

THE SEARCH FOR FEMALE POWER IN CATHARINE TROTTER'S *AGNES DE CASTRO*

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Catharine Trotter's tragedy *Agnes de Castro* features two hostile female couples searching for the power that will position themselves above the rest of female characters in the play. That gaining the love of don Pedro—the prince and future king of Portugal—appears to be the real objective of their fight, diverts our attention from the real one. To get this power to rule over the other people in the Court, Elvira and her attendant Bianca try to undermine Constantia's—the queen-to-be—and Agnes' reputation through the use of gossip. Thus, speech is used as a source of power to convince both the audience and the rest of the characters in the play of their real intentions. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate, by analyzing both their monologues and dialogues, that the use of speech by those female characters in the play is the vehicle to empower themselves.

The unfortunate story of the beautiful Castilian, beloved of the Portuguese monarch Pedro I, has always been attractive to European writers, poets and dramatists. For literary purposes, the woeful love story of Agnes de Castro has crossed Portuguese frontiers. There are instances of this tale in *Os Lusíadas* by Camoens, in the play *Reinar Después de Morir* by Vélez de Guevara, in the French version by Mlle de Brillac and in British playwright Aphra Behn, whose version is a fictionalized translation of the French one already mentioned. For the purpose of this paper, and considering that Catharine Trotter's tragedy is very close to Behn's novel, I will only mention those British instances of this tragic piece of Portuguese history.

Agnes de Castro was a maid of honor to the second wife of Pedro I of Portugal. Her coming to Portugal raises the passion of the Prince—and future king of Portugal—, who forgets his marital obligations in favor of the beautiful girl. Once the princess is dead, Pedro is supposed to secretly marry Agnes disobeying both his father, King Afonso IV, and the king's counselors, who consider the possibility of remarrying the heir to the Crown for convenience. The secret discovered, the King is advised to murder the beautiful Agnes. The murder scene, with Agnes pleading for forgiveness and her children around her, has inspired one of the most

beautiful passages in Portuguese poetry and one of the climactic moments in the Spanish play. Pedro's subsequent vengeance murdering his beloved's assassins and obliging the Portuguese Court to kiss her hand after her death has also been attractive. Hence, it can be considered a version of the legend fictionalized by Aphra Behn (Summers 1967: 212). As Margarete Rubik summarizes, "the tragedy draws on one of Behn's novellas for its plot, which, possibly, accounts for its brisk pace and lively character drawing" (Rubik 1998: 68). Although Trotter's tragedy changes some key parts of the legend recorded by some chroniclers of the History of Portugal, it follows and enhances the story of female rivalry present in Behn's version. Thus, Catharine Trotter's *Agnes de Castro*, as Jaqueline Pearson remarks, "concentrates on women characters to a remarkable extent. Women open the play, wholly dominate the first act, and speak more than half the lines" (Pearson 1988: 23). Following Katherine Quinsey,

Women's writing of this period engages two dominant forms of masculinist discourse: first, libertinism, whose apparent commitment to individualism and the celebration of free sexuality masks a deep devotion to patriarchal domination and which overtly, sometimes violently, constrains, restrains, constructs, and even negates female sexuality and subjectivity; and, less obviously, scientific empiricism, which promotes gender-based oppression under the guise of objective inquiry. (Quinsey 1996: 4)

The play features two hostile female pairs of women searching for the power that will set one above the other. Being the love of Don Pedro—the prince and future king of Portugal—the object of their fight, diverts our attention from their real objective: power. As Quinsey maintains, Trotter's play displays "the roots of the tragedy to lie within the self-defeating and inconsistent nature of those patriarchal economies" and "celebrate[s] women who embody political and sexual power" (Quinsey 1996: 5). To get the power to rule over the other pair of women and in the Court, Elvira and her attendant, Bianca, try to undermine both the reputation of Constantia—the queen-to-be—and Agnes to get their position of power. According to Aphra Behn's novella:

Before his Divorce from Bianca, he had expressed some Care and Tenderness for Elvira Gonzales, Sister to Don Alvaro Gonzales, favorite to the King of Portugal; and this Amusement in the young Years of the Prince, had made a deep Impression on Elvira, who flatter'd her Ambition with the Infirmities of Bianca. She saw, with a secret Rage, Constantia take her place, who was possess with such charms, that quite divested her of all Hopes. (Summers 1967: 215)

In Trotter's version, the rivalry of both couples is set from the beginning of the play. Elvira is characterized as a villain from the very beginning, again according to Behn's novel: "[...] and the Credit of her Brother gave her so much Vanity, as all the Indifference of the Prince was not capable of humbling" (Summers 1967: 215). Her double talk, her reasoning of the righteousness of her plot of vengeance in front of her brother and of her attendant, Bianca, contrasts with the use of speech when she is alone on stage.

The first scene opens with Elvira and Bianca plotting the way in which

Constantia will find out the prince's love for Agnes and thus get rid of her. Bianca, sent by the princess to watch on the prince, has discovered he is in love with Agnes and has taken a poem he has carelessly dropped on the floor. Bianca's allegiance to Elvira makes her bring her the letter. Elvira, then, sees the opportunity to wrong all of them, the prince, Constantia and Agnes, by letting the princess know the secret of her husband, Prince Don Pedro:

[...] That poison, jealousy,
Destroys the strongest bonds of blood, or friendship.
Constantia cannot think the Prince loves Agnes,
But she must hate and treat her as a rival;
Or cou'd she be so tame to keep her here,
Distrust and coldness, rivalry will breed,
Which Agnes is too haughty to endure,
And, though not sent, will soon return to Spain. (I.i)

While Bianca returns to the princess' apartment to tell her the news, Elvira goes to her brother, Alvaro Gonzales. Thus, Elvira's position of power in the Court is dependent on her brother, since Alvaro is the king's favorite. Moreover, she also knows her brother is somehow in love with Agnes and, hence, plans to let her brother's "boundless rage and jealousy/ Inspire him with some resolution,/ That must be fatal to the Prince, or Agnes" (I.i). Still she knows her position to be precarious in her brother's esteem and, thus, she intentionally hides her own objectives in front of him when it is revealed to her that her brother intends to marry Agnes at all costs. When he leaves her after telling her he will marry Agnes even if he has to rape and kidnap her, Elvira says: "Trust me, to hinder her from being thine./ Alvaro's wife!" (III.i). And to her confidante, Bianca, she says: "My brother's fondness gives me apprehensions,/ Which at my soul's expense I wou'd shake off" (III.i).

Thus, with the use of her "artful strength"—as she names her intelligence and her use of speech—Elvira sets the plot in motion. Her aim is to achieve the destruction of Agnes' reputation and her banishment from the Court of Portugal, and thus it turns out that the ultimate purpose is to destroy Agnes since, without Agnes, the prince will "lose her he loves" (I.i) and therefore Elvira's revenge on the prince will be complete. Learning from Bianca that the love letter does not affect Constantia's closeness to Agnes, Elvira plots:

I'll write a note as from the Prince to Agnes;
It shall express a free converse with her,
And joy for having overcome her scruple,
Then beg her to obtain his wife's consent,
On the pretence of shunning him, to leave Coimbra,
That he may see her with more easy freedom
Than watchful eyes wou'd e'er permit him here. (II.ii)

As a matter of fact, Elvira's asides and monologues signal her as the typical villain with a twofold characterization. To her brother, she is the wronged maid. She is the humble girl despised by a powerful male:

Alvaro

I never can forget your injuries,
 For which I've long borne hatred to the Prince.
 The world remembers still those warm addresses,
 Which rais'd the malice of the envious fair,
 And made you lift your hopes to royalty,
 Now turn'd to worse than hate, a cold neglect:
 What can they think, but that he whor'd my Sister? (III.i)

To the audience, however, Elvira is a murderer and the ambitious woman. In her own words:

All that can contribute to plague the Prince
 Is grateful to my thoughts. I know his temper;
 The Princess's regrets will most torment him;
 And then to lose his mistress; shall I see
 The faithless traitor, who abandon'd me,
 Punish'd in the same kind, lose her he loves:
 That, that's the pleasing part. (I.i)

Thus, by means of her asides and her dialogues with Bianca, Elvira is opposed to Agnes, not only as a suitable object of affection and beauty but also as the negative prototype of femininity. Though Agnes sometimes confines on the antithesis of the type of behavior expected from a young woman, the audience is always reminded of her beauty of body and soul by the representation made of her by her supposed rival, Constantia:

Ah! She who robs me of my husband's heart,
 Is all charm to plead for his excuse:
 Young, beautiful, discreet, and chaste, as fair,
 By nature form'd to captive ev'ry heart;
 My reason must approve the Prince's choice,
 For I myself prefer her to myself,
 And love her too, as tenderly as he. (I.ii)

On the other hand, Agnes' use of speech in both her intimacy with Constantia and her role in the Court instead highlights how close she is to Elvira in her willingness not to be told what to do, that is, to be mistress of her own fate. Agnes tries to do her will all the time: "A king's request is but a milder name/ For his command; I will obey you, Sir" (II.ii). This humble answer contrasts with the following dialogue in which Agnes tries on all accounts to disobey the king's request to marry Alvaro. Thus, whereas Elvira is from the very beginning characterized as a villain for her pertness, forwardness, and her desire of retaliation, Agnes is redeemed by the special conditions around her. However, Agnes is defined from the beginning of the play as a cunning maid in search of the crown. When Alvaro asks the king to intercede in his proposal of marriage to Agnes, he says:

I fear se has too much ambition, Sir.
 The Prince's love too may increase that flame;
 She treats me as she were some mighty queen,
 And I her meanest, despicable slave. (II.i)

Later on in the play, the king himself calls her "vain", "dissembler" and

“ambitious”. Hence, Agnes and Elvira exchange roles till the end of the play. However, as happened before with Elvira and Bianca, Agnes shows the audience the true nature of her character:

What is it for your sake I wou'd not bear!
 Witness th'all-seeing pow'rs that know my heart,
 If by my marriage I cou'd give you back
 That love which barb'rous Fate has robb'd you of—
 Though Don Alvaro's horror to my eyes,
 Though my soul loathes him by antipathy,
 I'd break through those strong bars which Nature's fix'd,
 And sacrifice my own, for your repose.
 But that, alas, cou'd never cure the Prince,
 Still he wou'd look on me with criminal eyes,
 And I am accessory whilst I stay. (II.ii)

The idea that Agnes can neither leave Coimbra nor stay stands for the climatic part of the play. Elvira's situation as the typical villainess of Restoration drama makes her Agnes' perfect counterpart, especially as uttered by Elvira herself: “The lot is cast, for Agnes, or Elvira; / If my good genius watch not for me now, / Let it forever sleep in dull neglect” (III.i).

Besides, Elvira's intention to murder Agnes has a twofold consequence in the play. On the one hand, the audience feels that Constantia's love and protection cannot save her friend. On the other the consequence of the attempted murder, which is the accidental murder of Constantia, and the subsequent accusation of Agnes makes her stand out as the wronged heroine whose life on earth is full of misfortune. Her wish to do her own will is in fact a pretext proposed in order to advise young ladies about the necessity to be protected by some male relative and the fatal consequences an immoral love relationship could have for those innocent maids, despite the fact that all turns out right in the end.

The fact that Agnes is not recognized as the heroine she is by the rest of the characters in the play is a device used by Trotter to show the problematic aspect of that willingness of her to do her will. However, in the end she is recognized as a wronged heroine and, thus, her description as a villainess is broken. However, Elvira is the one that is punished because her search for power over the rest of the characters is woman's sin *par excellence*. Her multiple nature, behaving as the perfect maid in front of the king, the wronged heroine in front of her brother and the mad murderess with Bianca and when alone on stage, does not confound the audience but builds suspense in the play. Her speech when found after the murder of Constantia proves this nature of hers:

This wound is witness of that horrid truth,
 Which justice will not suffer me to hide.
 Hither I came to visit Agnes, Sir,
 But finding the unhappy Princess here,
 And seeing both in heat, retir'd unseen:
 I scarce had pass'd one room, when a shrill cry
 Recall'd me, trembling, to a dreadful sight. (III.ii)

As regards Elvira, her ultimate punishment in adopting a too aggressive

behavior and exhibiting double talk could be regarded as the didactic purpose of Trotter's tragedy. Elvira is not only portrayed as unexemplary—"unnatural" as Rebecca Merrens labels—during the play but also her madness, her fury when seeing Constantia's ghost, stresses her misbehavior, since it is yet another manifestation of the recurrent image of the despised woman who does not control her emotions and so instead of being in control, she ends up at the mercy of her fate:

Furies and hell!! What's that? Where am I? Dead?
 No, there's too gentle plagues in th'other world;
 The Princess is come back to find worse here,
 Or bring'em all to me, she'll murder me.
 Ha! That was a hangman's voice, will he know me?
 Let's see, is murder printed in my face?
 Ah! Those are killing eyes—I'll stare the Prince to death—
 Look how they flame, they'll burn him up to ashes;
 But Agnes sets his heart and soul on fire;
 I'll weep it out, I'll quench it with my tears. (IV.ii)

On the other hand, her rival, Agnes, after being accused of Constantia's murder, is kidnapped by Alvaro, who tries to force her to marriage. Agnes is released when the prince accidentally discovers the plot, taking her back to Coimbra. When both the prince and Agnes are questioned by the king on the subject of the second letter, the prince quickly understands it to be all Elvira's making and tries to free Agnes of any suspicion. It is in the end that the king is portrayed as an old man lacking the skill and penetration to govern his country while the young prince is the regenerative force that will set things right. Alvaro and Elvira are, thus, discovered as the villains they are, while Agnes' reputation is restored.

Even though the play focuses on female rivalry, there is also a great effort to stress the importance of renewal, especially in these situations in which power plays the most important part. As Rebecca Merrens asserts,

Women are figured as deceitful not only because they do often struggle against the repressive demands of a patriarchal culture that requires their silence, chastity, and obedience but also because, by blaming female characters for the dissolution of putatively ordered patriarchal communities, those communities are enabled to reconstitute themselves over, against, and through the literal and symbolic dissection of women's bodies. (Quinsey 1996: 33)

That is, to think that those pairs of women can take the leading role in matters of power and social standards destabilizes the pyramid of power in which social relations are based. On the other hand, the restoration of order in the end can be interpreted as both the idea of renewal mentioned above and the restoration of woman to her right place in society. The new figure that appears to be the paladin of the social cosmos not only breaks with the vicious *ancien régime*, but also places the women belonging to this new regime a place where they can only hold the power appropriate to their status. The prince stands as the future which, with his intelligence to discover the plot and his righteousness in accusing

the real villains, will prevent these situations from happening. As for the women entangled in the plot, there is a clear solution to their intruding in the sphere of power. Depending on the extent of their unlawful behavior they will die, be punished or rewarded. If Constantia dies in the end is it to show the limits that society has to set on women like Elvira to prevent the misuse of power and influence over men.

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