



Sex and Society: Analytical Exercise

***The Fair Penitent*, Act Four, Lines 117-266.**

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In my analysis of the specified extract of *The Fair Penitent* I endeavour to discuss the way in which the immoralities of the characters, including betrayal, violence and vengeance, are presented in this scene and how these themes can be considered in social, historical and theological frameworks. I will also be considering how gender roles have a bearing on the action and how these roles were determined by the context in which the piece was written. I will particularly question whether the work can be legitimately called a 'she-tragedy', a fashionable genre at the time when Rowe supposedly coined the phrase, or whether this is really just a label of a genre that has been prevalent throughout theatre history. Is Calista a strong female protagonist or merely a vehicle for a plot that revolves around men? These are themes found throughout the play, and I will be relating this extract to the whole in this way.

The female patrons of English theatre at the time of the writing of the play were keen to see female characters taken more seriously, prompted by the fact that they were 'beginning to adopt the role of critic normally abrogated to the gentlemen in the pit'.¹ I will therefore be defining she-tragedy in this analysis as drama with a serious female protagonist, portrayed with more sympathy than in earlier works for contextual reasons I will be discussing later on in this analysis.

If we look first at the introductory indicators, such as the title and cast list, we can get a first impression as to the genre. From the Dramatis Personae given at the beginning of the piece we can see that the characters seem to be described in their relation to Calista. Sciolto is described as 'father to Calista', Altamont described as 'in love with Calista', and Lucilla described as 'confidante to Calista'. We also assume that *The Fair Penitent* at the centre of the title is Calista. We are given great indication that this is a play with a female protagonist, and better yet a desirable one, the name Calista meaning 'most beautiful'.² The plot of the work is driven by men's passions or love for her, and as a result we see Altamont shamed and heartbroken, Horatio betrayed, Sciolto dead and Lothario killed.

The extract chosen, in light of its original source *The Fatal Dowry*, shows a significant change of theatrical approach. If the two extracts are compared, we can see a change in plot that mirrors the changing social landscape which stressed politeness rather than bawdiness and mercy rather than vengeance. The scene in which Rochfort (Sciolto), Charalois (Altamont) and Beaumelle (Calista) are together after the exposition of Beaumelle's sexual indiscretions seems to have rather different actions and consequences. In Rowe's version we see Altamont having mercy upon Calista, confessing 'my soul starts with horror/ At thought of any danger that may reach thee' (line 122/3) and holds back Sciolto when he tries to kill Calista, telling him to 'Stay thee, Sciolto, thou rash father, stay'. In contrast, in Massinger and Field's play we see Charalois stab Beaumelle onstage, although

¹ Susan C. Harris, 'Outside the Box: The Female Spectator, The Fair Penitent, and the Kelly Riots of 1747' in 'Theatre Journal' (Great Britain: The John Hopkins University Press, March 2005), Volume 57, Number 1, pp. 33-55, (p.48).

² Website: 'Behind the Name', Search word 'Calista' < <http://www.behindthename.com/name/calista>>, with link to 'Kallisto' < <http://www.behindthename.com/name/kallisto>> [Accessed 07/11/2010]

prompted by Rochfort who forbids his forgiveness of Beaumelle, since 'to pardon such a sin,/ Is an offence as great as to commit it' (Act 4, Scene 3). This transformation on Rowe's part seems to be symptomatic of neoclassical tragedy; Goldstein notes that 'Like most sympathetic characters in neoclassical tragedy' Altamont is 'caught in conflict(s) between love and honor' and observes that 'As Calista grows in the course of the play, he seems to fade. Not only is he less virile than the other male characters; he is no match for his headstrong wife'.³ Susan Staves comments that 'As the culture became more a bourgeois culture of men who rejected the personal use of violence, where better to look for examples how people manage without violence than among women?'.⁴ Perhaps the character of Altamont could be seen as a product of the context in which he was authored, and perhaps reflects Rowe's, and other contemporary playwrights', stance that theatre should depict 'morally improvable human beings'⁵ and have a 'benevolent outlook on humanity'.⁶ Evidence for the extract, and the play as a whole, as demonstrating features of the she-tragedy can be found in the more sympathetic portrayal of Calista accessible in this scene. We could see the temptation of Calista and subsequent heartbreak of Altamont and death of Lothario as Sciolto's doing. As we can see from the *Dramatis Personae*, Altamont is not betrothed to Calista through mutual decision but because he is 'designed her husband by Sciolto'. We can feel sympathy for Calista in being arranged to marry someone other than the one she loves. She is clearly intimidated by her father, likening him to a 'storm' (line 134) and a 'tempest' (line 137), and misunderstood by Altamont, declaring 'O, thou hast known but little of Calista' (line 125). She is depicted as a martyr in the selected passage, willing Sciolto to 'Strike home, and I will bless thee for the blow' and begs him to 'free me from my pain' (lines 163/4), since she 'Still...(has) something of Sciolto's virtue' and 'applaud(s) thy justice' (lines 161/2). Her resignation to punishment and the guilt put upon her by the two men makes an audience feel sympathetic to her plight. Not only this but there are hints at Sciolto's being at fault; Calista declares 'I could curse/ The cheerful day....and thee,/...For being author of a wretch like me' (lines 165/8), an implied meaning of this perhaps being that Sciolto has brought her into the world and has not only made the wrong choices for her but made everyone miserable through his unwanted orchestration of her life. It could also possibly be seen as a retrospective wish for a different father than the one she has, one less controlling than Sciolto, Vaska Tumir highlighting that the 'the threat posed by an insistent paternal authority' in Rowe's play manifests itself 'in Calista's and Sciolto's tragic clash of will'.⁷ It seems significant too that the meaning of the name Sciolto, in its anglicised form as Sholto, means 'sower'.⁸ This could allude to the fact that Sciolto is the one who has seeded the misery depicted in the play, and has reaped what he has sown. Notwithstanding, I would argue that, despite having historical significance and a pathetic female protagonist, *The Fair Penitent* cannot be labelled as a she-tragedy in absolute terms. Calista doesn't seem to be as strong a character as one might think on first reading. The action in the play seems to happen around her and for want of possession of and control over her. She seems in the selected scene to be very passive, the action unaffected by her desires, prompting her to say on line 196 'I only beg to die, and he denies me'. She is made

³ Malcolm Goldstein in the Introduction to: Nicholas Rowe, *The Fair Penitent*, ed. By Malcolm Goldstein (Great Britain: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1969), p.19.

⁴ Susan Staves, *Players' Scepters: Fictions of Authority in the Restoration* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p.186.

⁵ Brean Hammond, Podcast on 'Restoration and early eighteenth-century theatre'.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vaska Tumir, 'She-Tragedy and It's Men: Conflict and Form in The Orphan and The Fair Penitent', in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 30, No.3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century (Rice University, Summer 1990), pp.411-428 (p.419).

⁸ Website: 'Behind the Name', alternative search word 'Sholto'
<<http://www.behindthename.com/name/sholto>> and link to 'Scioltach'
<<http://www.behindthename.com/name/si11oltach>> [Accessed 07/11/2010]

miserable at the hands of the male characters, used by Lothario, controlled by Sciolto and unfulfilled by Altamont. This pushes her so far as attempted suicide at the beginning of the selected extract, asking ‘And what remains for me? .../ ...there is/ But one way to break the toil and ‘scape’ (lines 117/9), and proceeds to grab Lothario’s sword and ‘offers to kill herself’. This is very problematic from a Christian point of view, since suicide is seen as a sin in the Christian faith. At the end of the 17th century attempted suicide was considered a felony, and was ‘punishable by forfeiture of the decedent’s goods and chattels because it deprived the king of one of his subjects’.⁹ It would seem in this extract she is depicted as weak and sinful, not to mention irrational, prompting Altamont to cry ‘What means thy frantic rage?’ (line 120), insinuating she is mad and unstable. She is so disempowered that she dreads the return of her father ‘Is it the voice of thunder, or my father?/ Madness! Confusion!’ (line 134).

As we can see from this scene, this is a play really about the relationships between men. There is something about the patriarchy in this extract, and in the play as a whole, which connotes something very Biblical about the work. It would seem as though Sciolto depicts a God-like figure, being a nobleman of Genoa, and along with the setting or ‘scene’ of the play, which is staged only in ‘*Sciolto’s palace and garden, with some part of the street near it*’ (Dramatis Personae), he is the ruler of his own microcosm. He is disgusted by Calista’s actions and, after being pacified somewhat by Altamont, tells Calista

‘...mark me well, I will have justice done;
 Hope not to bear away thy crimes unpunished;
 I will see justice executed on thee,
 Ev’n to a Roman strictness;...’ (Lines 183-186)

His intent on doling out his own justice shows him taking on God’s role of moral judgement, and he goes on to banish Calista, declaring ‘Fly with thy infamy to some dark cell/...Where ugly shame hides her opprobrious head,/ And death and hell detested rule maintain’. This even makes Altamont fearful, describing Sciolto’s actions as a result of ‘fatal fury’ and says ‘I tremble at the vengeance with which you meditate/ On the poor, faithless, lovely, dear Calista’. This is akin to Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden after her original sin, and there is further evidence for Calista and Altamont being representations of Adam and Eve. Lothario, like the snake, tempted Calista into succumbing to temptation, and this viewpoint can be reinforced by the fact that in the selected scene Altamont and Calista are in ‘*a garden belonging to Scioloto’s palace*’, a setting reminiscent of a mini-Eden.

Alternatively it can be seen that Altamont, throughout this scene, becomes more of a Jesus-like figure, full of mercy and martyrdom. He saves Calista from suicide, taking the sword away from her, and goes on to hold Sciolto back from killing her. Instead, he offers himself as sacrifice, telling Sciolto ‘turn the point on me.../...while for (Calista)/ I die, for whom alone I wished to live’. This shows obvious allusion to the sacrifice Christ made for man, and conjures the image of Christ imploring God ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34). We could perhaps see Calista as Judas in her betrayal of Altamont, Judas’ death too being by suicide, something Calista attempts in the passage. However, it is Calista’s dialogue in this extract, not her actions, which makes us question how penitent she actually is. She is depicted as a woman with a lot of pride, since she ‘would not bear to be reproached’ (line 128) but would rather ‘find a grave beneath’ (line 129), and ‘canst not bear to be outdone’ (line 177) by Altamont’s virtue and declares she ‘Shall never be indebted to thy pity’ (line 159) and will ‘be obliged no more’ (line 178). It seems she is

⁹ John M. Scheb, ‘Criminal Law’, ed. By Carolyn Henderson Meier, Fifth Edition (USA: Wadsworth, 2006), p.129.

too proud, even, to apologise and repent; she would rather die. These are not the actions of someone penitent, but someone too proud, perhaps even someone who feels they have been treated unjustly, and is sorrier they got caught than for what they have done. She even seems to refute Altamont rather disdainfully and satirically, questioning ‘Think’st thou I mean to live, to be forgiven?/ O, thou hast known but little of Calista’ (line 125). What is striking is that it is not just her former fiancé that Calista rebuts; she confronts her father too. She criticises Sciolto’s actions, questioning ‘Is this, is this the mercy of a father?/ I only beg to die and he denies me’ (lines 195/6). She implies that she is not willing to live a life dedicated to atonement, and does not want to give her father the satisfaction, querying ‘Then am I doomed to live and bear your triumph?/ To groan beneath your scorn and fierce upbraidings,/ Daily to be reproached, and have my misery/ At morn, at noon, and night told over to me’. Perhaps then Calista is not *The Fair Penitent*. I would argue in this extract that it is Altamont who is the more penitent of the two, and in the judicial sense, the fairer too. Not only is he sorry that Calista ever shamed him (cuckoldom being the worst fate for a man in this era, prompting Altamont declaring to Calista ‘O, thou hast more than murdered me’ (line 121)), but he is sorry he never believed Horatio when he warned him of Calista’s infidelity. Sciolto reproves him for this on lines 142-144:

Last night thou hadst a diff’rence with thy friend;
The cause thou gav’st me for it was a damned one.
Didst thou not wrong the man who told thee truth?

To which Altamont replies sadly ‘O, press me not to speak;/ Ev’n now my heart is breaking, and the mention/ Will lay me dead before you’ (lines 145/7). The dramatic irony here is that Calista has committed infidelity with Lothario at the expense of Altamont, and Lothario rejected and betrayed Calista, and in turn Altamont was an infidel to Horatio for the sake of Calista, who too turned out to be a traitor. The difference between Calista and Altamont is that Altamont repents, claiming to feel shame. Calista’s repentance on the other hand is less definite. What is interesting about this too is that Sciolto addresses Altamont about this before even acknowledging Calista (his first acknowledgement of her presence being when he offers to kill her). This combination of factors would suggest that camaraderie between men is the thing truly at stake here; before male and female relationships come those between men.

Finally, I would like to conclude my analysis by debating whether the idea of she-tragedy, whether an apt description of the play or not, was really all that new when it became fashionable. Certainly the actual label ‘she-tragedy’ was new, Rowe allegedly coining the phrase. However, there seems in this extract to be a sense of past theatrical history indicating that this type of play, with a female protagonist at the centre of the tragedy, is nothing new. From lines 228 to 232, Rowe, through Sciolto’s dialogue, alludes to the story of Virginius and Decemvir, a classical story made into a stage play in the seventeenth century, a story in which Virginius ‘slew his only daughter/ To save her from the fierce Decemvir’s lust./...to prevent/ The shame which she might know’. This would demonstrate that the notion of a ‘she-tragedy’ is not as contemporary as it might have seemed. Perhaps it can just be seen as a sort of ‘recycling’ of existing ideas, but presented in a way that is more respectful and more inclusive of the female characters it portrays, diagnostic of the changing social climate’s demands.

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