

## Emasculated subjects and subjugated wives: discourses of domination in John Banks's *Vertue Betray'd* (1682)

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### ABSTRACT

After a modest career as a playwright, John Banks acquired notoriety with his 'she-tragedies', plays dealing with English queens as tragic heroes, which proved controversial despite their favourable reception by the public. The Prologue and Epilogue to *Vertue Betray'd or Anna Bullen* (1682) defend the poet against possible attacks asserting his detachment both from the Tory and the Whig cause. However, critics such as Canfield and Owen have analyzed the links between sentimental tragedy and the Whig faction: the representation of feeble or tyrannic kings on stage was part of the Whig propagandistic strategy to create an anti-monarchic consciousness during and after the Exclusion Crisis (1678-81). *Vertue Betray'd* is a paradigmatic example of this political use of Restoration drama: Banks's anti-Catholic portrait of Cardinal Wolsey, his compassion for Protestant Anna, his vindication of Queen Elizabeth and, above all, the denunciation of the king's tyranny, evidence his sympathies clearly. However, the relationship between Banks's pro-Whig play and its success with the female public in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries has been systematically neglected by critics. My aim is to show that the discourses of domination which served to create the appropriate frame of mind against popery and arbitrary government also operated on an unexpected field: women's empathy towards Banks's female heroes who pioneered a new kind of drama.

Between 1681 and 1704, John Banks prepared for the stage four tragedies dealing with British history; three of them were centered on the meteoric rise and fall of doomed queens: Anne Boleyn, Mary Queen of Scots and Lady Jane Gray.<sup>1</sup> They deserve a restricted but

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<sup>1</sup> *The Unhappy Favourite; or the Earl of Essex* (1681), *Vertue Betray'd; or, Anna Bullen* (1682), *The Innocent Usurper; or, The Death of the Lady Jane Gray* (1694), and *The Albion Queens; or, The Death of Mary, Queen of Scotland* (1704 – a revised version of *The Island Queens*, banned in 1684).

significant place in the literary canon as they pioneered the new genre later called the 'she-tragedy', in which the tragic hero is a woman. Although they have not attracted much critical attention, they represent the transitional step between the heroic drama of the early Restoration period and the sentimental drama of the eighteenth century. Banks's plays combine the recreation of a recent political past with the sentimental conflicts of women torn apart between love and duty which, to judge from their enthusiastic reception, proved a successful formula.

The first of Banks's 'she-tragedies', *Vertue Betray'd; or, Anna Bullen*, was premiered in March 1682, the aftermath of the Exclusion Crisis. Whig attempts to prevent Charles II's Catholic brother James from standing first in the line of succession had proved inefficient. Whig leaders were persecuted or in exile, and the Tory final triumph was to become apparent in a few months. Nevertheless, the Whigs were still very powerful in the streets and there was a general feeling that, should they fail to fulfill their aim, no other chance would come.<sup>2</sup> Their use of the press and their massive distribution of propaganda gave an illusion of power on the Whig's side. The theatre, as a privileged state apparatus, suffered an unprecedented politicization.

The prologue and the epilogue to *Vertue Betray'd* attempt to distance the play both from the Tory and the Whig cause. This move may have been designed to protect the playwright from accusations that could have led to the banishment of the play, a censorship that he was not able to prevent in his subsequent tragedies. The prologue, "written by a Person of Quality", states that the poet "meddles not with either Whig, or Tory" (6), and appeals to the unity of the country pointing to the threat of a new civil war:

Was't not enough, vain Men of either side,  
Two Roses once the Nation did divide?  
But must it be in danger now agen,

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<sup>2</sup> Although the Whigs were clearly in recess, they gave a last proof of power only four months before the first performance of the play: in late November 1681, Shaftesbury, the Whig leader, was acquitted of a charge of high treason because the jury was predominantly Whig. In 1682, Shaftesbury turned to Monmouth, who had started a campaign to win Whig support, as his last chance. As this last strategy proved unsuccessful, Shaftesbury fled to Holland in November and died in exile in January 1683. The Rye House Plot, which led to the execution of the remaining principal Whig leaders that same year, marked the definitive Tory victory.

Betwixt our Scarlet, and Green-Ribbon Men?  
Who made this diff'rence, were not Englands Friends;  
Be not their Tools to serve their Plotting Ends. (7-12)

Nevertheless, we should not take these protestations at face value: with his rewriting of the history of Henry VIII and his second wife, the playwright is clearly responding to the political anxieties of his time. Early criticism on Banks failed to recognize the topical significance of the play (Rothstein 1967, Brown 1981), interpreting its cathartic display of pathos as a defective development of the heroic mode. More recent research has been fairer: critics like Diane Dreher (1981) and Susan Owen (1996) have read *Vertue Betray'd* in the light of its political nuances, pointing to the links between sentimental tragedy in general, and Banks's works in particular, with the Exclusionists: the presentation of feeble or tyrannic kings on stage was part of the Whig propagandistic strategy to create an anti-monarchic consciousness (Munns 2001, Owen 2001). The Whigs saw themselves as the true defenders of Protestantism and national unity, as opposed to the two evils of the country: popery and arbitrary government. They resisted James's ascension to the throne because they feared the new king would advance the Catholic cause, but they also disapproved of Charles's present politics, especially concerning his dependence on Catholic France and his undisguised desire to rule without Parliament.

*Vertue Betray'd* can be considered a paradigmatic example of the political use of sentimental drama during the Restoration: Banks's anti-Catholic presentation of Cardinal Wolsey, his compassion for Protestant Anna, his defence of Queen Elizabeth and, above all, the representation on stage of a lustful, easy to manipulate king, they all show the author's sympathy for the Whig faction. Since royal censorship prevented direct criticism on the figure of the present monarch, political opposition had to be vehicled by means of allegories, rewritings of previous sources, and parallelisms with other troubled periods in the history of the country.

In her study on the influences of the Exclusion Crisis on Restoration drama, Jessica Munns classifies plays in three categories: plays about dysfunctional royal families, the "succession crisis" play and works portraying "rulers who struggle against the necessity of putting the public good above private inclination" (2001: 118). *Vertue Betray'd* epitomizes this last category. Henry's lust and recklessness, which echo those of Charles II's himself, make him blind to the

needs of his subjects. Those who dare to expose the evils of the court are punished because they evidence the weakness of the monarchy: this is not only Anna's case, but also that of the innocent men who die because of her alleged transgression. Thus, Banks presents a story which would be familiar to the audience, but reshapes history and literary tradition alike in order to create an enlightening portrayal of a corrupt monarchy, suspiciously similar to the absolutist court the Whigs challenged.<sup>3</sup>

*Vertue Betray'd* is the story of a woman painfully subdued by a man, but it is also the tragedy of a subject annihilated by the tyranny of a king. The play starts with Anna's wedding to King Henry, despite the strong opposition of Cardinal Wolsey and Elizabeth Blunt, the king's former mistress. Anna was secretly betrothed to young Piercy, but their respective families had different plans for them: Piercy's father wanted him to marry the heiress of Shrewsbury, and Anna's family pursued the social advancement that her wedding to the king would bring. When her own brother deceived Anna into believing that Piercy had married, she accepted the royal match, even though from the very beginning we are told "With what remorse she took the Regal Burthen,/ That sate upon her like a heavy Armour/ On a Child's back; she staggered with the Weight" (l.i.p.2). Anna cannot disobey the requirements of her king and family, although she foresees the dangers of her situation:

Their very Breath that now Proclaims, with joy,  
Sad Katherine to be no longer Queen,  
And my unwelcome Coronation;  
Would the same moment, should my Stars permit,  
Shout louder at the Sentence of my Death. (l.i.p.7)

These fears will prove true when the King becomes attracted to Jane Seymour, a fact that makes him inclined to believe Wolsey and Blunt's machinations and false evidence which eventually will lead

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<sup>3</sup> The story acquired a new relevance with Davenant's revivals of Shakespeare and Fletcher *Henry VIII* (Dec. 1663/ Jan. 1664, Dec. 1668, Sept. 1672, Nov. 1675). Banks compresses the events in order to erase any trace of encomiastic celebration of the monarchy. McMullan rightly contends that the less subtle delineation of plot and characters "realigns and simplifies the play's engagement with Protestantism" (2000: 24). By choosing such a well-known story, the playwright was circumscribing the subject to an easily recognizable framework in order to deploy his allegory of the current situation.

Anna to the scaffold: Lady Blunt, by Wolsey's advice, seduces Anna's brother and uses his love letters, in which he called Blunt "sister", to ruin them both accusing them of incest (V.i.p.62).<sup>4</sup> Anna, a loyal subject and a faithful wife, falls prey to the corruption of the court and the inefficacy of the king, who neglects the welfare of the kingdom in order to pursue his personal goals. Henry is wilfully deceived by Wolsey because he is already infatuated with in Jane Seymour:

Take thou my Scepter, bind it to thy Cross,  
And to thy Mitre add my humble Crown;  
'Tis all my *Woolsey's*. *Woolsey* shall be king.  
I ask but only Seymour in exchange. (II.i.p.17)

This negligent transfer of power surely recalled that of Charles II himself, whose strategy was to make concessions to a Catholic power, the France of Louis XIV, in order to obtain the financial support necessary to rule without Parliament.<sup>5</sup> The defence of Parliamentary independence and Protestantism went thus hand in hand, since the one was perceived to safeguard the other.

Owen contends that it is difficult to differentiate between Tory and Whig plays because their core structure is very similar (1996: 239). Characters in both kinds of plays are usually passive, unable to respond to the aggressions they suffer. Canfield points out that, in political dramas, "no matter how weak the king, no matter what crimes he himself may have committed, loyal subjects must leave vengeance to the Lord" (2000: 41). Indeed, Whig plays did not encourage the audience to take explicit action against the two evils of the time: popery and arbitrary government. Instead, they helped to create the appropriate frame of mind for prospective changes. Although the Whig features in *Vertue Betray'd* are remarkable, there

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<sup>4</sup> Although *Vertue Betray'd* has been recently analyzed in the light of its theatrical predecessor, Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* (see McMullan 2000: 23-24), the plot follows closely the account that appears in *The Novels of Elizabeth Queen of England*, attributed to Mme d'Aulnoy (1680); nevertheless, the sexual tension between Wolsey and Blunt is completely new. Wolsey's characterization as an ambitious and lecherous man is hardly surprising: Protestant propaganda commonly identified Catholics with both vices.

<sup>5</sup> The savage prosecution of French Huguenots, many of whom went into exile to England, was a source of concern for English Protestants, who saw French religious intolerance as a terrifying warning (see Coward 1980: 274).

is no call to action but to inactivity and patient suffering, a feature that is usually found in Tory plays:

The heroes of avowedly royalist or Tory plays are often masochistic, passive and paralysed by a sense of right action ... Loyalty without hope of reward is a stifling ideal when loyal heroes must annihilate themselves in conformity with the ideal of absolute obedience to kings who do not deserve or value it. (Owen 2001: 134)

One of Banks's greatest innovations is that he rewrites the discourse of loyal endurance usually found in Tory plays, transferring it to his Whig denunciation of absolutism. His characters, suffocated by the oppressive power of the king, can only face their fate with stoic confidence in the afterlife. By presenting the subjugated self-righteousness of his protagonists, Banks is denying Tory claims that the Whigs would not hesitate to provoke a new civil war in order to achieve their ends: "Charles and the Tories successfully smeared the Whigs with the taint of republicanism; moreover, the Whigs themselves by their extremist tactics lost the support of the propertied classes" (Coward 1980: 291). Instead of overtly inviting the audience to rebel against the current situation, Banks adhered to the "principal discourses of later seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century politics, virtue and right" (Braverman 1993: xii). Virtue, representing "the principle of parliamentary independence in a mixed government" (xiii), can only be understood within the current political theory that identified the body politic as a feminized body:

sexual difference applied to the political difference of crown and parliament because that difference was inscribed in the hierarchy of the body politic; in that context the conflict between sovereign and nation over traditional powers and privileges was a contest over the definition and control of a political body. (Braverman 1993: xii)

Drawing on this identification between the feminized body and the body politic, political messages found their means of expression in the parallelism between state and household. Critical misapprehensions have usually based the reading of *Vertue Betray'd* on the second aspect, obliterating the first and thus missing the topical ideological framework that was in force during the Restoration. For instance, according to Brown, "Banks goes to almost ridiculous lengths to eliminate public motive from historical events"

(1981: 96). This interpretation misreads the symbolic potential of this identification: absolutism in the court is represented by means of Henry's despotic exercise of power in the domestic sphere. As Wheatley states, "Henry's hubris is shown by his intrusion on the newly private realm of affection" (2000: 78), separating Anna from Piercy and forcing him to marry a woman he would never love. The private and the public spheres are skilfully intertwined in a new kind of drama: the wronged wife stands for the subjugation of loyal Protestantism under the foot of absolutism, symbolized by a tyrannic husband. Popery and court corruption, incarnated by Wolsey and Lady Blunt respectively, unite to pervert the king's mind, turning him into an egotistic and malleable ruler.

Anna stands as the protomartyr of Protestantism harassed by popish forces. According to Dreher, the "anachronistic representation" of Wolsey (who actually died before Anne Boleyn's trial and beheading, although in the play he survives her and rejoices at her misfortune), along with his affair with Blunt, makes him "an evil caricature of the Catholic Church itself" (1981: vi). Banks manipulates chronology to create an allegorical character, simplistically manichean because it does not correspond to the portrait of a real man. Blunt herself describes Wolsey's dishonesty and flattery, and their mutual bonds of lust and greed:

Art thou the Thing that from the Chaff of Mankind,  
From the base scurrilous Rubbish of the World,  
First found thy self a way to thrive by Wit?  
Then edging it with sharpest villanies,  
Mow'd thee a passage to thy Princes Breast,  
And cut down all the Virtuous from his sight,  
Who choose thee for the Champion of his Vices;  
...  
This you did once confess to me, and more,  
When you declar'd how hot you were in love. (I.i.p.4)

Anne has a reputation for being the most conversant in theology of all of Henry's queens: even if she was not as pious and saint-like as the Spanish Catherine of Aragon, she nonetheless enjoyed discussing religious issues with her husband, and she sometimes interceded for dissenters or heretics (see Warnicke 1991: 100-130). Her ideological confrontation with the Cardinal would surely seem plausible to the audience. Anna and Wolsey's enmity encapsulates in fact a religious struggle, that of papistry facing, as

Wolsey exclaims in a rage, “a Lutheran Queen upon the Throne of England” (I.i.p.3).

Anna’s role as the cornerstone of the Church of England is further emphasized by the vindication of Queen Elizabeth at the end of the play. With an unbelievable loquacity for a three year-old baby, Elizabeth identifies Wolsey with popery and scorns both:

*Child:* He looks for all  
The World, just like the Picture of the Pope.  
*King:* Why, don’t you love the Pope?  
*Child:* No indeed don’t I,  
nor never will. (V.i.p.67)

Banks stresses Elizabeth’s power to clean her mother’s name and defeat popery, emphasizing the double bond that unites mother and child: they are both Protestant and also women:

*Queen:* Thou, little Child,  
Shalt live to see thy Mother’s Wrongs o’-re-paid  
In many Blessings on thy Womans State  
... That holy Tyrant,  
Who binds all *Europe* with the Yoak of Conscience,  
Holding his Feet upon the Necks of Kings;  
Thou shalt destroy, and quite unloose his Bonds,  
And lay the Monster trembling at thy Feet.  
When this shall come to pass, the World shall see  
Thy Mothers Innocence reviv’d in thee. (V.i.p.74)

Elizabethan nostalgia was a commonplace in Whig plays, celebrating a golden age of prosperity and unity that the Stuarts were not able to maintain. Banks had already chosen Elizabeth as the tragic heroine of *The Unhappy Favourite or the Earl of Essex* (1681, published in 1685). In that play, as in *Vertue Betray’d*, the favourable presentation of the Queen as a judicious and compassionate monarch sharply contrasts with the critical portrayal of the court as a site of corruption and partisan interests, a criticism that could be easily applied to the contemporary situation. As Munns contends, “the most positive images of royalty come not from Tory poets seeking to support a troubled monarchy but from Whig writers happily opposing it with propagandistic images of a national icon” (2001:121). This vindication of the monarchy is not at odds with the Whig oppositional discourse. The Whigs did not support a

republican form of government, but aimed to preserve the dignity of the royal institution by removing the elements that could impair it, which accounts for the conservative tone of this kind of drama (see Knights 1994: 313).

By way of contrast with Anna's steadfast convictions, Henry is easily manipulated by his subjects, especially by Lady Blunt, whose ambition precipitates the queen's downfall. Distrust towards royal sexual misconduct was deeply rooted, since Charles' French mistresses were suspected of influencing his decisions regarding English policy abroad (see Owen 1996: 10). The king is not only too inclined towards popery, epitomized in Wolsey, the Machiavel of the play, but also towards arbitrary government, oppressing his people. Yet, Anna decides to face her duty both as a woman and a subject by obeying a superior authority, even though she knows it to be unfair:<sup>6</sup>

Just Heav'n, whose is the Sin?  
Punish not me, I sought not to be Queen;  
But Henry's Guilt amidst my Pomp is weigh'd,  
And makes my Crown sit heavy on my Head,  
To banish from his Bed, the chastest Bride,  
That twenty years lay loving by his side!  
How can I give it, without tears, a Name  
When I reflect my Case may be the same? (I.i.p.14)

The real tragedy of the play is that Anna is able to foresee her fate, but she cannot rebel against it: external pressures force her to walk towards her own destruction. Her ambitious family uses her as a means of social promotion, reifying her into a commodity. Anna repeatedly laments the unyielding demands of her king and family, in a recurrent identification between tyrannical fathers and monarchs: "Parents threats and Kings Authority,/ Rent me, like Thunder, from my fixt Resolves" (I.i.p.10). As Owen states, the theme of bad fatherhood is unmistakably Whiggish (1996: 272). The image of the king as *Parens Patriae* is severely challenged since, as Banks repeatedly emphasizes, unnatural fathers might lead their offspring to destruction.

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<sup>6</sup> Curiously enough, this double bond as mistress and subject was part of Henry VIII's discourse of seduction in his love letters to Anne Boleyn in real life: in one of them, the king assured her that "if she found it more agreeable to be his servant than his mistress, he was willing for her to hold that position" (Warnicke 1991: 79).

It would seem that a play so dependent on topicality was bound to be forgotten as soon as the events that conditioned its composition were past. *Vertue Betray'd*, however, overcame its predictable fate and was, as it happened, a very popular play in the following century. Curiously enough, the same reasons which contributed to the political interest of the play explained also its successful revivals in the eighteenth century, when the Exclusion Crisis was a forgotten issue. The denunciation of tyranny was extrapolated to the domestic realm, and female audiences welcomed Banks's allegory with the same enthusiasm as Whig supporters had originally done. Banks was not only voicing a political message, he was participating in an ideological shift at the turn of the century, when women started to assert their right of resistance in the private sphere, as their husbands did in the public one.

Parallel to the increasing debate about the right to oppose an unlawful or tyrannical monarch (see Knights 1994: 33), another focus of controversy was being developed. Juliet Dusinberre traces the first signs of the clash between the new Puritan concept of the companionate marriage and the reinforcement of patriarchy:

One source of tension was the Puritan insistence on the spiritual equality of man and wife, and on a concept of relationship which stresses equal fellowship in preference to the subjugation of the woman. The reconciling of an authoritarian model with egalitarian practice was obviously fraught with difficulty. It would in due course have its own repercussions on ideas of government, that the political as well as the domestic state should be run by mutual consent. (1996: xvi)

According to Stone, "patriarchy within the family is a characteristic of societies with strong authoritarian state systems" (1977: 152); there is therefore a direct correlation between the discourses of domination at work in the public and private spheres. When resistance to royal authority became a political issue, women adopted the Whig's discourse in order to state their right to limit abuses within the household. This debate would acquire force progressively, culminating in Queen Anne's reign as a new era of women's empowering and self-legitimation (see Barash 1992). Mary Astell's *Some Reflections upon Marriage* (1700) is probably one of the best known and most remarkable instances of a woman writer transferring the political discourse of the petitioners to the domestic sphere:

He who has Sovereign Power does not value the Provocations of a Rebellious Subject, but knows how to subdue him with ease, and will make himself obey'd; but Patience and Submission are the only Comforts that are left to a poor People, who groan under Tyranny, unless they are Strong enough to break the Yoke, to Depose and Abdicate, which I doubt wou'd not be allowed of here. For whatever may be said against Passive Obedience in another case, I suppose there's no Man but likes it very well in this; how much soever Arbitrary Power may be dislik'd on a Throne, Not *Milton* himself wou'd cry up Liberty to poor *Female Slaves*, or plead for the Lawfulness of Resisting a Private Tyranny. (28-29)

Banks was probably no less patriarchal than his contemporaries, but his female heroes certainly established a new trend in drama and extended the possibilities for women on stage. Besides, by choosing influential women as patronesses, he was publicly acknowledging the social and political role of women in court faction. Banks maintained a symbiotic relationship with women throughout his literary career: he was protected and advanced by them; at the same time women, who traditionally were less politically involved in society than men, benefited from the innovative presentation of female heroes in his plays. Banks was a man and a playwright, which surely gave his ideas a wider reach than those of Mary Astell or any other woman writing in prose for a small circle of friends and family (usually female too). Heroic loyalty and patriotism, which had traditionally been inextricably linked to manliness, were for the first time identified with courageous women. The transitional nature of Banks's 'she-tragedies' contributed to the dramatic development towards melodrama, which proves that feminine tastes were a lasting target long after Banks ceased to write for the stage. In Derek Hughes's words,

One benign parallel to the weakening theoretical credit of hereditary hierarchy was a growing interest in the rights and potentialities of women; and, of course, the stage itself gave women a new forum, both as writers and actresses, at a time when some traditional areas of commercial activity were becoming closed to them. (1996: 23)

The Exclusion Crisis accelerated the rise of the sentimental; as Owen explains, "both Tory and Whig playwrights use sentimentalized, suffering characters to dramatize the horrors of

rebellion and republicanism, and tyranny and popery, respectively” (2001: 138). Writers chose pathetic characters as warnings against the stifling power of the monarchy; the more undeserved and unjust their punishments were, the more evident the unpredictability of subjects’ fates. Women, having a traditional image of powerlessness, were the ideal sufferers, less harmful and aggressive than men and thus more compelling than they were:

The history of serious drama is closely wedded to the changing position of women in English society. The evolving attitudes toward property marriage, toward women’s economic functions, toward the nature and importance of the family, and toward female chastity, which result, in part, in the eighteenth-century bourgeois cult of womanhood, produce a new female prototype that is reflected in the crucial role of the passive, virtuous woman in these plays. (Brown 1981: 99)

The male characters in these plays are also weak and pathetic, emphasizing the emasculating power of tyranny, against which no man can fight without risking his own life and estate, as well as those of his beloved ones: “His [Banks’s] heroes, when they share the stage with their suffering or wounded counterparts, resemble them in passivity, pathos, and ineptitude, and achieve an almost feminine reduction in effectual status as a result” (Brown 1981: 96). This emasculation, which was intended to make the audience aware of the evils of arbitrary government, is actually a change of roles in Banks’s plays: women live blamelessly and die heroically, while men provoke their ruin (as in the case of Banks’s version of the story of Lady Jane Gray, in which her husband convinces her to accept the crown despite her moral scruples at what she believes to be an act of usurpation) or have a far less honourable attitude than their chaste and judicious ladies, becoming more a burden than a help. This is the case of Piercy and Anna: she stoically faces her fate as Henry’s chaste wife, whereas Piercy complains in vain about the impossibility of their love, increasing Anna’s misery.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In Rothstein’s seminal book *Restoration Tragedy*, emasculated subjects are “blatantly foolish or naive” (1967: 96). For him, the “stupid hero” is an invention of Banks’s, who “alters the received structure of tragedy by having the lovers victimized together, in the three plays of the eighties, without differentiating by sex the nature of the life that they might choose ... Consequently, Banks goes further than Lee in downgrading honor, the more masculine of the perpetual antitheses” (1967: 97). In fact, this refusal to comply with traditional generic expectations can be interpreted in the opposite

Apart from the fact that women protagonists boost the pathos of the plays, the other major reason why Banks turned to women as the centre of his tragedies may have been the different political implications that male and female figures had in drama. Female protagonists allowed Banks to present political nuances that, with a male protagonist, would have been impossible to display on stage. Banks defended himself against political attacks saying that his plays were mainly aimed 'for the fair sex,' and his dedicatory epistles prove a biased interest towards this specific section of the audience. With the consolidated presence of women on stage, Banks's innovations were the suitable outcome of an age in British drama in which women had full protagonism as writers, actresses, spectators, and patronesses. As Elizabeth Howe explains, the actresses' "talent and popular success fostered a shift from male-based drama to female" and, although it did not translate in a remarkable change in women's living conditions and social status, it is indisputable that "the end of the century left them more articulate than ever before" (1992: xii-xiii). The excessive pathos in the delineation of some Restoration women characters should not, as has happened too frequently, obscure the fact that drama was experiencing a significant shift of focus, and moving towards a primarily feminine arena.

The parallelism between the monarchic and patriarchal systems proved extremely useful in the seventeenth century. In exposing the injustice inherent in one, Banks was indirectly criticizing the other as well. There is a glorification of 'quietism', so it could be too adventurous to talk of Banks's 'proto-feminism'; however, the connection between women's subjugation and subjects' annihilation was there, exposing an injustice that others had the chance to denounce properly.<sup>8</sup> In the subsequent wave of sentimental drama, domestic conflicts are explored in depth, and subversive conclusions are frequently represented on stage. The

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fashion: Banks is not undermining men but elevating women, conferring on them a moral superiority and a clearer insight that make them exceptional exemplary figures. Men are unable to react appropriately when facing transcendental trials which can only be rewarded in the afterlife: they are blinded by passion, court intrigues and ambition.

<sup>8</sup> My analysis of 'quietism' differs from that of Susan Owen, who interprets it as an essentially Tory phenomenon (1996: 30). As has been shown, the refusal to rebel can be found in Whig plays too. In Banks, martyred women incarnate the injustices of tyranny in a much more compelling way than an explicit call to arms, not to say that these plays had more chances to pass uncensored than overtly political works.

door was open for women writers, readers and play-goers, who had their forerunners in the suffering queens of Banks's plays. Feminist criticism has failed to see the subversive potential of Banks's 'she-tragedies', and political criticism has been deterred by what was perceived as an excessive sentimentality. It is time to reappraise the value and contemporary relevance of plays like *Vertue Betray'd*, and start considering its innovative multiplicity of targets as Banks's greatest contribution to the history of political drama and feminism alike.

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