

SHAKESPEARE REINVENTED: TATE'S FEMININE CHARACTERS¹

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... And I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I'th' posture of a whore.
SHAKESPEARE, *Antony and Cleopatra*

The Woman plays today, mistake me not,
No Man in gown, or Page in Petty-Coat.
SHAKESPEARE, *The Moor of Venice*

Introduction

In the last act of *Antony and Cleopatra*, after knowing that she will be led in triumph to Rome by Octavius Caesar, Cleopatra imagines the humiliations she will be subjected to. Among them, to see “Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I'th' posture of a whore” (V.2.218-220). In this daring piece of self-referentiality, Shakespeare breaks the theatrical illusion to call attention to the fact that the role of Cleopatra was played by a boy since women were not allowed to perform in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres. Yet, there is evidence of their participation in medieval drama; according to Orgel (1996, p.50) “until the 1530s, at least, women seem to have performed unproblematically in guild and civil theatrical productions”

Playwrights tried to turn this prohibition into an advantage by writing plays in which the plots demanded that in a given moment the heroines were obliged to disguise themselves as boys; thus, the boy-players spent a great part of the action being themselves. Shapiro (2002, p.221-223) lists 79 plays written in the period 1570-1642 which make use of this device. Shakespeare contributes to this list with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590-1591), *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1597), *As You Like It* (1599-1600), *Twelfth Night* (1600-1601) and *Cymbeline* (1610). In *As You Like It* the boy who plays the role of Rosalind has to pretend that he is a boy — Ganymede — who, at certain moments, pretends to be Rosalind.

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This play on gender would no longer be possible after 1660 when a woman is seen on the English stage for the first time. The prologue to the Shakespearean tragedy *The Moor of Venice* announces the great novelty: “The Woman plays today, mistake me not, / No Man in gown, or Page in Petty-Coat”. The impact of this major transformation on the performance of Shakespeare’s plays in general and on Nahum Tate’s adaptations in particular will be briefly discussed in this paper.

The socio-political context

The year 1660 dates the return of the monarchy to the English political scene. The period known as Interregnum, Protectorate or Republic lasted 11 years. From the end of the Civil War with the execution of King Charles I (1600-1649) in 1649 the political scene was dominated by the figure of the Puritan Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) until his death in 1658. As his son Richard, who succeeded to his father’s position, proved to be incapable of running the country, Charles Stuart, the future Charles II (1630-1685), was called back from exile by Parliament and the monarchy was restored.

The date in which the period called the Restoration begins is 1660; yet, there is no consensus among historians about its end. Some suggest 1688, when, after the death of Charles II in 1685, his brother James II (1633-1701) ascended the throne to be deposed three years later by his daughter Mary II (1662-1694) and her husband William III (1650-1702). Others prolong the Restoration until the death of Queen Anne (1665-1714), who died without leaving an heir, thus ending the Stuart dynasty and the Restoration period as well. Since the Shakespearean plays to be discussed were rewritten in 1680 and 1681, they can be safely labelled “Restoration adaptations”.

This period is marked by the figure of Charles II, famous for his thirteen mistresses and bastard children (no less than seventeen) and the immorality of his court. The truth is that he inherited a divided country: he had to punish those directly responsible for his father’s execution but could not go too far in order to avoid further divisions already ominously present in the religious question. Besides anglicanism, puritanism and catholicism that fought for truth and power, there were a great number of sects: presbyterians, baptists, diggers, seekers, ranters, quakers, anabaptists, grindletonians, muggletonians, levellers and other less numerous according to Christopher Hill (1975, p.30-31). Eventually, religion was greatly responsible for the two great crises towards the end of his reign: the Popish Plot (1678) and the Exclusion Crisis (1679-1681). The first was an invention of anti-Catholic groups that there was a

plan to kill the King and put his Catholic brother James on the throne; the second was a real attempt to exclude James, on account of his religion, from the succession to the throne since Charles had no legitimate heir. Though his wife, the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza bore him no children, Charles refused to divorce her and there lurked the suspicion that under her influence he was veering towards Catholicism. The beginning of his reign was marked by two great catastrophes: the plague of 1665 and the fire of London in the following year, which lasted four days, destroying a considerable part of the city. These were two great blows to add to the perennial financial problems of the king.

In spite of his many faults, Charles II had his virtues recognized by posterity. He is sympathetically portrayed by Bernard Shaw in his play *‘In Good King Charles’s Golden Days’: A True History that Never Happened* (1947) and by his biographer Antonia Fraser, who said that “he was the right king for that strange, demanding season in which he lived” (2004, p.612). His great interest in science led him to found the Royal Society in 1662 and the Royal Observatory of Greenwich in 1675; but he is particularly interesting to us as a lover and patron of the theatre.

The theatrical context

It has been said that the English monarchy and the English theatre fell together, and when they rose again, they rose together. On August 21, less than three months after his own restoration to the throne, Charles II sanctioned the restoration of the English theatre by granting exclusive rights to William Davenant (1606-1668) and Thomas Killigrew (1612-1681) to build theatres and to form acting companies. These royal patents were motivated by both personal and political reasons. During his long exile in France, Charles (the son of a French mother) had developed a great taste for the theatre; at the same time that he wanted to reward two great supporters of the Royalist cause, he was also defying the Puritans, opposed to the Crown and to the stage, mainly responsible for his father’s downfall and the closing of the theatres in 1642.

The two acting companies were sponsored by the Court: Killigrew’s Company was the King’s Men, and Davenant’s the Duke’s Men. The ties between the theatre and the monarchy could not be stronger; besides having the King and his brother as patrons, the companies could also count on them as spectators: before 1642 the theatre went to the king, but after 1660 the king went to the theatre. And many people went to the theatre to see the king. This was one of the many changes which distinguished the

Restoration theatre from the Elizabethan and Jacobean ones; besides the audience, others affected the buildings, the scenery, the spectacle, the dramaturgy, the repertory and the performance.

The two theatres differed from most of the Elizabethan and Jacobean buildings by being smaller, having a roof and a stage extended from the proscenium arch into the pit. Capacity was probably between 700 and 1,000 spectators. There was a curtain, and scenery was now an important part of the play, change of scenes being done in full view of the audience. The spectacle was enhanced by the use of machines “such as ropes for flying, trapdoors for appearing and disappearing and parts of the stage which rose, were very much used, provoking a burst of applause each time”, says Liza Picard (2003, p.216). An example of the use of this elaborate machinery can be found in Davenant’s adaptation of *Macbeth* (1664) which requires wires for the witches who enter flying, small traps for rising and descending ghosts and a large trap for the sinking of the cave in Act IV.

This different type of theatre demanded a different type of play to cater for all the scenic devices that had been introduced. The repertory was a great problem in this new beginning of the theatrical activities in London. Owing to the closing of the theatres for so long, there were very few playwrights available and, consequently, very few new plays; thus, the two new companies had to resort to old plays by William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Ben Jonson (1572-1637), Francis Beaumont (c1585-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625). These playwrights were specially preferred not only because of their past prestige, but also because their complete works had been published in folios — Jonson’s in 1616, Shakespeare’s in 1623 and Beaumont and Fletcher’s in 1647 — thus making the choice of plays easier. Another important advantage was that, the authors being dead, there was no payment involved. Consequently, in the 1660’s, the new dramatists found themselves competing with “an artificially selected, enthusiastically welcomed, massed anthology of the best of the past”. (Taylor 1990, p. 26).

The structure and performance of the companies were also profoundly modified by the same royal patent that allowed the opening of the theatres for it also allowed the presence of women in the companies and on stage. Thus, it can be affirmed that the professional actress was “the restored theatre’s most conspicuous innovation” (Dobson 1995, p. 38)

The revolutionary presence of women on the stage

In 1608, Thomas Coryate, an English traveller, visiting Venice was greatly astonished when he saw women acting for the first time (apud Shapiro 2002, p. 42). This fact, however, would not cause any surprise in some European Catholic countries: in Spain, France and Italy women were acting professionally before the end of the sixteenth century.

In the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras players were one of the favourite targets of the Puritan pamphlets against the theatre. In accordance with their accusations of immorality, actors who dressed in feminine clothes could provoke masculine desire among members of the audience. In the first decades of the sixteenth century, theatre companies enjoying the favours of the court, the written attacks ceased. Yet, in 1633, William Prynne wrote *Histriomastix: The Player’s Scourge*, which calls “prostitutes” women who acted on stage and which offended Charles I’s French wife Henrietta Maria who acted in the plays privately staged at court. As Barish concludes, “the theater, then, is damned if it dresses men as women, and damned if it dresses women as themselves” (1985, p. 91).

The women entered the exclusively masculine theatrical scene at the right moment. Besides the king’s and theatre owners’ willingness to import a continental practice, it was also a matter of necessity. Owing to the long period during which the theatres remained closed, there was a shortage of actors, mainly young ones, especially trained to play feminine characters. The public’s reception could not have been more auspicious, a mixture of curiosity, pleasure, fascination, interest and prejudice. Thus, the actresses held a very ambiguous position in that society oscillating between power and submission.

The main problem was the recruitment of actresses, as according to Howe (1992, p. 8) “no woman with serious pretensions to respectability would countenance a stage career, and yet the profession demanded more than a woman of the brothel class.” An actress needed to be able to read (not a very common accomplishment of the women in seventeenth-century England) and a good memory to be able to learn many lines at speed, to sing and dance, and to emulate a lady’s behaviour. This left only a “narrow middle stratum” of society from which actresses could be drawn. It was inevitable that they became sexual objects. There was a great deal of curiosity about their private lives and the scandals in which some of them were involved. Thus, many playwrights created

feminine characters in which it was impossible to separate the real person from the character. Actresses were also demanded to play the so-called “breeches roles” in which they had to dress the tight costumes of pages revealing the shapes of their bodies, and appear in “couch scenes” and “rape scenes” in which breasts and legs were to be made visible. The promise of such display was, sometimes, advertised in the very title of the play as in the case of Edward Ravenscroft’s *Titus Andronicus, or The Rape of Lavinia* (?1678).

Tate: Reshaping Shakespeare’s feminine characters

As long as there have been plays by Shakespeare, there have been theatrical adaptations of those plays. The Restoration was an early highpoint in this process, a period in which modifying Shakespeare’s staging, language, story and characters became commonplace. His plays had become old-fashioned and to be made attractive to the new audience, they were “altered”, “revived with alterations” or even “improved”. Davenant’s *Macbeth* contains “alterations, amendments, additions and new songs.” His drama had to be made fit for this new theatrical era; between 1662 and 1682 seventeen versions of Shakespearean plays appeared on the English stage (Murray 2005, p. xi). Although much criticized by most critics because of their treatment of the original texts, these adaptations were responsible for promoting Shakespeare’s name and preventing his work from falling into oblivion.

The beginning was not auspicious: Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), a frequent theatre-goer, wrote in his diary in 1662 that he had gone to the King’s Theatre, where he saw *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* “which I had never seen before, nor shall see again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life” (apud Spencer 1963, p. 42). But, according to Lanier (2006, p. 26) “soon Shakespeare became a staple of the dramatic repertory, but his work was fitted to new theatrical practices, among them actresses and movable scenery, as well as contemporary tastes and political concerns”.

Among those that made Shakespeare fit for this new cultural context was the Irish poet and playwright Nahum Tate (1652-1715). In his time he was a highly respected writer, made Poet Laureate in 1692, but was severely condemned by early 20th-century critics like Hazelton Spencer (1963 p.101) who calls his three adaptations “murderous attempts to improve Shakespeare”. Tate adapted three Shakespearean tragedies: *The History of King Richard II or The Sicilian Usurper*, *The Ingratitude of a Commonwealth or The Fall of Caius Martius Coriolanus* and *The History of King Lear*.

They were written between 1680 and 1681 when England was politically disturbed by the Succession Crisis.

Richard II was not a very wise choice at the time since the play centers on the deposition of a king. The text was first rejected by the censors, and not even disguised as *The Sicilian Usurper* could it avoid censorship in performance. The main changes are the characterisation of the king and the expanded role of the queen, who is barely present in Shakespeare’s tragedy. In order to engage our sympathy for Richard, Tate emphasizes his love for Isabella, a devoted wife who tries to console and support her husband. She appears in every single act of the play and is given two long scenes with the king in the last two. In prison, Richard is assassinated while writing her a letter. With the emphasis on conjugal love and its vulnerability to State affairs, Tate was hoping to diffuse the political subject of the play.

The Ingratitude of a Commonwealth is a gory version of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. As he had already done in *Richard II*, he cuts a lot of characters to expand a feminine role — that of Virgilia, Coriolanus’s wife. In Shakespeare she speaks very little and is greeted by her husband as “my gracious silence” (II.1.148); in Tate she is talkative and far more outspoken in her pacifism, fully participating in the horror scene at the end. Aufidius plans to rape her and imagines it taking place in full view of her wounded husband. Although the rape does not actually happen the villain’s voluptuous graphic language adds a sexualized form of violence towards Virgilia, who stabs herself in order to die chaste by her agonizing husband. Her bleeding sight is too much for Aufidius, who dies of shock.

Of all Restoration adaptations Tate’s *The History of King Lear* is the most notorious with its emphasis on the love affair between Cordelia and Edgar, the omission of the Fool, and a happy end: Gloucester and Lear remain alive, Cordelia will be queen and marry Edgar. Tate has been accused of changing Shakespeare’s great tragedy into a banal romantic melodrama or heroic drama. The noun “Tatefication” and the adjective “Tatefied” have acquired derogatory meanings indicating that a work has been sentimentalized and moralized.

As in his two other adaptations, the role of a feminine character is considerably enlarged to take advantage of the new prominence and popularity of actresses on the Restoration stage. Cordelia displeases her father on purpose because she does not want to marry Burgundy as she is already in love with Edgar, who saves her from being raped by the villain Edmund. The device of rape had already been used by Tate in his

adaptation of *Coriolanus* and, as it has already been mentioned, became a major feature in the drama of the period. As Howe observes, “rape became a way of giving the purest, most virginal heroine a sexual quality” (1992, p. 43). At the same time that it allowed dramatists like Tate to create women of such greatness and perfect honour as was felt to be appropriate to tragedy and heroic drama it gave them the opportunity to exploit sexually the new female presence in the theatre.

Conclusion

One of the most painful passages in the Shakespearean theatre is Cordelia’s death. When Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) finished his edition of Shakespeare’s plays in 1765, he added a personal note: “I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia’s death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor” (apud Garber 2009, p. 236). Thus, while the widowed Queen Isabella finished her life in exile, and Virgilia killed herself to escape violation, Tate’s choice of saving King Lear’s favourite daughter from death though disapproved by critics was approved not only by Dr. Johnson but also by future audiences. His version dominated the English stage for almost 160 years with Cordelia rewarded with life, crown and husband.

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