'Words more than civil’: Republican Civility in Lucy Hutchinson’s ‘The Life of John Hutchinson’

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‘Civility’ is probably not the first word that springs to mind in discussing the zealously Puritan writings of Lucy Hutchinson (1620–81). Contrary to contemporary and later ideas of the ladylike writer, she commanded a remarkably large vocabulary of vituperation and deployed it throughout her substantial canon of writings. The wars she chronicled were ‘more than civil’ in wider senses than Lucan’s (*Pharsalia*, book 1, line 1). And yet civility greatly concerned her. In the normative sense of an ideal of moral or public intercourse, ‘civil’ and cognate words occur more than fifty times in her life of her husband and twelve times in an earlier version. And her apocalyptic zeal did not impede a very strong concern to vindicate the civil sphere against the religious. Her concern for civility proves to throw a broader light on the nature of English republican discourse, as well as illuminating the tight thematic and conceptual unity of a text that has been more often quarried as a historical source than carefully read as a whole.¹

In tracing the emergence of civility as an ideal of manners and conduct, there has been a tendency, following the lead of Norbert Elias, to adopt a top-down model, with the court setting the agenda that the rest of the country followed. Early modern England, it has often been argued, lacked the strong civic culture that had developed in Italy, and aristocratic and courtly norms of conduct were very strong.² However, Markku Peltonen and others have been challenging that view, showing that England did generate an urban culture in which civility emerged not as a downward transfer of aristocratic norms but as a codification of the social, linguistic and political practices of an urban collectivity, with the civic and the civil being co-extensive.³ Jonathan Barry has located a tradition of specifically urban civility, a civility of urban freemen. And he takes as his text a comment by Henry Ireton at the Putney Debates, where he presents freeholders and the freemen of corporations as ‘the permanent interest of the kingdom’ in the ancient constitution; they were able to live without dependence.⁴ Henry Ireton was a neighbour and close friend of the Hutchinsons,
and his is the first name to be mentioned in her first narrative of her husband’s life; later she wrote that he ‘had receiv’d so much advantage to himselfe and his famely in the country by Sir Thomas Hutchinsons countenance that he seem’d a kind of dependant on them’. The great theorist of independency thus becomes a dependent of the Hutchinsons; but at least they are independent people.

At the start of the biography of her husband which she composed after his death in prison, Lucy Hutchinson presents his republican ideals as originating in long family traditions of resisting courtly advancement and remaining close to the local grass roots: ‘as if there had bene an Agrarian law in the famely, assoone as any of them arrived to any considerable fortune beyond his who was first transplanted hither, they began other houses’. In a middling position, upon an ‘even … ground’ yet ‘elevated enough from the vulgar’, the family maintained a ‘plaine and honest conversation with all men’ (p. 15). From this background came John Hutchinson, a man who ‘hated cerimonious complemt, but yett ha[d] such a naturall civillitie and complaisance to all people as made his converse very delightfull’ (p. 4). His civility manifested itself again and again in his readiness to put the public interest against private interests. Lucy Hutchinson caught this note of republican simplicity, a life in which military rank was only a regrettably necessary moment, in her original title for the manuscript, ‘The Life of John Hutchinson of Owthorpe in the County of Nottingham Esquire’ (Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson was bestowed by her nineteenth-century editor).

Against this ideal of a plain and honest republican communication, Hutchinson presents a Harringtonian analysis of a nobility and upper gentry who have become first corrupted and then undermined by becoming dependent on the private interests of the monarchy. Their corrupt communication thus becomes the true barbarism, separating language off from the public interest into the jargons of ecclesiastical and political interests. Hutchinson often accuses the royalists of barbaric practices (pp. 60, 232, 251, 260, 261, 276); and the charge links up with her political analysis. At the start of the war ‘the ordinary civill sort of people ... adher’d to the better, but all the debo什t, and such as had liv’d upon the Bishops’ bawdy persecuting Courts, and bene the lacqueys of projectors and Monopolizers and the like, they were all bitterly malignant’ (p. 70). With heavy irony she writes that her husband’s royalist jailor gave him ‘the base termes of Rebell and murtherer, and such language as none could have learn’d but such as had bene conversant among the civill society of Pickt-Hatch, Turnbull-Streete, and Billings-gate, neere which last place the Heroe had his education’ (p. 260).

This emphasis on the royalists’ incivility can be found in the defence of her husband’s activities as Governor of Nottingham which was compiled around 1645. This narrative is sometimes described as an early draft for the