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The Exploration of Female Identity

in the Father-Daughter Dynamic in Caroline Bowles's Poetry

The work and literary accomplishments of Caroline Bowles Southey established her significance as a poet in the Romantic tradition as well as contemporary culture. Similar to many other women writers, she worked within the established poetic genres against the conformity of the masculine norms of Romanticism. The father-daughter relationship is not new, yet in Caroline Bowles's poetry it becomes a symbol of the patriarchal relation of women and men in society, a precursor to the questioning of woman's role and place in culture. This paper aims to examine the father-daughter dynamic in *Ellen Fitzarthur* and *Birth-Day*. Bowles interrogates the ambivalence of self: the private and the public persona, which has to come to terms with the demands and pressures of patriarchal society. To achieve self-fulfillment a woman has to be free from the power of the father. Caroline Bowles's poetry is such an attempt to strive towards the personal and poetic independence from the expectations of the patriarchal society.

*My poor child, you resemble me too
much in all things. . .¹*

Caroline Bowles Southey, a second-generation Romantic poet, has too long been ignored and has recently been rediscovered as one of the "major writers" of the Romantic period. Still, her work and literary accomplishments established her significance as a poet in the Romantic tradition as well as in the contemporary cultural framework. Often referred to or known as Robert Southey's wife, Bowles's poetry in her "fondness of rural life, melancholy, pathos and moral satire,"² deserves recognition of its own.

Defining female Romanticism, Meena Alexander argues that "male Romantic poets had sought out the clarities of visionary knowledge while women writers, with their lives dominated by the bonds of family and the cultural constraints of

1. Edward Dowden, ed., *The Correspondence of Robert Southey with Caroline Bowles* (London: Longmans Green, 1881), letter 16 (July 1822), p. 30.

2. Duncan Wu, *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology* (Malden, Mass., Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 602.

femininity, altered that knowledge, forcing it to come to terms with the substantial claims of a woman's view of the world."³ Similarly to many other women writers, Caroline Bowles worked within the established genres against the conformity of the masculine norms of Romanticism. She established a genre of poetic autobiography as she frequently experimented with various literary genres. In her insightful analyses of culture she presented "a feminist sensibility and worldview . . . that male writers . . . could not offer."⁴

The father-daughter relationship is not a new subject in the literature of the period, yet in Caroline Bowles's poetry it becomes a symbol of the patriarchal relation of women and men in society, a precursor to the questioning of woman's role and place in culture. As for her own father, not much is known about his life. When Caroline was born, Captain Charles Bowles had retired from East India Company to a smaller rural place. He suffered from depression, "leading finally to a nervous illness which carried him off by a series of fits in January 1801"⁵ when Caroline was fourteen. It is important to remember that in a patriarchal society, unmarried women found financial support from a father or a brother. Caroline Bowles had a 'brother,' Colonel Bruce who is thought to be her father's adopted, and perhaps illegitimate, son. He lived in India "but came to his 'sister's' rescue a year or so after her mother's death."⁶ Having some financial difficulties, he offered Caroline an annuity, which helped her not to lose her home; she was "enormously grateful for his generosity."⁷

In a psychoanalytical framework, the preoccupation with the father figure comes from a daughter's idealized desire for her father as "desperate . . . 'Love' is entangled with the question of woman's complicity; it may be the bribe which has persuaded her to agree to her own exclusion."⁸ It is often a reinforcement of a sense of self-worth. Caroline Bowles is preoccupied with the theme of a father-

3. Meena Alexander, *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth, and Mary Shelley* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Nobles Books, 1989), pp. 2–3.

4. Kathleen Hickok, " 'Burst are the prison bars': Caroline Bowles Southey and the Vicissitudes of Poetic Reputation," in *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, ed. Harriet Linkin and Stephen Behrendt (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 192–211, p. 199. Hickok gives a fine overview of Bowles's contribution to the Romantic canon and its processes, which often excluded women writers.

5. Virginia Blain, *Caroline Bowles Southey, 1786–1854: The Making of a Woman Writer* (Aldershot, Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), p. 18.

6. Blain, *Caroline Bowles Southey*, p. 19.

7. Blain, *Caroline Bowles Southey*, p. 19.

8. Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982), p. 79.

daughter relationship in both her early and late works: from *Ellen Fitzarthur* to *Birth-Day*. In *Ellen Fitzarthur: A Metrical Tale, in Five Cantos*,⁹ written in 1820, Bowles reworks what at first seems an old story of betrayal and seduction of a young girl. The plot is seemingly simple: an innocent and sweet Ellen who is living with her widowed father falls in love with a man she nurses back to life after a shipwreck. De Morton who claims his love to Ellen persuades her to leave with him. Later he abandons her and their child in London, as marriage between them will ruin his inheritance opportunity. Ellen travels back home only to find her old father is passed away. Full of grief and despair, she dies on his grave with her child pressed to her chest.

The poem is much more complex than that; it reveals how a societal structure and its systems set women up as children who never grow up and remain dependent on a stronger male presence. One of the broader issues coming out of the poem is the problem of daughters who do not exist as individuals in a society that lacks female education. Ellen's mother's education is limited and consists of needlework, music and singing. After her death, Ellen's father becomes centered on his daughter, his only comfort and hope: "One earthly love he still confest, / One tie, the purest and the best, / That bound a widowed father's care / To one sweet blossom, frail and fair. . ." (line 7). Ellen, gentle and nurturing, resembles her mother in many ways: "His youthful heart's selected bride, / When first she breathed that fond 'for ever!' / E'en so she looked, she moved, she spoke, / But that soft sound th'illusion broke: / 'Father!' it cried" (line 11). Describing Ellen, Bowles uses the word 'inmate' as Ellen becomes imprisoned in a botanical garden of her father's home and village life; she is a fragile 'plant' that can only grow on a familiar soil. The only education she receives is from her father, a pious shepherd, who "trained her pliant youth / With lessons of eternal truth" (Canto I, line 15). Gradually, Ellen becomes the replacement of his wife, as they share 'the tender and pure union' that only death is capable of separating them: "A parent, tho' his heart may break, / From that fond heart will never tear / The child whose last retreat is there!" (Canto I, line 19). Ellen's home life is "an earthly Paradise she found" (line 19) until the seducer De Morton appears in the village.

The shipwreck brings a stranger home whom Ellen and her father, as God's mediators, rescue and nurse back to life. Ellen sees a 'brother' figure in him, for whom she has longed for a long time. De Morton is first described as "the cherished stranger," an outsider who comes from "foreign fields of conflict" yet he experiences the "shipwreck on his native land" (line 28). Ellen's father sees him-

9. All parenthesized references are to Caroline Bowles, *Ellen Fitzarthur: A Metrical Tale, in Five Cantos* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1820).

self in De Morton, as “he will protect, sustain, and bless / My Ellen when she’s fatherless” (line 31). Despite De Morton’s assurance of his decent intentions, his union with poor Ellen jeopardizes his inheritance prospects; therefore he proposes a secret marriage. Ellen’s father objects to his proposal as it will taint Ellen’s reputation: “never shall my Ellen’s hand, / In secrecy’s dark shade be given; / In open day, and sight of man, / Her virgin vows shall rise to Heaven!” (line 37). De Morton leaves Ellen who can only hope for his return.

Similar to Madeline in John Keats’s *Eve of St. Agnes* who dreams of her future husband, Ellen perceives herself as De Morton’s wife: “And in her dreams! . . . The suit was gain’d, the time was past . . . he came at last / His bride, his promis’d bride to claim; / She murmured the beloved name, / And woke. . .” As she waits in vain, “nor line, nor message came, / No sound that bore De Morton’s name” (Canto III, line 42). Ellen possesses a fortitude, a strength of character that does not let her give up her hopes: “*There* seek her in her loveliest dress, / (Long suffering, mild, meek tenderness) / In woman’s fair and fragile form, / That bends, but breaks not in the storm” (line 49). Her heart remains pure and sweet as her “love knows no chill” (line 50). However, her father perceives the change in Ellen: “as with a father’s anxious dread, / Its presage of appalling gloom, / He marked his Ellen’s fading bloom,” (line 51) yet Ellen continues to believe in their happiness together. When he returns, De Morton offers Ellen a choice: “Two paths are open in thy sight – / Decide – one word, and all is ov’er; / Fly far from hence with me to-night, / Or stay, and see my face no more!” (line 60).

When Ellen leaves her home, the Paradise is lost forever: “Since Ellen left her father’s cot, / Her heart, remorseful and unblest, / Has sought for peace, but found it not” (Canto IV, line 65). Her guilt is unbearable, stabbing her heart like a “poisin’d dart” (line 65). Her father cannot sustain life without her as “A father’s forfeit love – in vain – / No parent’s tender eye beheld / Those lines by cruel fraud withheld – / Destroyer! was it not enough / From his old age’t have torn away / The last, the only prop, that lent / Its dear support to life’s decay” (Canto IV, line 67). Ellen cannot maintain her existence without him as well: “So seemed his silent scorn to show, / And Ellen wept in hopeless woe. . .” (line 68). De Morton becomes unattached and cold to Ellen: “Kind looks, and gentle words, were changed / For sullen tones, and eyes estranged, / And love’s assiduous cares were lost / In cold indifference’ killing frost. . .” (Canto IV, line 68). Gradually, Ellen too becomes ‘shipwrecked’ without a loving force, left both by De Morton and her father: “all she had loved in better days, / Involved in that impervious haze, / Or dimply shaped, like distant coast, / Thro’ twilight mists just seen and lost” (line 78). She hopes her father will forgive her and welcome her home with a child: “He cannot from his heart expel / All thought of her he loved so well / He cannot from

his heart erase / All record of her infant days, / When widowed love was wont to trace / Her mother's likeness in her face. . ." (Canto IV, line 71).

Ellen makes a decision to return home and as she passes the church, she encounters an old pastor who reminds her of her father; her memories of her father become alive. She becomes the wanderer who is taken in as a substitute daughter of a mother who lost her child: "And young and helpless, as thou art, / As was my child, a mother's heart / Finds in thy fate, a sympathy / That wakens all its cares for thee" (Canto V, line 106). Bowles invokes the Prodigal Son theme here: as Ellen hears the Biblical story, she desires to return home as her father "may greet his child with pard'ning love as sweet" (line 87). Ellen is the only child whose father does not expect her to come and live; however, her social recognition shrinks as her mind expands. Ellen's only want is "To sink upon her father's breast, / By his mild accents lulled to rest; / To breathe her last repentant sigh, / To look upon his face and die!" (line 91) Thoughts of homecoming give Ellen strength to continue with her journey: "So near her home – so near the close / Of her long travel – that dear thought / Came, scarce with gleam of comfort fraught" (line 107). Memory preserves home as a constant for her "pure and happy" life (Canto V, line 108). However, she returns to find that no one is waiting for her, "like Ellen's fate, / All there was dark and desolate," with "no sound of life was near" (line 112). Ellen's self, her whole existence depends on her father; when he is gone, her identity disintegrates as well: "but life was fled, / And the poor wand'rer's weary head / Had found, at last, a resting place / Upon her father's grave; her face / Was turned to earth, as if to hide / The bitter pang with which she died" (line 116). Ellen never finds personal or social fulfillment; forced into marginality, she is left with no other option but death.

After her parents' death, Caroline Bowles wrote to Robert Southey for some publishing advice, which began their long correspondence and friendship. It resulted in an 1839 marriage two years after Southey became a widower. Southey, thirteen years older, was a friend, a mentor and very much a father-like figure for Caroline. He encouraged and supported her talent, which he recognized as superior to his own poetic gift: "the flow of verse is natural, and the language unconstrained – both as they should be."¹⁰

There has been some gossip about the Bowles–Southey marriage,¹¹ such as the decline she brought upon him (she nursed a senile and ill man), her marriage to Southey for his money (in fact, she lost her money and supported his family) and her tense relationship with Kate, Southey's daughter. Both women had a need

10. Dowden, ed., letter 8 (20th November 1819), p. 17.

11. Blain, *Caroline Bowles Southey*, pp. 200–219.

for love and protection by Southey and Bowles, who had no children of her own, might have had a hard time adjusting to a new ‘mother’ role.

The father-daughter theme is reopened in her autobiographical masterpiece *Birth-Day: A Poem, in Three Parts, to Which are Added Occasional Verses* (1836),¹² which she began writing in 1819 and continued for the next fifteen years. The poem has been called an unconscious “seduction poem for ‘father’ Southey”¹³ as he was one reader she tried to please and impress. For example, early in the poem Bowles gives a general view on the notion of father-daughter relationships:

And little Annie – what will Annie be?
 The fair-haired prattler! she, with matron airs,
 Who gravely lectures her rebellious doll –
 “Annie will be papa’s own darling child,
 Dear papa’s blessing.” Ah! she tells thee truth:
 The pretty mockbird with his borrowed notes,
 Tells thee sweet truth. Already, is she not
 Thy darling child? Thy blessing she will prove –
 The duteous prop of thy declining years. (387–95)

In the idyllic life she describes in the passage, little Annie will always be her father’s child, “remaining unmarried in an unbroken pre-Oedipal dyad with her complacent papa.”¹⁴ His sons will grow up and fly out of the nest but not his Annie. Despite marriage and children, Annie will remain a part of his life because “*she* will never change. That tender heart, / Though wedded love, and infant claimants dear, / May waken there new interests – new and sweet; / Thine in that loving heart will ne’er decrease. . .” (403–406). Even the barrier of marriage will not remove her from the close relationship with her father.

Bowles’s narrative then moves from a general to a more personal, individualized description of the father-daughter dynamic. Caroline Bowles recalls how happy she is to accompany her father on numerous fishing trips: “Soon came the days, / When *his* companion, his – his only one / My father’s – I became” (2018–2019). She invokes one fishing episode with her father as she reminisces on her childhood as “supremely happy” (2023–45). As her father is fishing on the bank

12. Caroline Bowles, *Birth-Day: A Poem, in Three Parts, to Which are Added Occasional Verses* (Edinburgh / London, 1836).

13. Virginia Blain, “‘Be these his daughters?’ Caroline Bowles Southey, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Disruption in a Patriarchal Poetics of Women’s Autobiography,” in *Tradition and Poetics of the Self in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry*, ed. Barbara Garlick (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 8.

14. Blain, “‘Be these his daughters?’,” p. 8.

of the river, his child preoccupies herself playing in a “Naiad’s grot”: “I found a cave, / A little secret cell, one large flat stone / Its ample floor, embedded deep in moss” (2076–2079). This scene reinforces the words of Jane Williams, who wrote on the mid nineteenth-century gender dynamic: “Men stand, as it were, upon a promontory, commanding extensive views, and open to immediate impulses from all above, below, and around them. Women sit like the genii of secluded caves, receiving echoes, and communicating mere reverberations from the outer world.”¹⁵ Later Caroline plays the role of a “wife,” lovingly and yet possessively getting lunch ready for her and her father: “The busy, bustling joy, with housewife airs / (Directress, handmaid, lady of the feast!) / To spread that ‘table of wilder-ness!’ ” (2095–2100). She is meticulous in setting and arranging the table and is sad when he leaves the table:

The rod securely fixed; then into mine
 The willing hand was yielded, and I led
 With joyous exultation that dear guest
 To our green banquet room. Not Leicester’s self,
 When to the hall of princely Kenilworth
 He led Elizabeth, exulted more
 With inward gratulation at the show
 Of his own proud magnificence, than I,
 When full in view of mine arranged feast,
 I held awhile my pleased companion back,
 Exacting wonder – admiration, praise
 With pointing finger, and triumphant “There!” (2144–2156)

Despite the fairytale imagery of grotts and caves, the little girl does not fashion herself as a princess, or a fairy. She takes on a role of a “masculine protector: Leicester escorting Queen Elizabeth (her father).”¹⁶ She is in control of the entire situation rather than her father.

The poem is set in the month of December (the month of her birthday) as the poet is alone, all her family members are dead and therefore “the jump from prized daughter to undervalued spinster” is a traumatic one.¹⁷ She does not regret the lack of a husband or children, but her parents, especially her father, are very much missed. Sexual desires are absent throughout the poem, as the mood remains pre-pubescent.¹⁸ When the poem was published in 1836, Caroline Bowles

15. Jane Williams, *The Literary Women of England* (Saunders, Otley, 1861), pp. 2–3.

16. Blain, “‘Be these his daughters?’,” p. 12.

17. Blain, “‘Be these his daughters?’,” p. 13.

18. Blain, “‘Be these his daughters?’,” p. 13.

was fifty years old and the poem symbolically opens with a celebration of mid-life. It is full of somber and desperate notes, as the present is bleak and dark. The happy times are associated with the childhood self when her parents were alive and she was “the golden child.” She reconstructs her identity as a woman through memory flashbacks of a much happier past, as memory links her past selves into one. As an artist, Caroline Bowles strives towards creative independence and her own poetic voice. Yet she has moments of frustration with her limits: education and the social expectations that nineteenth century woman had to face. By the end of the poem, the “narrative falters and breaks off, in the face of a lack of positive reinforcement from the Father.”¹⁹ Southey’s opinion was very important for Bowles and her address to God in a way is a final speech to her “poetic guide”:

Oh precious seed!
Sown early; soon, too soon the sower’s hand,
The immediate mortal instrument withdrawn,
Tares of this evil world sprang thickly up
Choking your promise. But the soil beneath
(Nor rock nor shifting sand) retained ye still,
God’s mercy willing it, until *his* hand,
Chastening as fathers chasten, cleared at last
The encumbered surface, and the grain sprang up. –
But hath it flourished? – hath it yet borne fruit
Acceptable? Oh Father! leave it not
For lack of moisture yet to fall away! (3034–3045)

In her search for poetic self-fulfillment Bowles touches upon the father-daughter interactions as well as on the maturation of a girl into a woman. Her voice shifts in scenes describing a pagan garden altar and its destruction, her rejection by her Mother during the chicken pox and a few others. In a clock scene she touches upon the issue of marriage, which she later dismisses in favor of freedom and artistic independence: “When I’m a woman / I’ll have’, quoth I, / – so far the *will* and *when* / Tallied exactly, but our difference lay / Touching the end to be achieved. With me, / *Not* settlements, and pin-money, and spouse / Appendant, but in unencumbered right / Of womanhood – a house and cuckoo clock!” (2867–2886).

Bowles misses her family and the fact that she owns a house is because her family is gone: “Years past, the pledge (self-plighted) was redeemed; / There hangs with its companionable voice / The cuckoo clock in this mine house. – /

19. Blain, “‘Be these his daughters?’,” p. 15

Ay, *mine*; / But left unto me desolate” (2890–2894). Bowles’s writing in this passage is “conceived as a household task”²⁰ rather than a poetic task. Her concept of self (recalled from the past) is one of a child rather than an adult writing, which reinforces the issue of women who are never allowed to grow up. Bowles desires independence, the space of her own to create and be fulfilled. She is on the quest for the poetic voice as writing can free her female self from societal constraints.

It is significant that the Mother presence is vague in the poem yet the Father image is quite circumspect. Her Nurse and her father who are substitute ‘maternal’ figures for her raise her. Bowles had a mother, however, the poem stresses the emotional ties with her father. The mother in the poem is very much of a stranger; when young Caroline is sick with smallpox, the only woman who cares for her like a mother is her Nurse. The poem does not clarify that Caroline’s mother is the one who pushes her away yet there is a strong sense that she is more concerned for herself than for her own daughter. A number of feminist critics, Angela Leighton and Dolores Rosenblum²¹ in particular, have noted that the poem is a search for the mother, while the father’s role is strongly emphasized; the word ‘father’ is mentioned twenty four times in the course of the poem and often is very emotional.

The autobiographic aspect of *Birth-Day* as well as other works by Caroline Bowles investigates the father-daughter dynamic. Similarly to her many contemporaries, Bowles interrogates the ambivalence of self: the private and the public persona, which has to come to terms with the demands and pressures of the patriarchal society. Both poems can be seen as the cautionary tales of nineteenth century women who in order to achieve self-fulfillment should free themselves from the power of the father: “it may be historically necessary to be momentary blind to father-love; it may be politically effective to defend – tightly, without lucidly – against its inducements, in order for a ‘relation between sexes,’ in order to rediscover some feminine desire, some desire for a masculine body that does not respect the Father’s law.”²² In order to articulate herself, a woman should leave the father’s presence behind, and move away from worshipping him: “by dephallicizing the father and avoid[ing] the pitfall of familial thinking in order to have greater effect upon the much more complex and powerful societal relations which structure our world.”²³ Caroline Bowles’s poetry is an attempt to interrogate the father-daughter relationship and to strive towards both personal and

20. Blain, “‘Be these his daughters?’,” p. 17

21. Blain disagrees with Angela Leighton and Dolores Rosenblum, who see the poem as the search for the mother figure. Cf. “‘Be these his daughters?’,” p. 20.

22. Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, p. xv.

23. Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, p. 79.

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poetic independence from the expectations of the patriarchal society. In her works, she follows the female poetic tradition, defining female subjectivity and then enriching the Romantic literary canon on her own terms. Her poetry should be read as a literary and cultural phenomenon, breaking the silence and the absorption into the male ego so many Romantic women writers endured and experienced.