

Re-crafting the heroic, constructing a female hero: Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn¹

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ABSTRACT

The development of women's writing in English throughout the seventeenth century is quite extraordinary. In the field of drama, women participated not only as spectators or readers, but more and more as patronesses, as playwrights, and later on as actresses and even as managers. Yet some dramatic forms proved more resilient than others to women's coming to voice. Comedies were more flexible, as their conventions allowed for female characters – heroines – as mates and nearly equals to the young male hero. But tragedies required high-born, authoritative and powerful characters, and such defining traits seemed to be the prerogative of the male. The question, then, for these women playwrights, was to what extent one could bend dramatic conventions to accommodate women's heroic behaviour. How can one construct a female hero and yet not masculinize her in the attempt? Is it possible to rethink the traits of the heroic to include, rather than exclude, women? This paper engages with the ensuing problems and conflicts by looking into the work of two women dramatists of the period: Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn.

KEYWORDS: women playwrights, dramatic genres, heroic characters, Margaret Cavendish, Aphra Behn

In her celebrated essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf observed the discrepancy between the material lives that women of former times had led and the female role models that dramatists had put forth in their works:

One might [...] say that women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time – Clytemnestra, Antigone, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Phèdre, Cressida, Rosalind,

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Desdemona, the Duchess of Malfi, among the dramatists [...] the names flock to mind, nor do they recall women 'lacking in personality and character.' Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is a woman of fiction. In fact, as Professor Trevelyan points out, she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room. (Woolf 1929: 39-40)

The question then arises, as early modern women came to voice, as to how women authors may have attempted to bridge this gap between the 'woman of fiction' and the real lives they led themselves or were otherwise acquainted with. Previous criticism on Renaissance women's writing seems to have largely bypassed this issue, and instead has mostly addressed the subject of the difficulties involved in entering the public arena and challenging cultural proscriptions of women's writing and speech.² As Margaret Ferguson (1996: 145) pointed out,

In some discursive contexts, particularly those that participate in the lively Renaissance debates about 'proper' modes of masculine and feminine behaviour [...] the idea of the 'woman writer' is a veritable paradox or oxymoron, one eliciting attitudes of outrage and / or scorn. If women were prescriptively defined as 'chaste, silent and obedient,' according to a well-known ideal in Renaissance conduct books, and if both writing and printing are defined, for any number of reasons, as 'masculine' activities and also in opposition to 'silence', then the phrase 'woman writer' will be seen as a contradiction in terms.

The purpose of this essay is to find out how seventeenth-century female dramatists broached the dramatic conventions they inherited and put them to work for their own purposes. One can start with the premise that this task was more easily achievable in the case of comedy, for this was a genre that allowed for female characters – heroines – as mates and nearly equals to the young male hero. But tragedies required high-born, authoritative and powerful characters, and such defining traits seemed to be the prerogative of

² Representative of this approach are book-length works such as Beilin (1987), Pearson (1988), Williamson (1990), Lewalski (1993) and Wall (1993). Later feminist criticism appears to be shifting its interest towards the stageability of women's plays, like Findlay et al. (2000).

the male.³ According to Elaine Beilin (1987: 152), “towards the end of the sixteenth and in the early seventeenth century, a small but important group of women writers appear to find the heroic woman an increasingly significant focus of their interrelated attempts to redeem Eve and to establish their own literary presence.” The question, then, for these women playwrights, was to what extent one could bend the dramatic conventions to accommodate women’s heroic behaviour. This entailed the related problem of constructing a ‘female hero’ to replace a ‘heroine’ and yet not masculinizing her in the attempt, and whether it was possible to rethink the traits of the heroic to include, rather than exclude, women. Such troublesome issues were first faced by Elizabeth Cary, Lady Falkland, who has the honour of being the earliest known woman author of an original play.

Published in 1613 but surely composed a few years earlier, *The Tragedy of Mariam* tackles the relationship between the Queen of the Jews, Mariam, and her husband Herod, who has risen to this position solely through his marriage. Such biblical subject matter is hardly to be wondered at, both considering Lady Falkland’s religious inclination and because, as Wendy Wall (1993: 310) reminds us, “women were generally given more cultural license [...] to study religious works [...] Because of their guilty lineage from Eve, women were frequently exhorted to meditate, pray, and study the Bible.” In its form, however, the play is clearly indebted to Senecan tragedy as developed in France and circulated in the Sidney coterie, to which Cary belonged. Barbara Lewalski (1993: 191) has traced the features that Cary adapted from Senecan drama: “the primacy of speech over action; long rhetorical monologues; the prominence of women as heroines and villains; and a chorus which speaks from a limited rather than an authorized vantage point.” But in the last twenty years many feminist critics have discussed Cary’s play from a variety of perspectives, although many have been inspired by Catherine Belsey’s original comments in *The Subject of Tragedy*.⁴

Although it was certainly puzzling to a playwright such as Cary, living in the stability of the Jacobean period, the subject of the

³ Mary Beth Rose (1988: 95), among others, has remarked that English Renaissance tragedy focuses on “a heroism of public action, emphasizing the protagonist’s will to power” and thus generally excluding women to the periphery of the plot. In Jacobean tragedy there is a shift towards the domestic that makes women more visible.

⁴ See, among others, Belsey (1985), Beilin (1987), Raber (1995), Luis Martínez (1996), Miller (1997), Bennett (2000a), Green (2003), Gruber (2003) and Heller (2005).

heroic and its redefinition must have become even more pressing as the Caroline period ushered in increasingly unsolvable conflicts between the monarchy and the English Parliament; the aristocracy and the rising middle classes; the Anglican establishment sympathetic to Catholics and radicalized Protestant groups. Therefore, this paper addresses the gendered construction of the hero in the works of two female playwrights of the second half of the seventeenth century: Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn. For reasons of space, only two plays will be discussed here, Cavendish's *Bell in Campo* (1662) and Aphra Behn's posthumous *The Widdow Ranter* (1689). Although the former was written during the Interregnum and the latter at the end of the Restoration period, both are viable case studies due to their clearly heroic topic, conveying two different approaches to the creation of a female hero that concurrently address the interrelated categories of gender and genre.

1. Amazons and Cavaliers: Margaret Cavendish's *Bell in Campo*

Margaret Cavendish, née Lucas, was an extraordinary young woman that followed the royal family into exile in Paris, where she met and married in 1645 the widowed William Cavendish, later Duke of Newcastle. The couple settled in Antwerp, and there during the 1650s Margaret composed several plays that would be published in London on their eventual return in 1662 in the first of two collections of dramatic works, *Plays Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, the Marchioness of Newcastle*. Among them, I would like to briefly consider *Bell in Campo*, a play that explores warrior heroism as a viable form for women. Technically speaking, *Bell in Campo* is not a tragedy, nor is it identified as such in its original printing. Like other pieces by this author, the play defies conventional categories. Recent editors and critics have variously labelled it a heroic romance (Shaver 1999: 7), a dramatic utopia (Bonin 2000), and a tragicomedy (Raber 2000). More often than not they wholly bypass the question of genre (Bennett 2002), in implicit acceptance of the playwright's eccentricity. Writing some fifty years after her predecessor Elizabeth Cary, and like many other women of her generation, Cavendish was empowered by the turmoil of the English Civil War. Women of all paths of life were thrown into the most unlikely situations and had to perform roles other than those institutionally approved. Royalist women in particular were occasionally forced to defend their households and properties in the

absence of their husbands.⁵ Alexandra Bennett reminds us that “Cavendish’s own stepdaughters Jane and Elizabeth also attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to hold the family properties of Bolsover Castle and Welbeck Abbey against the Roundheads” and she further remarks that “the actions of real female warriors amid the male armies during the English Civil War could provide plentiful raw material for a dramatist’s pen” (2000: 267-268).

Tomlinson (1992: 148) has pointed out that there was already in place an iconography that Cavendish could and did draw from. It started in France in the 1640s around the figure of Anne of Austria, Queen Regent from 1643 to 1652, and of women like her niece Anne Marie d’Orléans, the ‘Grand Mademoiselle’, who participated in the French civil wars known as ‘la Fronde.’ Their counterpart in England was Queen Henrietta Maria:

Decorous figures of female valour began to appear in Caroline masques and drama from the mid-1630s and with the onset of civil war Henrietta Maria embraced the chance to act out her role as a ‘martial lady’. In her letters to Charles she draws amused attention to this role, dubbing herself ‘her she-majesty, generalissima.’ (1992: 148)⁶

Besides the actual events of the Civil Wars in France and England, the most obvious inspiration for Cavendish’s warrior women is the classical myth of the Amazons, which had been kept alive in other literary works of the period and would survive in the Restoration work of poets like Anne Killigrew. Cavendish must have felt the appeal of an all-women army as a separate society in which women would be allowed to pursue their skills and talents truly uninhibited, a subject that recurs in her works, just as it would occupy the thoughts of later feminist thinkers like Mary Astell. In the play, the Kingdom of Faction and the Kingdom of Reformation are at war. Lady Victoria convinces her husband the Lord General of the Kingdom of Reformation to allow her to accompany him to the front,

⁵ Raber (2000) offers some particular instances of such women warriors and discusses the subject at some length; see also Bennett (2000b) for a detailed analysis of the parallelisms between fact and fiction.

⁶ See Chalmers (2004: 40-55) for a critique of Tomlinson’s views. Even though the latter author has written about *Bell in Campo* once more in *Women on Stage in Stuart Drama* (2005) and I have included this reference in the Reference section, I am quoting here from Tomlinson’s earlier work, since in my opinion, her arguments have not varied substantially to date.

and many other wives follow her example. But once there the women are sent to live in a garrison town and thus kept out of the way and far from danger, a situation which they come to resent. Under Lady Victoria's leadership, several thousand women agree to take over the garrison town and arm themselves in order to help the male war efforts against the Kingdom of Faction, which are not going as well as could be expected. As they are training, the news arrives of a battle with grave casualties on their side, and the army of 'heroickesses', as Lady Victoria terms them, advances towards the enemy and wins the day. Even though the men are grateful for this providential help, they refuse to let the Female Army into their plans, and so they continue to fight on their own, successfully completing the siege of a town that proves to be the key to the final victory of the Kingdom of Reformation. The king acknowledges the women's prominent participation by granting special favours on all women in general, and on Lady Victoria most of all.

Tomlinson finds this happy ending wanting insofar as the privileges and rights granted by the king fail to perform a complete revision of the prevailing gender system, and consist only of minor changes in the domestic rather than the public domain; but I agree with Chalmers (2004: 45) that the play achieves its purposes in valorizing female heroism, and I would add, not only for an isolated individual but for women as a group. Lady Victoria's initial impulse to raise an army springs from men's patronizing behaviour, as she argues in her address to the women:

LADY VICTORIA

Then thus, we have a body of about five or six thousand women, which came along with some thirty thousand men, but since we came, we are not only thought unusefull, but troublesome, which is the reason we were sent away, for the Masculine Sex is of an opinion that we are only fit to breed and bring forth Children, but otherwise a trouble in a Commonwealth, for though we encrease the Commonwealth by our breed, we encumber it by our weakness, as they think, as by our incapacities, as having no ingenuity for Inventions, nor subtile wit for Politicians; nor prudence for direction, nor industry for execution; nor patience for opportunity, nor judgment for Counsellors, nor secrecy for trust; nor method to keep peace, nor courage to make War, nor strength to defend our selves or Country, or to assault an Enemy; also that we have not the wisdom to govern

a Commonwealth, and that we are too partial to sit in the Seat of Justice, and too pittifull to execute rigorous Authority when it is needful. (1999: 119)

Therefore, Lady Victoria's agenda is no other than to prove men wrong, and to show them that women are indeed multifaceted beings deserving full citizenship. At the end of the play, the king's proclamation together with the men's admiring comments highlight this extraordinary achievement, no matter what relative terms it is couched in.

In order to bring this project to a successful end, Lady Victoria displays all the talents of a true born hero. She shows courage and initiative, she is resourceful and determined, and she fights against the odds. Moreover, the Female Army's success in the battlefield is not presented as sheer luck or a one-off, but as the commonsensical result of a careful, well-contrived plan, both in training the troops and in designing the war strategy. One whole scene of the play is given to a rather tedious explication of the rules given by Lady Victoria for the organization and training of the Female Army, in order to bring home the message of the lady's accomplishments and thus to prepare the readers for the later news of her victories.

Yet Sue Wiseman, who has paid attention to the dynamics of gender and class in Margaret Cavendish, has faulted this kind of female heroism. She contends that it is based on a discourse of class privilege that contradicts the text's claims to gender equality: "The right to power, for women in Cavendish's writing, is a privilege attendant upon birth and status; her plays dramatize the differences between noble women warfarers and other women, especially citizen women" (1992: 175). This is true only in part. Although one should acknowledge the many fractures in the discourses of gender and class in Cavendish's works as a whole, this play is remarkably consistent in the construction of a hero that works towards the common good of all women, regardless of their social rank. Obviously Cavendish's Royalist partisanship prevents her from envisioning a woman that can be a leader *and* a commoner, and it is her understanding that true merit is much more likely to be found among the high-born. But such nobility of mind and character is precisely what allows Lady Victoria to look beyond her own self-interest. This fact becomes more evident if one considers the play's subplot. There Cavendish provides two other women characters that, though living through similar circumstances, markedly contrast

with Lady Victoria. Both Madam Passionate and Madam Jantil accept their respective husbands' departure for the front, and both are devastated when they are killed in battle. However, old Madam Passionate's grief does not last long, and she is soon married again, this time to a young, handsome but penniless gentleman, who swiftly takes control of her assets and her household, leaving her quite literally out in the cold:

MADAM PASSIONATE

[F]or this idle young fellow which I have married first seized on all my goods [...] and now he [...] sells all my Lands of Inheritance, which I foolishly and fondly delivered by deed of gift, the first day I married, divesting myself of all power, which power had I kept in my own hands I might have been used better, whereas now when he comes home drunk, he swears and storms, and kicks me out of my warm Bed, and makes me sit shivering and shaking in the Cold, whilst my Maid takes my place; but I find I cannot live long, for age and disorders bring weakness and sickness, and weakness and sickness bring Death, wherefore my marriage Bed is like to prove my grave, whilst my Husband's Curses are my passing Bell, hay ho. (1999: 162)

Madam Passionate's behaviour stands as a cautionary tale for women of all social rank, rich or otherwise. Again, Cavendish emphasizes this point by making Madam Passionate's maid, Doll Pacify, follow her mistress' lead, and like her mistress, be duped by her young Master, who robs her of all. Madam Passionate rejected the chance to enter the public domain and preferred to stay home. But 'home' in this play is not necessarily a safe haven for women, and this subplot stresses the need for women's wise management and power-taking in order to survive.

Madam Jantil's story differs completely. She is unable to overcome the grief over her husband's passing away, and so determines to devote the rest of her life to his memory. She uses her wealth to build a monumental shrine, where she retires from the outside world and leads an austere life of prayers and philosophical contemplation. On her untimely death she wills most of her money to ensure the survival of her husband's memory, while her own is most likely to be erased from public record. Only her maid Nell Careless will fondly remember her mistress, for she has received a pension on condition that she remains single:

NELL CARELESS

Truly I have seen so much sorrow in my Lady, and so much folly in your Lady [Madam Passionate] concerning Husbands, that had not my Lady injoyed me to live a single life, I would never have married; wherefore my Ladies generosity did not only provide for my bodily life, and for my plentiful living, but provided for the tranquillity of my mind, for which I am trebly obliged to reverence her memory. (1999: 169)

Even though Madam Jantil's plight is full of pathos, and evidently very far from the ridiculous story of Madam Passionate, her example is ultimately every bit as unprofitable and barren for women as a group. In Nell's speech, they stand for sorrow and folly. Beyond their differences, these women are similar in that they are victims, passive creatures instead of agents, and in retreating from the public sphere, their path seems to lead only to death. The last scene of the play further contrasts their deaths with Lady Victoria's happiness and triumph, both in the public and in the domestic fronts, with the Lord General's pride in his wife's heroism.

At this point it might be useful to stop and ponder whether Lady Victoria is indeed a "female hero," and to what extent she has become 'masculinized' in her search for heroism. In taking up arms, Lady Victoria would seem to have become a virago, an unnatural woman, an honorary man. However, Cavendish did not aim at reversing the spheres, i.e., she never actually suggests that men should stay at home and women abroad. Instead, she appears to be proposing a theory of mutuality, or collaboration between the sexes beyond strict gender roles, that can be profitable for the nation as a whole. Lady Victoria does not encourage gender antagonism in any of her military addresses to the Female Army. Her actions are rather reactions to the unfolding events. She lets the Male Army go into battle first while she observes from a distance, ordering her own Army in only when the defeat of their side becomes evident. She offers the Male Army the opportunity to work together in the design of the military strategy to follow, but is rejected. Only when the men's continued gender prejudice endangers the royalist enterprise does she act on her own, and only in order to prove that women can also play their part in the protection of their world.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Lady Victoria affords only a provisional role model for women's heroism, one that may work out in times of war, but not in times of peace. At the end of the day,

Cavendish must return women home, which is what causes the disappointment of many feminist critics. But, as Alexandra Bennett has the commonsense to ask: “does Cavendish have a choice but to return to extant discourses in showing Lady Victoria’s social recognition and triumph?” (2000b: 273).

2. Female heroes in breeches: Aphra Behn’s *The Widdow Ranter* (1689)

Aphra Behn might have had this kind of questions in mind throughout her long and fairly successful professional career, which the next generations of women authors would try to emulate. It has been a matter of some perplexity for her critics and editors that in a theatrical career spanning two decades, Aphra Behn should write only one tragedy, *Abdelazer* (1676), the rest being all comedies and tragicomedies. *Abdelazer*, set in medieval Spain, rehearses much of the dichotomy passive heroine/active villain concerning women’s characterization that one can find in plays like Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* at the start of the century. Queen Isabella’s transgressive behaviour casts her in the role of the villain, while the young Lady Florella and Princess Leonora are passive heroines to the point of death or near rape. This pattern regularly recurs in the tragedies written by women in the late Stuart period, but it is one that Aphra Behn seems to have found singularly unsatisfactory.⁷ Rachel Carnell (1999) has convincingly argued that the key lies in the conflict between Behn’s royalist and feminist politics. Restoration tragedy as practiced, for example, by John Dryden, conflated both discourses, so that a loyalist message of male obedience to the crown would entail female domestic submissiveness. Carnell further contends that Behn continued to pursue the tragic mode in a new genre, the novel, which provided more latitude to the woman writer than dramatic tragedy. In spite of such turn to fiction, Behn continued to write for the stage; but she never tried her hand at a tragedy again, preferring to remain within the more flexible rules of comedy. Behn wrote tragicomedies too in her earlier years as a playwright. According to Janet Todd and Derek Hughes, the reason for this preference was that “this was the prevailing mode in the 1660s, when she must for the first time have watched plays on the public English stage” (2004: 83). The reason for such fashion was given by Nancy Klein Maguire in her classic *Regicide and Restoration*,

⁷ For more on this subject, see Cuder-Domínguez (2003, 2005).

where she pointed out that “the very nature of tragicomedy (that is, in simple terms, drama which turns tragedy into comedy) made the genre suitable for marketing a restored king with a decapitated father” (1992: 13). However, Behn turned once more to tragicomedy in her last play, *The Widdow Ranter*, perhaps because such a mixed genre gave a more mature author the scope to balance tragic and comic messages. Of Behn’s tragicomedies, I would like to examine this one, because it may allow us an insight into Behn’s ideas on women’s heroism towards the end of her career.

The Widdow Ranter, or the History of Bacon in Virginia (1689) was performed posthumously, and must have been composed roughly around the same time Behn was penning her most famous novel, *Oroonoko* (1688), closely related to her youth experiences in Surinam. Both works are related in both the setting – the English colonies in the New World – and in subject matter, for both feature male tragic heroes, Bacon and Oroonoko. The historical source of the tragic plot in *The Widdow Ranter* is the 1676 rebellion of Nathaniel Bacon in Virginia, which offered Behn the raw materials of the good man who fights for good reasons but ultimately does wrong. Bacon had armed himself in order to protect his possessions from the attacks of the natives, but in doing so he usurped royal authority and brought on more chaos and disorder.⁸ Apparently, Bacon abducted the wives of the Virginian aristocrats in his struggle against the Governor, and he was so successful that he even took possession of Jamestown, but on his sudden death the rebellion ended. The confusing situation in Virginia, with three parties at war, Bacon’s rebels, the Virginia loyalists, and the Indians, was conducive to Behn’s usual interrogation of royalist and sexual politics. Of these two, I am more interested here in the latter, and specifically in her creation of tragic and comic female characters in their respective plots.

In the tragic plot, the Indian Queen Semernia suffers in silence her love for her enemy Nathaniel Bacon, whom she first saw at the tender age of twelve, before being forced to marry the Indian King Cavernio, in what is perhaps an echo of the Pocahontas myth (Hutner 2001: 99). The play is sympathetic to the Indians’ side of the colonial venture, letting the Indian King voice his complaints over

⁸ For more information on Behn’s use of historical sources see Ward (1976), Figueroa (1999), Hutner (2001), Velissariou (2002) and Pulsipher (2004), among others. The focus of their essays is Bacon’s rebellion, and the women characters are mentioned only in Hutner’s analysis.

the English occupation of their land, arguing that “we were Monarchs once of all this spacious World, till you, an unknown People, landing here, distress’d and ruin’d by destructive Storms, abusing all our charitable Hospitality, usurp’d our Right, and made your Friends your Slaves” (1996: 230), and even accepting through an English colonist, Friendly, the responsibility of the English in mismanaging the situation (1996: 214). However, the colonists also defend their ancestral right to the land, as Bacon replies to the Indian King: “I will not justify the Ingratitude of my Forefathers, but finding here my Inheritance, I am resolv’d still to maintain it so” (1996: 230). The elements of tragedy are here served, in the irreconcilable conflict between both men over the land, but also over the Indian Queen’s body and heart, for she symbolically stands for the colony. Their jealous rivalry is played out in open combat during the battle, with Bacon killing the King and capturing the Queen, who had stayed behind, praying in the Temple and full of strange foreboding. But some Indians manage to infiltrate Bacon’s camp and rescue the Queen, whom they dress in men’s clothes and take away. Bacon pursues them and falls on them in a murderous rage, accidentally dealing the blow that kills the (to him unrecognizable) Queen. While Bacon grieves over the body of the dying Queen, the Royalists attack and, fearing he has been defeated and is most likely to suffer a traitor’s death, Bacon prefers to commit suicide.

In the figure of the Indian Queen, then, we find the staple elements of the tragic heroine, who welcomes death because it rescues her from the conflicting emotion of love towards her enemy and because it safeguards her honour. Her female body stands as a trophy to be fought over by men of both races, like the land. The racial script that stipulates that the English must take over the land is superimposed on the gender script. Interestingly, however, class supersedes race in the same way as race supersedes gender when all these categories come into play. As Rubik has observed: “the Indian royal couple have completely internalized the European code of civility” (2000: 36). Like Dryden’s, Behn’s representation of the higher classes remains constant regardless of the race of the subject.

In the passive configuration of the tragic heroine, cross-dressing as a male is for Semernia just one more ill-starred accident, which instead of providing her with agency and autonomy, hastens the way to her tragic death. The “moral paralysis” of this character has received a different reading from Ross:

Semernia's moral paralysis when forced to choose between "the King" and "The General" is, on the one hand, an obvious nod at the choice England faced when Cromwell usurped the power of Charles I. At the same time, she embodies the post-revolutionary subject, the being caught between the two camps of the old "fictions of authority" but is herself a "foreigner" within the old system. On the outskirts of the *status quo*, she is both a part of it and excluded from it, essentially incapable of acting within it. (2000: 85)

Whether or not one wants to follow this close parallelism with the affairs of the Interregnum, what matters for our purposes here is that Behn balances this exemplar of female passivity with an alternative role model in the comic plot. The title of the play refers to Ranter, who came to the colonies as a servant, married her older master, and after his death wants to marry again a man of her own choice. He happens to be one of Bacon's brave commanders, Dareing, but unfortunately for Ranter he is passionately in love with a more conventional heroine, a young maid. Ranter is indeed rather unconventional, for like the male colonials she loves to smoke, and also drinks and swears, an indication of her lower social extraction. For other characters, Ranter may appear "primitive," a description that according to Ross (2000: 86) establishes a connection between her and Semernia, if one more connection were indeed necessary at this point. Such vulgar, 'masculine' behaviour is quite unsuitable for a rich young widow, but she takes it one step further when, in the middle of the confusion, she dons man's clothes and joins the campaign. In that sense, as Ross perceptively comments, "[w]hile Semernia remains trapped within the standard love versus honor debate of Restoration tragedy, Ranter settles issues of love with action" (2000: 86). Dareing is convinced by the widow's actions to give up the young maid and to accept this partner, someone who will "fit his humour" better and who comes with a sizeable fortune too.

DAREING

Give me thy hand Widow, I am thine – and so intirely, I will never –
be drunk out of thy Company: – [Parson] Dunce is in my Tent, –
prithee let's in and bind the bargain.

RANTER

Nay, faith, let's see the Wars at an end first.

DAREING

Nay, prithee, take me in the humour, while thy Breeches are on – for I never lik'd thee half so well in Petticoats.

RANTER

Lead on, General, you give me good encouragement to wear them.
(1996: 340)

Soon, however, the enemy's attack separates the lovers, and Ranter is taken prisoner. When she is eventually reunited with Dareing, she complains:

RANTER

Faith, General, you left me but scurvily in Battel.

DAREING

That was to see how well you cou'd shift for your self; now I find you can bear the brunt of a Campaign you are a fit Wife for a Soldier.
(1996: 350)

In the comic plot, as seen here, Ranter is endowed with masculine qualities that may not be apparent at first sight. In breaking away from the ideal of modesty (swearing, drinking, smoking), Ranter would seem to be too masculine, and therefore unmarriageable. What is more, she dares enter the public sphere in donning men's clothes and joining the campaign. Beyond the erotic appeal that cross-dressing had on the Restoration stage, here it also suggests that Ranter has qualities beyond those considered 'natural' or desirable for her gender. Like Lady Victoria in Cavendish's play, she is resourceful and determined, and she does not respect pre-established borders. She is as daring as the man she loves, and the turmoil of war empowers her. Thus Behn hints that certain features cannot be statically assigned to one gender, and that they can be and should be renegotiated in each particular instance. According to Bridges, this is a significant departure:

Her identity, far from being fixed and written as Bacon's is, is dynamic and growing [...] [S]he refuses to be constrained by what others believe her, or women in general, to be. Ranter takes as her model neither Restoration London nor an ancient past. Rather she prefers to write herself into the moment and the future. (2000: 79)

By showing a brave woman that is not afraid to decide her own destiny, Behn states that such a course of action is not only

possible, but desirable. Behn's deployment of the New World as a setting is probably relevant as well, since she envisions a place where white women of the middle class can experience gender empowerment as well as upward social mobility.⁹ Yet, the comic tone of this plot undermines the feminist message. Although her transgressive actions are acceptable, Ranter is a one-off, an eccentric, the exception to the rule, as Hutner has perceptively remarked:

With Ranter, Behn brings together servant women [...] religious dissenters, and upper-class women. In effect, through the linking of disparate socioeconomic, political, racial, and gendered identities in Ranter's body, Behn attempts to resolve, or at least unify, the intense social and political oppositions at war in the late seventeenth century in England and Virginia. It is not surprising, however, that Ranter can only be figured as a joke, or a mockery. [...] Ranter's hybridity, her blurring of distinctions, calls attention to the crisis of categories – for she is a blatant dramatic invention in an historically 'real' context. (2001: 105)¹⁰

3. Conclusions

In 1989, Dymrna Callaghan's masterful essay *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* warned feminist critics that there was no need to search for female heroes in the genre. She encouraged us to look instead for the idea of transgression, which often decentres the male hero of tragedy. Callaghan's work valorized the role of the often absent, mute, or dead women characters. In the same year, Ania Loomba argued against over-simplified readings of tragedy, and contended that:

To read these plays either as straightforward documents of women's liberation or elaborate patriarchal devices for containment is to erase the conflicts and complexities of the Renaissance politics, discourses on women, the position of the popular theatre and that of playwrights. (1989: 95)

Yet, both critics confined their analysis to the study of a male-authored corpus, consisting of Shakespeare, Middleton, and Webster. One may only wonder whether their conclusions would

⁹ Needless to say, such is not the case for Native women, as Semernia's death illustrates.

¹⁰ On this subject, see also Bridges (2000) and Cuder-Domínguez (2002).

differ, had they included women-authored texts, and how our current views of early modern English tragedy might be complicated, if we put together male- and female-authored plays. I have tried here to broach this topic from the perspective of women playwrights as they newly arrived at this received genre and faced their rules. Cavendish and Behn attempted to re-craft tragedy and to explore new generic forms that could adequately convey the heroic *topos*. Their case-studies have afforded us an insight into alternative configurations of female heroism. Cavendish's hero leads the life of a royalist warrior while Behn for the first time envisioned a low-class would-be female hero, the bourgeois woman of the next century. Neither completely succeeded. There is indeed, as Callaghan pointed out, no female hero, perhaps because the genre, as Behn seems to have intuited, was impervious to women's heroism. The clash of ideological positions remained unbridgeable and unnegotiated. No female behaviour can be truly heroic for a society that believes that all women are interchangeable, all sinners by their flawed nature, Eve's daughters after all. At best, these women authors succeeded in suggesting ways in which the official paradigm of femininity fell into incoherence, and in destabilizing essentialized notions of the masculine heroic. Tragedy would remain contested ground for women writers of the late Stuart period, even while they, like Behn, would continue to break new ground and to formulate new paradigms of femininity in other literary genres.

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