

CATHARINE TROTTER'S *AGNES DE CASTRO*, OR THE REVISION OF FEMALE VIRTUE

SONIA VILLEGAS LÓPEZ
University of Huelva

In her first tragedy, *Agnes de Castro* (1695), Catharine Trotter re-elaborates the traditional notions of 'vice' and 'virtue', and presents them as arbitrary concepts, especially when attributed to femininity or to women's actions. The villainess Elvira, for example, manipulates those concepts, and considers her revenge on the Prince as an act of virtue and justice, whereas his own unruly passion for Agnes appears as vicious. Specifically, Trotter redefines the scope of female virtue, claiming political virtue as women's moral purpose. In fact, her female characters even subordinate their reputation and good name to their loyalty to and their friendship with other women: Elvira and Bianca are united by revenge and ambition, Constantia and Agnes by sincere affection. In contrast to male characters like the Prince, who follow their instincts and neglect their political duties, women in the tragedy put reason before sexual passion. Unfortunately, the feminine principle is smothered at the end of Trotter's play, and the patriarchal social order is restored when women die or disappear from public life.

If the aim of true tragedy, as drama critics insist on underlining, is always to "bring chaos into an ordered world" (Wilson 1968: 52), the Restoration playwright Catharine Trotter, one of the three "Female Wits",¹ succeeds in doing so, not only at the basic level of plot and story, but more clearly at the level of characterization and gender roles. In compliance with the tastes of the Restoration audience, as many other tragic authors, in *Agnes de Castro* Trotter chooses a source which provides her with numerous scenes of intrigue, jealousy, revenge and murder on-stage. These hallmarks of sensationalism were also to appear in later fiction. Yet already in the plays of the period we are witness of the virtuous or vicious behaviour of royal and noble figures, who are most times rewarded or punished accordingly: the wicked usually die as a result of their villainy and ambition, but some benign characters also end tragically and the original order is restored.

Agnes de Castro is a play with a romantic plot written by Catharine Trotter at the age of sixteen, a tragedy of historical origin. The scene is the King of Portugal's palace at Coimbra, and the main plot revolves around the love triangle between Prince Don Pedro, his new Spanish wife, Princess Constantia, and her bosom friend, the Spanish aristocrat Agnes de Castro. The tragic development is set

1. For a comprehensive analysis of the "Female Wits" and of their influence in the British drama of the turn of the century, see Rubik 1988: 57-ff.

in motion when Don Pedro's secret devotion for Agnes is brought to light by the villainess of the story, Elvira, the Prince's former mistress, who is moved by jealousy and a feeling of revenge on him and on the object of his love. By mistake, Elvira finally stabbed Constantia, and aided by her friend Bianca, blamed the Princess' murder on Agnes. Judging by these evidences, and by Agnes' former disobedience of the King in rejecting his order to marry Don Alvaro, she is imprisoned and even abducted by Alvaro's henchmen. However, her reputation is cleared when Elvira, in her madness, stabs Bianca and the latter's confession absolves Agnes from every guilt. However, her life was not to last, since in Alvaro's attempt to kill the Prince, he accidentally kills Agnes, who with her last breath admits her love for him. Desperate, and about to commit suicide, Don Pedro is prevented by his father from a sure death, and lives the rest of his days for his country.

The central motive of Trotter's tragedy was taken from a previous account of the story, Aphra Behn's novella *Agnes de Castro: Or the Force of Generous Love* (1688), itself an almost literal translation from the French original by Mlle. de Brillac (Todd 1996: 394; Gosse 1916: 1036). Trotter's tragedy deviates slightly from its models, basically as regards plot: the villainess' accomplice in Trotter's story, Bianca, had been presented by Behn as the Prince's first wife and the daughter of Don Pedro, King of Castile (Behn 1969: 159); secondly, there is a source of enmity between Don Alvaro and the Prince, previous to their rivalry for Agnes' love, since the Prince had humiliated him in public. Moreover, in Behn's version of the tale, long after Constantia's death, Agnes and Don Pedro get married, in spite of her initial rejection, as Behn phrases it, her "barbarous virtue", which was about to end with the Prince's life (1969: 196). Finally, although Don Alvaro in Trotter's play is punished by Agnes' murder, in Behn's precedent he leaves Coimbra with a number of servants (Behn 1969: 202).

What's the reason for these alterations of the original? Probably Trotter's aim was to precipitate the events that in Behn's short novel took between four and five years, and in Trotter's play they covered a lapse of a couple of days, to heighten dramatism –especially as regards Agnes' accidental death–, and to support once more the ideal of "female virtue" that Agnes and Constantia embody. In fact, in *Agnes de Castro* Catharine Trotter reelaborates the traditional notion of "virtue" when attributed to femininity and to women's actions. Particularly, Trotter redefines the scope of the term, claiming political virtue as women's real moral purpose, and not just as their chastity and the preservation of their good name.² In the play, sympathetic female characters like Constantia and Agnes herself subordinate their honour and reputation to their loyalty towards and their friendship with other women. Male characters like Don Alvaro and the Prince, follow their instincts to the point of neglecting their political duties, and by so doing they risk the survival of basic patriarchal institutions like the family and the monarchy. In contrast to them, women in the tragedy put reason before

2. In fact, Pearson claims that in women's plays of the period the double standard applied to the concept of "virtue" becomes a source of analysis, since these female playwrights, Trotter clearly among them, "emphasise that women can be distinguished for virtues other than chastity, for courage, wit and intelligence" (1988: 72).

sexual passion. Unfortunately, the feminine principle is “smothered” at the end of Trotter’s play, and the patriarchal social order is restored when all the women disappear from public life.

As Jacqueline Pearson puts it, virtue is a key term in Trotter’s production, in her tragedies as much as in her comedies and works of fiction. In fact, she had a tendency to develop good characters at the expense of villains and villainesses, who remained minor characters (Pearson 1988: 184). Trotter reveals, thus, as one of the initiators of the sentimental vein, inaugurated in the 1690s, especially as she usually presents a moral conflict which affects female characters, and which must be resolved during the play. In this respect, the tragedy is the most favourable medium to idealise extreme versions of female virtue. This insistence in delineating female virtue especially on stage comes from Trotter’s inclination to moral reform. In a time in which love and its ways held the audience’s attention, Trotter extends the grip of women far from the realm of emotions to the public sphere of politics. Trotter’s originality consists, precisely in her first tragedy, in benefitting from the genre to expose gender reindications: *Agnes de Castro* represents both at the same time the traditional extremely virtuous heroine and the courageous female hero, and in that peculiar combination lies the difference between her and her friend Constantia. Yet this audacity on Trotter’s side was not new. Already in 1693 in *Olinda’s Adventures*, an epistolary and semi-autobiographical short novel, she showed young Olinda’s devotion for her friend Cleander, and her prospective suitors whom she would take a great deal of effort to reject. Olinda’s most salient feature is precisely her virtue, which foretells the famous prototype of Pamela, though with a humorous twist.

It seems interesting to note how the arbitrary concepts of “vice” and “virtue” are manipulated in Trotter’s tragedy, depending on whom are those terms applied to, men or women. The villainess Elvira, for example, presents her revenge on the Prince as an act of virtue and justice, whereas his unruly passion for Agnes, a sign of weakness, as vicious:

Revenge is justice, born in noble souls.
 ‘Twas some mean spirited fool that first taught patience,
 Weak cowardice, that preach’d up dull forgiveness,
 And call’d the lasie impotence, a virtue. (I.i.42-45)

Elvira has accepted the normative roles conventionally assigned to the sexes, and the gendered view of virtue male characters promote, consciously or not, in *Agnes de Castro*. As her behaviour shows, though Elvira seems to reject the passivity associated to virtuous femininity, she does so at the expense of accepting the gendered view of virtue promoted by male values. Therefore, although Elvira and her friend Bianca actually seem to support a proto-feminist agenda, in so far as they suggest that women should be no “trifle[s] to be played with” (I.i.49), their mistake lies in trying to quench their thirst for revenge not exactly on the agents of their mischief, but on other women. They ruin, thus, female bonds of friendship and mutual loyalty, as more moderate figures, like Constantia and Agnes, spare.

The virtue men display is related to their relevance in public life. We are told that the Prince's war campaigns and his boldness in battle are clear manifestations of his virtue (II.i.246-48), as actions which perpetuate the *status quo*. Allusions to traditional views on female virtue are common in the discourse of these male characters, especially in those of the King and Alvaro. Agnes' flat refusal to marry the latter is contested by violent means: the King advises the jilted suitor to obtain by force what she readily denies:

Don Pedro's absence favours the design,
 And when she's in your pow'r, you've nought to fear
 He'll lose his hopes by seeing her your wife;
 She'll make a virtue of necessity,
 And dutifully seem at least to love.
 I need not sure instruct a lover more. (II.i.268-73)

Not only is female virtue as sheer chastity redrawn in *Agnes de Castro*, but also preconceptions about women are proved wrong. One of those flaws, according to the King, is their ambition, "a part essential in a woman" (II.i.2) which would make Agnes accept Alvaro as her future husband. Though pressed to comply with a marriage of convenience, she shows her firmness by promoting a union based on mutual love, which goes beyond the ties of marriage.

Once more Don Alvaro exposes his manly vision of virtue, and challenges Agnes' appropriation of the concept, restricting it to those who can afford it: "The great are only virtuous. What but pow'r/ Makes actions right or wrong? Accept my love,/ And you shall see yourself above control,/ Where none, in thought, dare tax you of a fault" (III.ii.43-46). On the contrary, the virtue women present in Trotter's play amounts to a curse for male characters like the Prince, who follows his passions and shows his human frailty: "The virtue of my wife too proves my curse,/ And I'm constrained to wish for my relief/ What others shun as the worst plague of life" (I.ii.329-31). Though by the end of the tragedy he had witnessed Constantia's and Agnes' virtue in times of trouble, the Prince tries to stab himself, and cannot help a final sign of weakness, and thus, a lack of virtue that may endanger their authoritative positions, especially as regards their place as heads of family and state, as the king observes:

Your valour never made you do before,
 But what a coward sometimes does for fear,
 'Tis in these wars, the combats of the mind,
 Where courage from false brav'ry is distinguish'd,
 And if you fly from them to death, 'twill show
 There was danger which you durst not meet. (V.i.472-77)

Except for the villainess of the play, the rest of female figures propose a more egalitarian view of virtue, a reinvigoration they make by means of a role reversal. Constantia and Agnes are probably the bravest characters of the play in contrast to their male counterparts, Don Pedro and Don Alvaro. To a great extent the moral dilemmas in *Agnes de Castro* rest on women's shoulders, who should choose between personal loyalty and sexual passion. Female figures are vindicated as

the leaders of the moral regeneration of the country, a task traditionally entrusted to men. This manly behaviour of women is established by Trotter from the very beginning, already in Agnes' depiction of Princess Constantia as "the sun" and "the bright mind" (I.ii.6-7). She is the first one to be associated to virtue in the play, "that virtue that mankind adores" (I.ii.32). Moreover, her use of reason and her moderate composure at the time of suffering are set as an example even for virtuous Agnes, who doesn't have a thought for herself, but only for the well-being of her friend's marriage and of the crown of Portugal. Constantia confesses to Don Pedro her uneasiness at Agnes' extreme self-renunciation: "I dread the effects of her severity,/ Which may instead of curing, more engage you,/ Charm'd with that rigorous virtue that undoes you" (I.ii.12-14). Nonetheless, Agnes' virtue is tried especially when, aided by faithful Lorenzo, she has the chance to escape from her imprisonment, but once more she prefers to behave honourably and accept her fate (IV.i.144-47). Agnes also refers to virtue as a "privilege" of noble souls, who far from the senses concentrate on the "riches of the mind" (IV.i.181-ff.). That is another reason why the villainess of the tragedy, Elvira, cannot be appraised as virtuous, precisely because she does not use reason, but follows the dictates of the senses. In that light, Elvira, as much as the male characters in Trotter's play, cannot embody that virtue Agnes represents. For her, this concept also implies a degree of self-sacrifice, which must not be identified with passivity, but once again with honour:

Most noble prince, you urge the king too far,
I ask for no defence, but innocence;
No arms, but argument, but truth, and virtue;
If they are without effect we must resign:
Death's welcomer than life with infamy. (V.i.146-50)

When she is finally absolved by means of Bianca's confession, and is free to love the Prince, now a widower, or to go away freely, she chooses to stay, once more at the cost of her name.

In choosing Agnes as a model of female virtue, Trotter does not only foster a reconsideration of gendered terms like the one proposed, but more than that, the playwright announces a new version of femininity altogether, the birth of the sentimental woman, that later writers of fiction like Defoe and Richardson will exploit in their novels, only to bring them back to the fold of domesticity and public anonymity. In that sense, intrinsically self-renunciating figures like Princess Constantia and Agnes herself in *Agnes de Castro*, were soon to be divested from the cloak of moral regenerators in the sense Trotter implies. From then onwards, at least for a long time, as is made plain at the end of the play, women's efforts to stand out in worldly matters are going to be thwarted, sometimes even tragically to the cost of their lives.

The existence of Elvira and Bianca also contributes to this very purpose. Rebecca Merrens attributes the frequent appearances of sinful women in Restoration tragedy, like these two characters in Trotter's play, to the need to constitute them as the site of sociopolitical warfare:

... 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. "Unnatural" female characters become the means by which anxiety-and conflict-ridden homosocial networks reestablish themselves as seemingly coherent and by which they mask the internal divisiveness of the patrilineal system. (1996: 32)

Ultimately, this strategy also works for masking the real purpose behind blaming women for being the agents of mischief, and that is the disguise of the intrinsic contradiction and the excess of violence within the patriarchal order itself, a system that already at the beginning of the 18th century revealed itself as crisis-ridden. Finally, the progressive feminisation of "weak" male characters like the Prince, also the precedent of the later sentimental man, especially due to his capacity for suffering and to his need of redemption through works of virtue. Figures like Don Alvaro became old-fashioned, very much like his sister, since both are the ones who initiate the two bloody revenge scenes of the play. Specifically, their tragic death shows Trotter's concern for suppressing manly excesses, and for promoting more moderate, and thus feminised positions instead.

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