance to the future James II's succession to the throne<sup>1</sup>. In her novella *Oroonoko* (1688), Behn, in the persona of the narrator, claimed that she had "celebrated" her Suriname acquaintance Colonel Martin (the name is sometimes also spelled Marten) "in a Character of [her] New Comedy, by his own Name" (Behn 1688, p. 210)—which in all likelihood refers to *The Younger Brother*'s protagonist George Marteen, although, except for the name, the character seems to evince few similarities to his historical model. Moreover, in the play, the exhibition of a rhinoceros is mentioned in II.1.35—and such a beast was indeed displayed in London in 1684, which makes it probable that Behn was already working on the play at that time, as topical pointers would have made little sense years later. In addition, a reference to the investiture of Mirtilla's sister in a convent in Flanders ties in with narratives featuring nuns that Behn penned in the 1680s, such as *The Fair Jilt* and *The History of the Nun*. However, although Behn seems to have written (or drafted) *The Younger Brother* in the 1680s, the comedy was only staged posthumously, in 1696, almost seven years after Behn's death, by Charles Gildon, an alleged acquaintance. How he came into possession of Behn's manuscript is not known. In the Epistle Dedicatory to the play, he confessed that he substituted the conflict between the Whigs and Tories (which Behn had also included in several other plays of the 1680s, such as *The Roundheads*, *The City Heiress*, and *The Luckey Chance*, and which Gildon regarded as outdated in the 1690s) with a satire of rakehells—notorious debauchees who harassed pedestrians, molested women and broke windows. Gildon may, however, have introduced other changes he did not care to mention, and he may have added scenes to a play that Behn perhaps left unfinished at her death.

In early-modern England, if an estate was held in fee simple (i.e., if it was in the landlord's complete possession, without restrictions on the transfer of ownership), the landowner could bequeath it as he wished. Indeed, sons in Restoration plays show themselves to be keenly aware of the potential power of their fathers to instate another heir and dispossess the disobedient firstborn. Young Belair in Etherege's *Man of Mode* (1676), for

instance, knows that he risks disinheritance when he decides not to abide by his father's wish and marries the woman he loves. He is lucky that he is forgiven in the end.

However, if an estate was entailed—generally to the eldest son, and his eldest son in succession—the present owner could not easily will it away to another son. The Marteen estate in the play is indeed entailed, which lulls Sir Merlin into a false sense of security and makes him insolent (“I defie him; he can’t cut off the Entail. . .” Behn 2021, I.2, lines 121–22). Some contemporary pamphleteers in fact predicted such insolence would happen, as entails weakened control over unruly heirs (Houlbrooke [1984] 2013, p. 232). “. . . the Lands were so surely tied upon the Heir, as the Father could not put it from him; It made the Son disobedient, negligent and wastful, Marrying often without the Fathers consent, and to grow insolent in Vice, knowing there could be no check of disinheritance to restrain him . . .” (Gardiner 1690, p. 14). Like Behn’s Sir Martin Rowland, Belfont Senior in *The Squire of Alsatia* is similarly sure that, as the elder son and heir, he can mortgage with indemnity and gamble away the estate he is to inherit in order to pay for his debaucheries (“The Land is Entail’d, and I will have my Snack of it while I am young . . .”, Shadwell 1688, IV. 1., p. 66).

Given the assurance of these debauchees, how realistic is Sir Merlin’s disinheritance in *The Younger Brother* under these circumstances? One would assume that social comedy needs some factual grounding—though this is not always the case in Restoration drama. We only need to think of trick-marriages under a false name, which in fact were legally invalid but often served as a punishment for unlikeable fictional characters. In Behn’s *The City-Heiress*, for instance, the rich, ill-natured Sir Timothy (a caricature of the historical Earl of Shaftesbury, the Whig leader) is tricked into marrying his nephew’s cast-off whore to humiliate him, and in *The Lucky Chance*, the rude Bearjest unwittingly weds Diana’s disguised chambermaid, not the heiress herself.

Disinheriting the heir of an entailed estate may have been fairly rare in historical reality, but it was not impossible. Breaking the entail could be engineered by a process called “common recovery”, that is, by means of a fictitious lawsuit, in which a friend of the landowner claimed a title to the estate and a third party offered to guarantee the title of the present tenant but then defaulted, so that the court had to grant the estate to the plaintiff without encumbrance. The plaintiff then by pre-arrangement re-conveyed the land to the original owner in fee simple (English and Saville 1983, p. 14).

Although such wily legal pathways could be taken, they seem to have been difficult and lengthy. Thus, in Thomas Shadwell’s *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688), the furious father is warned he had better reconcile himself to his spendthrift, stupid elder son and reclaim him from the hands of his villainous friends before the young man mortgages the whole estate and “the Reversion will be gone in your Life time” (Shadwell 1688, V. 1, p. 76). Behn’s *The Younger Brother* provides no information about how Sir Rowland sets about breaking the entail and whether he can resort to a process of common recovery in the short time, which is supposed to pass in the comedy between his decision to disinherit Sir Merlin and the institution of George as his heir. All we are shown is that Sir Merlin is a fool, too thoughtless to apprehend the danger he is in when it comes to losing both his father’s favor and the estate.

To this brief survey of the seventeenth-century inheritance law, it needs to be added that after the middle of the seventeenth century, it was possible to use a strict settlement as a substitute for an entail to secure the continuity of landed estates (Stone 1986, p. 278). Strict settlement, often signed upon the marriage of an aristocratic pair, made the landowner a tenant for life but gave him the possibility of making provisions for children (yet unborn!), though not the right to sell parts of the estate—which was to be inherited by his eldest son (Spring 1993, pp. 79, 125, 138). But strict settlement was mostly employed by high aristocrats and great landowners, and less frequently down the social scale (Fawtier Stone and Fawtier Stone 1984, p. 75). In Behn’s play, Sir Rowland’s title indicates that he is a baronet or knight. It is unlikely that he has set up a strict settlement, and we hear nothing about such an arrangement in the play.

### 3. Arguments for and against Disinheritance in Restoration Pamphlets and Their Applicability to Behn's Play

The problem of inheritance was not only dealt with in drama; the legitimacy of primogeniture and disinheritance was also widely debated in sermons and pamphlets in “a discursive arena that was mediated . . . by the rhetoric of religion and of the English Bible” (Austin 1999, p. 19). However, biblical precedents proved perplexing and provided no incontrovertible guideline. The Old Testament forbids disinheriting the son of an unloved wife in favor of the son of a loved one, but it permits recalcitrant sons to be indicted before the elders and stoned. Some biblical sons forfeit their birthright through sale and trickery (as in the case of Esau and Jacob), some through parental preference (Ephraim was chosen instead of Manasseh), and some because of sinful behavior (Reuben slept with his father's concubine). There was an unresolved debate whether these examples conveyed God's displeasure with primogeniture in general or a warning that only God is allowed to interfere with the natural descent of birthright and property (Austin 1999, pp. 23, 27). Accordingly, some Restoration writers held that “Disinheriting the Eldest Son is forbid in the Holy Scripture”; fathers, like God, will not disown their children (Aubrey 1696, p. 32; Horn 1671, pp. 62–63). Others, somewhat less imperatively, enjoined that, like God, “A Father will not . . . disinherit [his Son] for every offence that he doth commit” (Burroughs 1668, p. 94), and will only act if the heir is “past all hopes of amendment” (Tyrrell 1694, p. 106). In contrast, writers like Baxter believed that “it is a duty to disinherit an incorrigible wicked Son” (Baxter 1683, p. 306).

What, in the eyes of moralists and clerics, would have counted as a “just cause” (Baxter 1682, p. 40) meriting the disinheritance of an incorrigibly wicked son and might be relevant to Behn's *The Younger Brother*? Obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (Baxter 1683, p. 306); a marriage to which the father objects (Tyrrell 1681, p. 33), especially if it is dishonorable, such as a marriage to a whore (Pullen 1699, p. 306; Brydall 1700, p. 12); constant association with “Fellows . . . guilty of Ill, Lewd and Mischievous Practises”; or cuckolding one's father; laying violent hands on him and attempts on his life (Brydall 1700, p. 12).

In *The Younger Brother*, this list hardly provides compelling moral ground for preferring the younger brother, George, to the elder, Sir Merlin; in fact, it makes the former's preferential treatment seem rather cynical. Both Marteen brothers are disobedient and lewd—the elder has become a boorish, drunken rakehell, but the younger is no less of a rake and spendthrift; he just acts more deviously and manages to hoodwink his father. George plays the sober apprentice, but he has accumulated an enormous debt of £ 5000, a sum that almost equals the yearly income of a peer (Milhous and Hume 2015, p. 128) and is more than the Welsh estate of the Marteens might yield p.a.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Behn clearly invites the spectators' sympathy for her protagonist—she starts the play with conversations between George and his valet, and George and his sister, so as to introduce his viewpoint, and she gives him the wit and verbal dexterity his elder brother is so conspicuously lacking—but, as in the case of several other rakes in her comedies (for instance, Wilmore in *The Rover*, Wilding in *The City Heiress*, or Gayman in *The Luckey Chance*), his character and morals are questionable. George even steals his father's bride yet is forgiven; nor does Sir Rowland in fact object to Merlin's marriage to another man's mistress—so a “dishonourable” marriage cannot be the cause of his disinheritance. Indeed, the father even grants his elder son £ 1000 upon the event, supposedly because he has shown “more Wit than [his father] thought he had” (Behn 2021, V. 4, line 66). It is not spelled out why such a disreputable alliance should be rewarded, possibly because, as a married man, the rakehell may be hoped to behave with more discretion. Sir Rowland is undoubtedly angry at the drunkenness of his firstborn, but we hear of no other excesses typical of contemporary rakehells he may have committed, and drinking was a widespread aristocratic pastime. A possible reason for the drastic measure of disinheritance could be that Sir Merlin in his inebriation draws his sword upon his father, thus attempting to lay violent hands on him, though the situation is hardly life-threatening, as the rakehell is much too drunk to do serious harm and is quickly disarmed by George.

#### 4. Political Reasons for Disinheritance

There is, however, another possibility why Sir Rowland might disinherit his elder son, namely a political one, a reason for punishment not listed by the moralists quoted above but mentioned in several political texts of the period. As outlined at the beginning, Gildon deleted from the text the political conflict between the Whigs and Tories that Behn had allegedly written into *The Younger Brother*. Like several other Tory writers during the Exclusion crisis, Behn often portrayed the Whigs as treacherous republicans at heart. If Behn originally designed Sir Rowland to be a Tory and Sir Merlin to be a Whig, Sir Rowland's real motive for disinheriting his son may be more understandable. There are references in *The Younger Brother* to treasonous conversations among Sir Merlin's associates (Behn 2021, I. 2, line 47, III. 1, line 201), and to Sir Merlin's hope to emulate Cromwell and "Reign in Parliament" (Behn 2021, III. 1, lines 185–86), which may be ghosts of Behn's manuscript that Gildon failed to adapt (rakehells mobbed and harassed people but did not engage in politics). In the 1680s, Sir Merlin's political fantasies would have embodied the worst Tory fears of an alleged attempt on the part of Whig exclusionists to turn England into a republic again (Harris 1987, pp. 133–35). That Behn included this political conflict in the family strife is all the more probable as the historical Henry Martin, Colonel George Martin's elder brother, was a republican and regicide during the Commonwealth, though he later fell out with Cromwell. After the Restoration, Henry Martin was spared execution, though not imprisonment (ODNB, Henry Marten). Usually, however, the land of a traitor, upon his execution, would have been forfeited to the Crown (Spring 1993, p. 140)—so Sir Rowland's preference for his Tory younger son may have been a means of protecting the estate. Interestingly, George's historical model, Behn's Suriname friend Col. Martin, in reality seems to have maintained contact with both the Parliamentarians and the Royalists in England and the Caribbean (Barber 2007, pp. 193–95, 207; Gragg 2003, p. 48). But we need not go into such drastic speculations as the threat of Sir Merlin's possible inditement for treason. Political reasons for disinheritance are also mentioned; for instance, in Crown's *City Politiques* (1683), where a Whig rogue threatens his son with disinheritance when he suspects him of being a Tory (Crown 1683, II, p. 20). Similarly, in Behn's *The City Heiress*, the seditious Whig Sir Timothy wants to disinherit his Tory nephew for his political convictions and his attacks on the rebellious City of London. Thus, Restoration audiences would hardly have wondered if an exasperated Tory father dispossessed his Whiggish son.

Significantly, the term "disinherit" was also used in the debates about the exclusion of the Duke of York from the succession. Apart from political disputes, religious conflicts between Protestant fathers and Catholic sons, or vice versa, were also grounds for disinheritance at the time: "A Father that has a Son that is an Heretick, is bound to disinherit him. . ." (Care 1682, p. 75, see also Wood 1691–1692, p. 880; Pullen 1699, p. 151). Milton's grandfather, a zealous papist, disinherited his protestant son (Campbell 2004). Political and religious arguments thus combined in the contention of one exclusionist MP that "sure no Father will scruple to Disinherit a Son, or a Brother . . . that would ruine him" (England and Wales. House of Commons 1681, p. 17). The political background to the disinheritance debate on the grounds of religion is also clearly evinced by a pamphlet written in 1689: "And the Laws allow a particular Man for Just and Reasonable Causes to Disinherit his eldest Son, and Entail the Estate upon others of his Posterity, only for the preservation of a private Family; and I would fain hear a solid Argument, why such an Advantageous Priviledge (in extream Necessity) should be denyed the Publick?" (Kennett 1689, p. 18). What was at odds in the disinheritance debate of the 1680s was thus the question of the legitimacy of excluding the Catholic King James II from the succession and justifying the accession of William and Mary to the throne.

That inheritance law was an eminently political question even before the Exclusion debate is evinced by the attack on primogeniture by radicals during the Interregnum, who thereby tried to undermine the undivided transference of aristocratic estates. Since the family was viewed as a microcosm of the state, the attack on primogeniture "was also an attack on monarchic power" (Austin 1999, pp. 22–32). In her play, Behn is unlikely

to have countenanced such an attack, although *The Younger Brother* ends with the elder son's disinheritance. Unlike other Tories, she did not equate patriarchal power (which she frequently questioned) with royal power (which she tended to defend), although, if indeed she had originally made Sir Merlin a Whig and George a Tory, she would have welcomed the discomfiture of a partisan of republicanism and the promotion of a supporter of the court party, who gets the estate and the heiress, notwithstanding that he is a prodigal himself. In view of Gildon's changes to the text, it is impossible to reconstruct what she meant Sir Merlin's fate to have been. In the 1696 version of *The Younger Brother*, he gets off surprisingly easily, which may be Gildon's makeshift conciliatory ending for the (comic) rakehell, or perhaps an attempt to tie up the loose ends Behn left in an unfinished final scene. The reformed comedy gaining popularity in the 1690s trusted more in the moral reform of characters than in harsh social satire. In any case, the £ 1000 annuity Sir Rowland grants Sir Merlin upon his marriage is much higher than most sons who did not inherit an estate could have expected. An heir who was to receive the estate was not paid any annuity during the father's lifetime (English and Saville 1983, pp. 22, 26), but since George marries an heiress, the couple will have no further financial problems.

### 5. Women's Inheritance in Behn's Comedy

Although in *The Younger Brother* Behn focuses on the inheritance prospects of the two brothers, she was generally more interested in the financial situation of women. Historically, last wills generally provided daughters with a portion that was to enable them to marry. In the course of the seventeenth century men from the middle ranks of society rarely made "their bequests of marriage portions for their daughters conditional upon the approval of the groom by guardians or executors" (though this was different in the case of the upper classes), and many daughters received their inheritance at the age of twenty-one at the latest (Stone 1961, pp. 183, 184; Erickson 1993, p. 94); but in comedies, which frequently featured characters from the upper ranks, hard-hearted blocking figures to love-marriages continued to be staple ingredients, as well as threats of disinheritance for refusing a match and wills putting daughters under guardianship longer than may have been the wont in reality: Miranda in Centlivre's *The Busie Body*, for instance, is to receive her estate only at the age of twenty-five.

In *The Younger Brother*, George and Merlin's sister, Olivia, is lucky in so far as the man her father has selected as her mate is in fact the very man she has fallen in love with—so in her case there is no danger of punishment for the disobedience she planned to commit when she swore not to wed an unknown groom of her father's choice. Her friend's situation seems more precarious: Teresia's dowry is provided by her grandmother, all of the girl's other relatives probably being deceased. On the eve of what Lady Youthly believes will be her wedding day, as well as that of her granddaughter, she settles £ 3000 on Teresia (see Behn 2021, V. 3, pp. 147–49). After re-marriage, Lady Youthly would no longer be able to dispose of her money, which would become her husband's property. So, when the old woman finds out that Teresia has married George Marteen, whom Lady Youthly wanted for herself, and not his father, as was arranged, there is nothing she can do to retrieve the money she has willed away. She must have failed to define in detail the conditions upon which her granddaughter is to receive the dowry. In addition, Teresia "has a good Fortune of Five Hundred a year that [her grandmother] cannot hinder her of" (Behn 2021, II. 1, lines 26–27). Her grandfather left her an income she can dispose of freely, though it was unusual for guardians to have no control over a young heiress's inheritance.

In Behn's plays, there are several other young women who are equally free of (financial) control by guardians. We only need think of Hellena in *The Rover* (1677), whose male relatives cannot interfere with the 300,000 crowns her uncle left her, or the eponymous Widdow Ranter, whose husband left her 50,000 pounds without any provisos. Teresia's financial independence is thus a typical feature of Behn's work. However, all the money at the heiress's discretion can do is buy her the possibility of choosing the mate she wants to hand it over to, that is, "the freedom to choose her master" (Copeland 2004, pp. 103–4).

As both Behn's and Centlivre's heroines are well aware, marriage was "an act of legal and economic disempowerment" (Markley 1995, p. 8), and the wealth of the bride passed into the hands of her husband.

## 6. Political Grounds for Disinheritance in Centlivre's *The Artifice*

Like Behn's *The Younger Brother*, whose very title draws attention to the different inheritance prospects of siblings occasioned by primogeniture, Susanna Centlivre's *The Artifice* (1723) invites consideration in the context of contemporary inheritance customs because its main plot deals with an elder brother's attempt to regain the estate his father willed away to his younger son. Politically, Centlivre positioned herself at the other end of the political spectrum: she was an avid Whig, regarding the Tories as seditious Jacobites who wanted to reinstate the Stuarts to the British throne. Yet, there are several interesting parallels between *The Younger Brother* and *The Artifice*. In this comedy, as in Behn's play, there are two brothers vying for the family estate worth £ 4000 p.a. Sir John Freeman, the elder and, in this case, more upright and responsible brother, was disinherited by his father (already deceased at the beginning of the play) for political reasons: motivated by patriotic (Whig) fervor, he had disturbed a meeting organized by a non-juring parson, had driven out the congregation and tied and locked up the priest. Non-jurors were Anglican or (in Scotland) Episcopal clergymen who regarded James II as the legitimate king of the realm, refused to take the oaths of allegiance to William and Mary after James's deposition in the Glorious Revolution, and embraced a policy of nonresistance and Passive Obedience to the established authorities (see Klein 2021). Sir John's father, a Jacobite and member of this cleric's congregation, had thereupon disinherited him in favor of his younger brother Ned, though he could not deprive his elder son of the title, just like Behn's Sir Rowland, whose elder son continues to be Sir Merlin, while the younger brother is just called George Marteen, even when he inherits the estate. However, unlike Sir Rowland, Freeman Sen. did not grant his elder son an annuity; hence, Sir John is now impecunious and must earn his living as a soldier—a very honorable profession in Centlivre's eyes. He is, indeed, proud of serving his country as a Captain (quite the contrary to George Marteen in the *Younger Brother*, who is mortified by the necessity to work as a trader) and has just returned from war against the Jacobites in the North—probably a topical reference to the Atterbury plot, in which several Tory and High-Church conspirators in 1721–1722 plotted an armed invasion of Britain on behalf of James II's son, James Francis Edward Stuart, the so-called Old Pretender (Gregg 2004). As in Behn's play, Centlivre's (dis)inheritance plot in *The Artifice* is thus linked not only to the friction between political parties but also to the contested succession to the throne. Centlivre leaves her audience in no doubt that she thinks that Sir John's attack on the Jacobite priest was fully justified—one of the play's characters speaks about the parson as "Old Sedition" (Centlivre 1723, I, p. 5)—and that the hero's behavior is honorable throughout. However, his upright political "conscience" (Centlivre 1723, III, p. 55) has not only cost him the estate and yearly income but might also lose him his beloved bride, Olivia, whose rich, greedy father Sir Philip Money-Love refuses to let her marry a man without an adequate income, blaming the heartbroken suitor for the stupidity of revealing his converse political opinions to his father.

In the meantime, his younger brother Ned struts about followed by three footmen and is about to marry Sir Philip's daughter. This miser now favors Ned's suit, while he has forbidden Sir John his house, although he would, with the same unscrupulousness, renounce the new groom, should he lose the estate he is now in possession of. Ned may be a rake and cuckold-maker, but he is no villain: he promises his older sibling shall not want, although he does not specify the amount of money he means to grant him as an allowance and is too stingy to buy him a Colonel's commission in the Guards (Centlivre 1723, I, p. 9). Sir John, in turn, constantly bewails the loss of the estate and the fact that he must live on "a younger Brother's Bounty" (Centlivre 1723, III, p. 52).

While Behn, in *The Younger Brother*, (probably) saw to it that justice was served by having the republican Sir Merlin disinherited and the estate transferred to the Tory pro-

tagonist, Centlivre devised a solution to the inheritance struggle according to her own political preferences by reinstating the Whig elder brother to his rights. In order to prevent a marriage between Ned and Olivia Money-Love, Sir John has written to a Dutchwoman, Louisa, whom his brother had seduced by promising to marry her, a verbal promise that in the Low Countries counts as a common-law marriage. Ned, however, refused to honor the vow and absconded, leaving his bride pregnant with a son. In the “artifice” of the title, the Dutchwoman, who has travelled to London, pretends to poison both Ned and herself, whereupon the rake, racked by imaginary cramps, wishes to do penance for his sins not only by officially marrying her on his deathbed but also by conveying the estate back to his older brother. When he realizes belatedly that he has been tricked, he has already given away his possessions by deed and cannot retrieve them: evidently, like Behn’s Lady Youthly, he has failed to specify in detail under what circumstances Sir John is to have the estate. In his panic about his impending death—and possibly nudged by a lawyer sympathetic to the elder brother’s just claim—he signed a deed instead of drawing up a last will. In this final turnabout, it is now the younger brother who seems to find himself penniless. Sir John generously offers Ned half the estate, so that he and his Dutch wife will not live in poverty—a gesture that immediately makes Sir Philip threaten to also halve his daughter’s portion. As it turns out, however, there is no need to halve the Freeman estate: Louisa has inherited 40,000 pounds from her father—a sum that completely reconciles the rakish Ned to the trick-marriage: “no Woman can be Guilty of any Fault, that has Forty Thousand Pounds” (Centlivre 1723, V. 3, p. 102). Indeed, Centlivre even makes sure this vast sum of money is not wasted on a Tory: in the end, Ned Freeman confesses that he, in fact, has always harbored the same political sympathies as his elder brother but “did not think it prudent to contradict [his] Father” (Centlivre 1723, V. 3, p. 106). Henceforth, like a good Whig, he promises that “no Man shall do more in Defence of his Country, or pay his Taxes more cheerfully” (Centlivre 1723, V. 3, p. 106).

## 7. Women’s Inheritance in Centlivre’s Comedy

As in *The Younger Brother*, the conflict between the elder and the younger brother is only one of several strands of action in Centlivre’s multi-plot comedy, which also involves another trick-marriage and a cuckolding plot. As in Behn’s play, the inheritance prospects of young women also receive some attention: unlike Behn, however, Centlivre rarely gives her female characters financial leeway to follow their own amorous inclinations. Most of them cannot marry the man of their choice and freely dispose of the money they inherited from deceased relatives, instead depending on the consent of their guardians. The Dutchwoman Louisa is an exception in this respect. Her father, the “burgo-master” of “Haerlem” (Centlivre 1723, I, p. 7) left her sole heir and mistress of 40,000 pounds (V. 3, p. 102). Roman–Dutch law, as operative in the Low Countries in the eighteenth century, had no right or custom of primogeniture (Williams 1910, p. 159), so the daughter could inherit all of her father’s possessions. In contrast to the lucky Dutchwoman, Centlivre’s English female characters are almost all under the tutelage of greedy fathers or guardians in control of the purse strings, who try to blackmail the women into marrying according to the elders’ wishes by threats of withholding the money. Olivia Money-Love is a case in point: her father refuses to give his consent to her marriage to the impecunious Sir John who she loves, trying to force her into taking Ned Freeman for a husband instead, because he is now in possession of the Freeman estate. With the same unscrupulous nonchalance, he favors Sir John again once the latter has regained his estate, yet immediately threatens to halve the bride’s portion if the groom makes good on his promise to share the estate with his younger brother. Luckily for Olivia, Ned has married a rich woman and is in no need of his brother’s generosity, so her father is finally satisfied with her marriage to Sir John. In many of Centlivre’s other plays, the only recourse young women have against such unconscionable blocking figures is trickery, carried out by the heroine herself, the groom, or by a witty friend (as, for instance, in *The Busie Body*, *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, or *The Beau’s Duel*). What is unusual in Olivia’s case is the fact that she is not only a rich heiress

but will also, in fact, inherit her father's estate (see [Centlivre 1723](#), V. 3, p. 102)—which not only indicates that the Money-Love estate is not entailed, as in that case it would have to go to the nearest male relative, but also seems to suggest, by the owner's very name, that Sir Philip's title may be new and that he probably rose from the merchant or trading class into the (lower) gentry without, as yet, developing pride in the maintenance of an aristocratic family line (in addition to his greed for money). Centlivre's hostile portrayal of such nouveau-riche parvenus is surprising; as a Whig, she tends to present (big) merchants with sympathy, though she can be acerbic against lower-ranking citizens.

## 8. Conclusions

Although, like Behn, as a rule, Centlivre's work centered on the inheritance prospects of women rather than men, both playwrights took up the problem of primogeniture and the inheritance conflict between an older and a younger brother in their last plays. In the case of *The Younger Brother*, it is not possible to reconstruct beyond doubt Behn's original manuscript before Gildon's alterations, but it seems highly probable that in both comedies the elder brothers were disinherited for political reasons, their Whig political stance giving offense to their Tory fathers. To change the succession of his entailed estate, Sir Rowland would have had to go through a process of common recovery. We receive no information about how Freeman Snr. conveyed the estate to his younger son instead of the elder one before the play starts, but the fact that Sir John offers to halve the estate to support Ned suggests that the land is held in fee simple, and the father merely needed to change his will. As befits the genre of comedy, both authors engineer a conciliatory ending that gives the disinherited, politically objectionable brother an income sufficient to lead a comfortable, or even lavish, life, while the brother whose political opinion the playwright herself favored is rewarded with an estate and the political influence associated with the social status of a big landowner.

Both comedies are socially conservative in the sense of preserving the dominance of the ruling class ([Canfield 1997](#), p. 2): the Marteen and Freeman families are members of the lower aristocracy. In Behn's play, the eponymous younger brother's promotion is no threat to the social hierarchy, only a personal and a party-political triumph. In *The Artifice*, Centlivre even restores the order decreed by primogeniture by returning the estate to the elder brother. In contrast to comedies where the impoverished upper-class protagonists need "transfusions of new money" from their rich brides to build estates ([Canfield 1997](#), pp. 249–50), Sir John Freeman is already in possession of the estate again when he marries and George Marteen has officially been made heir to his father's estate. The heiress's dowry just further contributes to the couple's wealth.

Centlivre's and, particularly, Behn's works have been analyzed by a great number of scholars; however, the nexus in *The Younger Brother* and *The Artifice* between the (dis)inheritance plots and contemporary political and legal discourses on the advisability or indeed imperative of disinheriting insubordinate heirs has not been discussed before. Indeed, both plays have been strikingly neglected, although Behn's politics, and her role as a Tory propagandist, especially in plays like *The Roundheads*, *The City-Heiress*, and *The Lucky Chance*, have been examined in many studies (see, for instance, [Hughes 2001](#); [Kubek 1993](#); [Markley 1995](#); [Owen 1996](#)). With regard to the treatment of political and legal issues in Centlivre's plays, critics have focused on her presentation of marrying and marriage contracts, her commitment to Whig politics, and the way in which she employs Locke's contract theory for the presentation of freely contracted marriages (see, for instance, [Anderson 2002](#); [Frushell 1986](#); [Rosenthal 2019](#); [Tierney-Hynes 2016](#)).

Debates about primogeniture and disinheritance, as I have tried to show, could have a political context, but not each and every (threatened) disinheritance in a Restoration play is caused by antithetical political views or religious controversies within a family. Fathers often simply resent an heir's marriage plans or his dissolute life. For Behn, politicizing the conflict between two brothers who hold different political opinions was a new angle from which to articulate her anti-Whig propaganda of the 1680s; for Centlivre, it was one more

opportunity to exalt the Whig ethos and the Protestant succession. *The Younger Brother* and *The Artifice* should be included in the group of Restoration and early eighteenth-century social comedies in which “the threat to be socialized is . . . political”. “What is at stake in these plays is estate, from a Cavalier’s lost estate to a younger brother’s absent one, to the contested land of England itself” (Canfield 1997, p. 2). Indeed, in both Behn’s and Centlivre’s comedy, the domestic struggle for inheritance reverberates with echoes from another, more public, family struggle for an estate, that between James, Duke of York, his Protestant son-in-law and daughter William and Mary, and the Duke of Monmouth, Charles II’s illegitimate son, in the 1680s, and the controversy in Centlivre’s time about whether the Protestant Hanoverians or the Catholic Stuarts were the legitimate claimants to the throne. By favoring the Tory younger brother, Behn implicitly also supported the claim of the future James II. Centlivre, on the other hand, defended the entitlement of the Hanoverian dynasty by rewarding the Whig elder brother, a zealous opponent of the Jacobites, with the estate and the heiress. Behn’s *The Younger Brother* and Centlivre’s *The Artifice* partly obscure their political thrust behind a wealth of comic action and diverse plot lines (after all, women were not expected to exert political influence), but in fact both female dramatists use the topic of sibling rivalry concerning an inheritance to make a party-political statement.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further details, see (Rubik 2021, pp. 716–18).

<sup>2</sup> In the seventeenth century, Wales was often portrayed as poor and provincial (Jenkins [1992] 2014, pp. 18–19).

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