

Pilar Cuder-Domínguez. *Stuart Women Playwrights, 1613-1713*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011. 148 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6713-1

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In the last three decades, our knowledge of British women writers of the early modern period has changed radically, largely thanks to the research and teaching of many scholars from around the world. The book under review is one such example, and a wise and successful re-elaboration of many issues that its author, Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, a specialist in early modern literature, gender and postcolonial theory, has dealt with in previous articles and essays. This monograph is a sound and groundbreaking analysis of the tragedy and tragicomedy written by women dramatists during the Stuart period, and deserves the attention that its publication by Ashgate is likely to bring.

Cuder contends that, despite the inclusion of female-authored texts into the corpus of early modern researchers in recent years, there is still much work to be done, mainly with respect to certain authors and texts. She argues that scholarship so far has mostly focused on Aphra Behn and particularly on her comedies, while the contribution of other contemporary female dramatists to tragedy and tragicomedy has been neglected. Hence Cuder's stated aim in this text is "to establish the importance of those two dramatic genres —tragedy and tragicomedy— in the context of women's coming to voice in seventeenth-century England and, in so doing, trace a full genealogy of women-authored works" (8). With this objective in mind, she examines some twenty plays of those genres, published between 1613 (Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*) and 1713 (Anne Finch's *Aristomenes*). Thus her study covers a period of a hundred years that roughly coincides with the Stuart reigns in England, and consciously breaks from conventional approaches that establish a gap between the periods before and after the Interregnum, since she sees "inescapable continuities" (9) in themes, plots, and formal issues. Nevertheless, her analysis does not seek to establish a linear progress or evolution in women's employment of tragic modes, but "to map out a number of diverse, multi-nuanced appropriations and uses of tragedy and tragicomedy, all of them serving as vehicles for each playwright's social, intellectual, and/or formal concerns" (13). All these aims are set out in the first chapter of the book, where the author also delineates her debt to feminism, new historicism and post-colonialism, hence her interest in the construction of gender and racial identities, sexual politics, and ideological issues underlying the texts.

Certainly, the work of the women writers of the Stuart period is worthy of further critical attention. The recent interest in Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish, Aphra

Behn and Delarivier Manley must still be extended to new issues and neglected texts. And certainly, the work of Frances Boothby, Mary Pix, Catherine Trotter, Jane Wiseman, and Anne Finch needs further scholarly attention, so that it can be better known, (re) assessed, and taken into account for a more thorough knowledge of Stuart England and female literary tradition. Yet I cannot concur with the idea that the female playwrights of that period wrote mostly comedy, and that their comedies have already been sufficiently studied. As Cuder herself notes, the first contributions that English women made to drama were translations of tragic plays: Jane Lumley rendered Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* about 1550, Queen Elizabeth Englished a fragment of Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus* about 1561, and Mary Sidney adapted Robert Garnier's *Antonie* in 1592. The first original play written by an Englishwoman was also a tragedy, Cary's *Mariam* (1613), and before Behn's first comedy (*The Amorous Prince*, 1671), only a comic closet piece was female-authored: Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley's *The Concealed Fancies* (c1645). Women writers otherwise penned dramatic sketches of difficult generic categorisation (like Cavendish), translated tragedies (e.g. Katherine Philips's rendering of Corneille's *Pompey*, 1663), or opted for tragicomedy (e.g. Boothby's *Marcellia*, 1669, and Behn's *The Forced Marriage*, 1670). It is true that most of Behn's later plays are comedies, but at the turn of the century Pix wrote as many comedies as tragedies, Trotter and Manley composed only one comedy each, and neither Finch nor Wiseman employed the comic genre. It is also true that Behn has attracted more scholars than any other female author of this period, but we must bear in mind that she was the most prolific of her era, and also wrote poetry and prose fiction (*Oroonoko* being the object of much Behn scholarship and, notably, a tragic story). Moreover, most studies on her drama have focused on *The Rover* (Parts I and II), yet the rest of her dramatic pieces deserve more critical attention than they have had so far. The same can be said of comedies written by the other female dramatists of this period. Considering the aims expounded in the first chapter and the selected corpus, a more specific title for the book would make explicit the study's restriction to tragic and tragicomic works, a focus which makes the book distinct from previous studies on these female dramatists, such as Cotton (1980), Clark (1986) or Rubik (1998), among others.

The first female translators and writers of drama in England were members of prominent aristocratic families and received an education seldom available to early modern women, a sign of the commitment of the English upper classes to humanist ideals. As Cuder rightly points out, classical drama figured prominently in humanist pedagogy, because it was thought to offer good models for the learning of classical languages, rhetoric, and morals. Reading, translating, and memorising extracts of classical drama was part of the educational process of these privileged women. It is no wonder that women translated full texts or (later) wrote their own dramatic pieces following classical models. Moreover, their plays were never meant for public performance and often circulated in manuscript, so the authors could avoid possible censure of their work as a breach of expected feminine modesty and domesticity. Cuder interestingly argues that Elizabeth Cary's choice of Senecan closet drama as a model for the first original play written by an Englishwoman placed the text in

an ambivalent position (neither private nor widely public), and by providing devices for orienting the readers (summary, chorus, etc.), gives primacy to speech over action. These devices could defend her as a woman author while giving her female characters voice and agency to an unusual degree.

In Chapter 2 Cuder centres mainly on Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*, where, in the first four scenes of this pioneering play, Cary gives the floor entirely to women, providing female characters with the chance to voice their views. These women are outspoken about their motives, ends, and concerns, expressing their multiple reasons for their resistance to King Herod's tyranny. There is a clear confrontation between the active, articulate, Iago-like Salome and the stoic and modest Mariam: the agentive, deviant villainess versus the victimised, virtuous heroine. For Cuder, this conflict is further complicated by issues of race and rank, since Salome is *othered* as a dark woman in relation to Mariam's fairness, as a "mongrel" versus a purer embodiment of the Jewish nation. Compared to such female characters, the men in this play seem to lack power and direction: the most virtuous — Constabarus— is rather passive, while Herod proves changeable and easily manipulated. Cuder's analysis of gender and racial politics in the play shows how those categories overlap and are in constant flux, fraught with discrepancies and contradictions. Some characters —mainly women— try to bring about change, while others —often men— simply resist tyranny. Unexpectedly, at the end, scheming, active characters such as Salome and Alexandra are absolved, whereas virtuous, passive characters like Mariam and Constabarus are killed. Mariam's Stoic resignation as a victim allows for a non-confrontational type of heroine that will prove attractive to later women writers.

In Chapter 3 Cuder deals with Margaret Cavendish's "Dramatic Experiments" during the Interregnum. The writings of this author are *sui generis* and challenge generic labels, so it seems inappropriate to refer to them as tragedies. Nonetheless, Cuder chooses to analyse two pieces of the 1662 folio edition of her plays with tragic elements: *The Unnatural Tragedy* and *Youths Glory*, along with the heroic *Bell in Campo*. The first of these plays revolves around the topic of incest, presented as 'unnatural' because the male protagonist, Frere, uses rhetoric and violence to obtain his ends regardless of moral values, bringing about suffering and death. In the subplot, Monsieur Malateste's second wife mistreats him, just as he has abused his first wife. Her behaviour is as 'unnatural' and monstrous as his, but she somehow becomes an agent of poetic justice. *Youths Glory* also plays with contrasting and similar fates for female characters. Lady Sanspareille gives up marriage prospects and manages to become a famous scholar, whereas Lady Innocence becomes the fiancé of Lord de L'Amour, who has a married lover —Lady Incontinent— who conspires against her. Their fates, however, are similarly tragic: Sanspareille dies from a sudden illness, and Innocence commits suicide after being falsely accused of robbery. Life without and within marriage turns out to be challenging for women. Similarly, in the subplots of *Bell in Campo*, the lives of Madam Passionate and Madam Jantil are ruined after their husbands die in battle, although one marries again and the other one does not. In the main plot, Cavendish presents an example of successful heroism in

Lady Victoria: she leads a group of wives who accompany their spouses to battle, and their military action becomes crucial for victory. Cuder claims that Lady Victoria shows courage and resourcefulness, and proves that women deserve full citizenship, despite the elitist discourse used by this royalist author.

Chapter 4 moves to the first original play written by a woman to be performed in the commercial theatre, Boothby's *Marcellia* (1669), before proceeding to Behn's tragicomedies and sole tragedy. Boothby's play has a tragicomic plot and a comic subplot. As in prior examples, the women in the serious plot are powerless, paralysed by the codes of virtue and can do nothing but complain. However, the female characters of the comic plot are allowed to exhibit more freedom. This Tory piece shows the defeat of upstarts and the triumph of aristocratic values, with a light criticism of Charles II's libertinism. In analysing Behn's plays, one of the questions that occupies Cuder is the clash between the author's partisan and gender politics. For instance, in *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670), gender violence remains largely unquestioned, and in *Abdelazer* (1676), female characters are only consequential in so far as they oppose the royalist cause —the villainous Isabella— or advance it —the grieving Leonora and the silent and submissive Florella. According to Cuder, Behn does not resist the characterisation of women as either passive virgins or forward whores. She acknowledges that the Amazon princess Cleomena in *The Young King* (1679) is one of Behn's most agentive heroines, engaging in matters of state, like setting up the restoration of her brother Orsames, even though she is forced into marriage. And in *The Widdow Ranter* (1689), the eponymous heroine is an unconventional, daring, determined woman. Cuder is also interested in the representation of race and cultural confrontation in *Abdelazer* and *The Widdow Ranter*, arguing that Behn questions the association of blackness with evil and whiteness with virtue in the former, and is sympathetic with the Native Americans and acknowledges the English mismanagement of colonial Virginia in the latter.

Cuder's combination of gender and post-colonial approaches is also present in Chapter 5, where she analyses the Eastern plays of Pix and Manley: *Ibrahim* (1696), *The Royal Mischief* (1696) and *Almyna* (1706). For the author, these Eastern plays should be understood as reflections on difference and possibility, often with hidden domestic worries. Pix had Whig sympathies and her play justifies active resistance against tyranny. But, as occurs in works previously analysed, female agency is portrayed as deviant, since Sheker Para is a Machiavellian villainess. Similarly transgressive is Homais, in Manley's *Royal Mischief*, but this time the politics underlying the play fall on the Tory side, with the final restoration of order. Manley manages to reconcile gender and party politics in *Almyna*, as the eponymous heroine is depicted as agentive and outspoken without becoming monstrous, and the king, as Charles II had also done, restores order and appoints his brother as his successor. This chapter also analyses Pix's *The Conquest of Spain* (1705) and *Queen Catherine* (1698), together with Manley's *Lucius* (1717).

The sixth chapter of this monograph focuses on Catherine Trotter, whose tragedies, according to Cuder, enact the public versus private, reason versus passion, and duty versus love dichotomies. Trotter dares to base her first play, *Agnes de Castro* (1696), on a female-

authored source: a novel by Behn with the same title, seeming to show the admiration that Trotter and the 1690s generation of women dramatists had for Behn. However, according to Hughes (1996: 445), Trotter works against Behn's emphasis on the fragility of a civilization disrupted by rebellious subjects and rulers. For Cuder, the play shows the fatal consequences of letting feelings guide people's actions in both the private and public spheres. As for other tragedies by Trotter, the author is concerned with how *The Fatal Friendship* (1698) emphasises the corrupting power of money, *The Unhappy Penitent* (1701) explores the private-public dilemma of what may happen if an engagement is broken, and *The Revolution of Sweden* (1706) ends with the destruction of tyranny and foreign rule, as well as with the union of two individuals who are aware of their public duties. Cuder contends that a Whig conceptualisation of citizenship lies at the heart of this last play.

Stuart Women Playwrights ends, rather bluntly, with a very brief chapter on the tragic works of Jane Wiseman and Anne Finch. Cuder limits herself to a few comments on Wiseman's *Antiochus the Great* (1701), although she considers it an astonishing achievement for someone who has written no further works, and she addresses Finch's tragicomedy *The Triumphs of Love and Innocence* (c.1688) and her tragedy *Aristomenes* (c. 1690), not published until 1713. These two plays convey Finch's preoccupations with matters of kingship and exile, as well as her Jacobite sympathies. None of the three pieces discussed in this chapter have yet received much critical attention, so it is a pity that we are not provided with more extensive analysis. What one misses most is a final section where the author might present the conclusions reached after writing this well-documented and insightful study. Highlighting the "outstanding commonalities" among these tragedies written by Stuart women in a period of a hundred years, and providing a detailed account of how her analysis proves that gender and genre "establish challenging and thought-provoking links that have so far been neglected and that deserve to be teased out further" (127), would have successfully concluded a study that is, in all other respects, innovative, clear-sighted, and enlightening. We must warmly welcome a book like this, and hope that it will become an important reference in future research on early modern women writers.

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