

GENDER, DISGUISE AND THE POLITICS OF MARRIAGE IN ARIADNE'S *SHE VENTURES AND HE WINS*

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In spite of being considered as a minor dramatist, with *She Ventures and He Wins* (1695) Ariadne reopened the tradition of female playwrights after Aphra Behn's death. In the main plot of the play, Charlotte, a young and rich heiress, makes a deliberate use of crossdressing and disguise in order to test the man she herself has chosen to marry. Through the acquisition of a new identity, the female protagonist plays a joke both on the patriarchal power over women as regards the choice of a husband and also on the conventional terms of marriage, like money and social class, usually settled by male figures. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to trace the features of the active and manipulative heroine that Behn had already established in plays such as *The Rover* (1677) and to check the way in which Ariadne complies with those principles.

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/ femme identities... In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself -as well as its contingency. (Judith Butler)

The control of the patriarchal system over women's identity pervaded many of the plays of the English Restoration period. Very frequently, playwrights portrayed the different ways in which men exercised their authority and restrained women from behaving beyond the codes of obedience and submission. Within the family, the unavoidable rule of the male heads of households –either fathers or brothers– obliged women to comply with the conditions and circumstances that superior male figures had set for their future, which meant above all the attainment of a secure and profitable marriage. Traditionally, men established their own foundations for the only possible relation between man and woman and they made plans for marriage contracts that granted wealth and a high social position to the family, without considering the individual interests of women.

This practice of arranged marriages turned women into merchandise that could be bought and sold for the sake of a successful deal. As a result of this, the revision of the politics of marriage from a female perspective became one of the major concerns of women and women writers of the period:

From about the mid-1680s until 1713 or thereabouts, unprecedented numbers of

women wrote on women's conditions [...] It was the first sizable wave of British secular feminist protest in history. Many were inspired by the general philosophical shift towards a rational and empirical analysis of life that rejected tradition and encouraged self-confidence and independent thought. (Ferguson 1985: 15)

The appearance of works by authors such as Aphra Behn gave rise to a widespread criticism of this sexual inequality in which women had been trapped for long, and very frequently women writers used their works to challenge the stability of the patriarchal system. The standard codes of female behaviour began to be strongly rejected and there was a tendency to deconstruct the stereotypes that enclosed women in the only possible roles of virgins, bound for marriage or religious life, and prostitutes. Disguise and crossdressing were then two of the most common strategies used by these authors in order to provide female characters with the agency and independence that they had been denied. In spite of being considered as a minor dramatist, Ariadne's *She Ventures and He Wins* (1695) meant not only the recovering of plays by female playwrights to be performed after Aphra Ben's death, but also the continuation of the features of the active and manipulative heroine which Behn had inaugurated in plays like *The Rover* (1677) or *The Feigned Courtesans* (1679).

The play deals with the deeds of a young and rich heiress –Charlotte–, who rebels against social and familiar expectations and tries to find a man that may marry her not for money but for love. Far from submitting to male rules, she decides to take up a fake identity and step into the male realm where virtuous women were not supposed to enter. That change is performed by means of crossdressing which, together with the complicity from other female characters, enables her not only to gain the love of Lovewell, the man she herself has chosen for her future husband, but also to test his truthfulness and constancy. Hence, this strategy becomes a tool to defy both the power of patriarchy and the traditional terms in which marriage is defined.

The analysis of the relation between female use of disguise and the politics of marriage can be structured in three main sections within the present study. First, we will trace the meanings and implications that transvestite women represented at the time in which the action is set, considering issues like its reception and the subversion of social and sexual roles that it conveyed. Secondly, the proceedings of the plans of the heroine in Ariadne's play will be explored, taking into account the reasons and strategies to develop her project. And finally, the last step will be the interpretation of the way in which the protagonist manages to break patriarchal impositions and to succeed in shaping the kind of marriage she wants for herself, without threatening her virtue.

Although it was a recurrent motif in the plays of the English Restoration, previous writers had already displayed in their works the experiences of characters that made use of transvestism in order to achieve their aims. Yet, the main innovation lies in the performative means in which it was acted on stage, since with the entrance of actresses on the stage in 1660, female writers could think of their heroines to be performed by women, in contrast with the theatrical rules that had left them out so far (Howe 1992: 20). In this sense, the social and

theatrical circumstances that were incorporated in this period contributed to the re-articulation of this device from new, feminist perspectives.

Nevertheless, the reception of transvestite women was not systematic among the seventeenth century audience. As Jacqueline Pearson points out, "men in the audience do not seem to have found it threatening, though female spectators may have been offered a 'sense of release' by watching women escaping the constrictions of a conventional female role" (1988: 102). Male spectators used to perceive this theatrical custom as an erotic stimulation, that involved both the pleasure of watching the body of real actresses in men's clothes and also a sort of 'homo-erotic fantasy' that turned this type of performance into an excellent method to exorcise their hidden homosexual tendencies. The effect contrasts ironically with the intention of the writers, which was mostly to mock male behaviour and subvert the traditional notions of gender differentiation that had always marginalized women to the level of material property. On the contrary, with female characters that adopt many different identities and conceal their supposedly "natural" gender, women dramatists question the common belief that marked these acts as dangerous, and they suggest that not only is gender not stable but also that its boundaries can be easily transgressed. Both ideas are indeed present in *She Ventures and He Wins*, where, like Behn had done before, Ariadne deals with an active heroine that decides to pretend to be someone else as a means to redefine the politics of marriage from the point of view of women. At the beginning of the play Charlotte examines these conventions that used to be set by men and she tells her cousin:

I'm not obliged to follow the world's dull maxims, nor will I wait for the formal address of some ceremonious coxcomb, with more land than brains, who would bargain for us as he would for his horse [...] No, my Julia, I'll have one who loves my person as well as gold and please myself, not the world, in my choice. (I. 1. 35-53)

The heroine creates her own version of a prosperous marriage and throughout the play she insists in checking that her lover wants her out of true love and not because of her money. Disguise is then her best vehicle to make sure that love and marriage take place according to her interests and she undermines the possible results of her acts upon the established social order.

In her process to test Lovewell's constancy and truthfulness, Charlotte makes different uses of crossdressing and disguise, starting with her approach to the male realm in which she can have closer contact with men. With a male appearance, the heroine can address her lover directly and even share some sort of complicity with him:

CHARLOTTE: I have evidences enough confirms me, you're the man that has cruelly robbed a near and dear relation of mine of her repose for ever, and except you restore it her by reciprocal love, I fear the worst effects of this unhappy passion.

LOVEWELL: Oh sir, I find you design to divert yourself instead of me.

CHARLOTTE: By honour, trust, and all that's sacred, I'm serious.

LOVEWELL: Well sir, bring me to the lady; I'm so cruelly inclined to let a pretty

woman for any civil kindness I can do her. (I. 3. 45-53)

This is, according to conventional standards of female behaviour, a very challenging act for a woman, but, by adopting a typically male attire, Charlotte manages to speak openly to this man and even demand attention and favour from him. Thus, through this resource women like her can escape from their confined scope of private, submissive settings since “when women took men’s clothes, they symbolically left their subordinate positions and enclosed spaces. They became mobile, masterless women, and this threatened overthrow of hierarchy was discursively read as the eruption of uncontrolled sexuality” (Howard 1994: 101).

Charlotte’s skill to progress in her plans is also displayed through the way in which she continues deceiving Lovewell. Once she has teased him and inflicted suspense upon him, she makes sure that he turns to her own brother –Sir Charles Frankford–, asking about her, and after that, she arranges a meeting in which the mentioned lady will meet him in a mask. At this moment, as an alter ego of the author that directs and organizes the actions, Charlotte is the very one who is in control of the situation and she is able to set the conditions for the future relation between them: “and if you have courage to venture on me as you see me, here’s a hand and heart, and all that’s mine to be entirely yours” (III. 3. 31-33). Again, the heroine tries to check if he would marry her whatever her physical and economic circumstances may be, and she becomes the very director of their future.

These particular performances of crossdressing and disguise in the first three acts of the play result into their marriage, which they celebrate in a tavern, a space virtuous women were required to avoid, because of its traditional association with prostitution. Anyway, ignoring this threat to her female virtue, Charlotte develops her aspirations further: to puzzle her lover by means of fake identities. At the tavern, Charlotte suddenly leaves Lovewell with no other company than a purse with some money, and, following Sir Charles’s directions, he goes to the village where she has suddenly fled after their wedding in order to give her a letter. At this stage, Charlotte had decided that her cousin –Bellasira–, would pass herself off as Charlotte so that, again, she can test whether he loves her for herself or because she is sister to a prosperous and respectable man. Being completely deceived by Bellasira, the effect of this strategy favours her projects again, as Lovewell admits to Bellasira:

Forbear, dear madam, to distract me with this angel’s goodness, I am not worthy of the least of all this mighty kindness [...] I love with all the ardour of prevailing passion, a false ungrateful woman, and what renders my folly inexcusable, one I know not, nor ever perhaps may see again. (IV.4. 33-44)

Thus, Lovewell renounces the high social position and benefits that his marriage to whom she believes to be Sir Charles’ sister could bring forth, but, on the contrary, he declares in despair that he is in love with another woman. In spite of his rage, Charlotte still attempts to develop her plans further. This time she relies on the complicity of her own brother and his friend Roger, who, all along the play have complied with her actions and decisions, against all expectations

of the patriarchal authority that they represent. Once they check that Charlotte's aims are "honourable", both of them forsake the part of the patriarchal power of the missing father to help her in her aims: "to find which he has most esteem for, my person or state" (V.1.6-7). They imprison Lovewell for keeping the money from that purse in the tavern and, it is in the prison where, sent by Charlotte, Bellasira tries to tempt him again:

BELLASIRA: Is it so hard to love? I have youth and fortune, is that no charm?
 LOVEWELL: ...I must tell you, to justify myself from that ingratitude, you justly might reproach me with: I am to my destruction married, married, dear lady.
 (V.1. 148-150)

Hence, after all her efforts to create a different notion of marriage and the relation between its members, Charlotte succeeds in her attempts. On the one hand, the very last consequences of her cunning strategies demonstrate that they have been effectively developed, for Lovewell is completely amazed when he sees the Charlotte he was in love with approaching him when he was still in jail. Even in the last scene of the play, she keeps him under her control telling him that Roger, her brother's friend, had loved and proposed to her long ago. But, however cruel she is to him, and when all misrecognitions are solved, Lovewell replies: "Well, I will live with thee, for heaven knows I love thee; and though you have used me thus, will always use you well" (V. 1. 245-247). Like all throughout the play, he admits his constant love for her and that confirms the importance of all her resources for the attainment of her happiness.

On the other hand, regarding social order, these particular cases of crossdressing and disguise prove that although women can break traditional gender distinctions, they can still keep their honour unspoiled. In the play, Charlotte tricks and deceives her lover repeatedly as part of her teasing game, but when Sir Charles reveals that she is his sister –the very same woman that Lovewell loves and a rich heiress with a state–, he answers: "dear madam, from the sincerity I ever used to you, 'tis the least part of my joy; but I have, by my knowledge who you are, an unquestioned proof of your virtue" (V. 1. 270-273). Somehow, Charlotte never did lie to him but just *used* him for honourable interests like love and marriage and, in spite of using women's bodies as her main tools, she could never be accused of looseness or prostitution, with which crossdressing was strongly associated.

That gender differentiation was a widespread concern in Early Modern England can be inferred from works like *Hic Mulier*, the anonymous Renaissance tract in which this differentiation is assigned to God, who dictated that man's clothes were "fit for his labour, the woman's fir for her modestie" (Keeble 1994: 245-246). According to this, gender categories could not be violated since any change of identity could generate a break in the patriarchal hierarchy that placed men in a superior position. However, in *She Ventures and He Wins*, Ariadne follows the trend of other female playwrights who rejected that separation of gender by means of using active heroines that decide to take up an *unnatural* appearance. These women challenge the permanence of that system and, as Judith Butler

infers, their acts show how “genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original or derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*” (1990: 141). Charlotte then, turns out to be a symbol for Ariadne’s defence of women’s right to play with their bodies, as she tries to prove that it is legitimate to validate the use of transvestism and disguise as a means of achieving a sort of marriage in which women may take an active and independent part.

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