



**The Image of Woman in She-Tragedy:  
a Study of John Banks' *Virtue  
Betrayed*, or, *Anna Bullen*, Thomas  
Otway's *The Orphan*, and Thomas  
Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage***

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## ABSTRACT

The paper concerns the genre of she-tragedy in the Restoration drama and how the woman is portrayed in this type of drama. It tackles three plays of different writers: John Banks' *Virtue Betrayed*, or, *Anna Bullen*, Thomas Otway's *The Orphan*, and Thomas Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage* because each play exemplifies an image of the injustice women usually face in she-tragedy. She-tragedy is a play in which the pathos and distress of an innocent female character take the central part of the main plot. While she-tragedy has been considered as a type of melodrama that entertains the audience at that time, the paper traces subversive elements disseminating throughout the three plays being examined. Throughout analyzing the three plays the paper will unfold new themes intended by the writers other than the themes and intentions that have been previously discovered. The paper will follow a feminist approach.

**Keywords:** Feminism, restoration drama, madness, oppression, patriarchal, she-tragedy

It is historically ironic to find such contradictory images for women in one nation like England. A nation that is ruled by glorious and exceptionally strong female Queens in different eras of history such as Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), Queen Ann (1665 -1714), Queen Mary (1516 -1558), Queen Victoria (1819 - 1901), Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ( 1925 -2013), and last but not least Queen Elizabeth II (1926- ). However, the woman in the same nation is reduced to be subjected and belittled to internalize certain stereotypes whether in actual life or as she is represented in various genres of literary forms. Drama is one of these literary forms and it is very representative and an influential one.

The paper tackles three plays of different writers in the restoration era. The first is *Virtue Betrayed* or, *Anna Bullen* by John Banks (1650-1706). The second play is *The Orphan* by Thomas Otway (1652 –1685). The third play is *The Fatal Marriage* by Thomas Southerne (1660 – 1746). Each play exemplifies an image of the injustice women usually face in she-tragedy. She-tragedy is a play in which the pathos, and distress of an innocent female character take the central part of the main plot. It emerges in the 1680s that Robert Hume describes the pathetic play as "the one important new mode established in the early eighties" (Hume, 350). She-tragedy concentrates on the heroine rather than the hero, as the central figure who gravitates the audience's affection throughout her victimization to the extent of shedding tears "which is the true End of Tragedy" (qtd. in Marsden 237 ) states the critic and playwright Charles Gildon as he exalts the play of Mary Pix *Ibrahim, Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks* (1698).

Nicholas Rowe (1674 -1718) is the playwright who coined the term identifying such type of plays. He writes two famous plays about she-tragedy [\*The Fair Penitent\*](#) (1703) and [\*Lady Jane Grey\*](#) (1715). The female protagonist may undergo rape, innocent adultery or incest, and or injustice which she bears with humiliation and passivity, unlike the "male-centered plays in previous decades" in which the male protagonist reacts actively and usually



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performs violent action. The female protagonist ends up killing herself or becoming mad, or murdered (Marsden 238).

There are many reasons behind the emergence of the she-tragedy. The first is the novelty of the presence of female actresses on the stage that helps to make the female figure occupies the central character in the play. Elizabeth Barry and Ann Bracegirdle are remarkable actresses who used to act the major role on the English stage at that time. Their performing of the she-tragedy "portrayed a new kind of heroine, whose victimization provides the essential material of the plot and whose defenselessness constitutes a specific contrast to the defiance of the passionate and ambitious female characters in the preceding heroic play" (qtd. in Stewart 50). The second is the emergence of the middle class that requires a drama to represent them "But more important, the rise of the she-tragedy coincides with a major transition in the genre: the transition from the aristocratic heroic drama of the coterie Restoration theater to the "bourgeois tragedy" of Aaron Hill, George Lillo, Charles Johnson, or Edward Moore " (Brown 430).

The paper concerns the genre of she-tragedy in the Restoration drama and how the woman is portrayed in this type of drama from a different point of view. Many critics exclude the possibility of the subversive in she-tragedy. Melissa Mowry believes that she-tragedy establishes the stereotyped image of women as being virtuous, docile, and submissive:

For she-tragedies not only taught women to see themselves as desirable only in so far as they were vulnerable, they also taught not-elite men to see women as desirable only in so far as they could inspire pity without action. Both dynamics clearly served the interests

of patriarchy, redirecting audience energy away from power and towards pity, (Mowry194).

Moreover, other critics think the women role in the she-tragedy is for entertainment that is gained from rape scenes that were popular in these plays. Ann Maria Stewart, in her book *The Ravishing Restoration: Aphra Behn Violence and Comedy* 2010, dedicates a chapter named 'Rape and Restoration Tragedies' in which she discusses the significance of rape scenes in She-tragedy. After 1660s the rape scenes pervade and become "quite common". Stewart remarks that there are thirty-five she-tragedy plays between 1660 and 1800 that include rape scenes written by male and female playwrights. John Dennis notes that these scenes became the "peculiar barbarity of the English Stage". Elizabeth Howe also refers to that phenomena in her document marking the rapid acceleration of performing rape scenes after 1660s "Anne Bracegirdle actually specialized in having her virgin innocence brutally taken from her" adds Howe (qtd. in Stewart 48). Yet there are no actual rape scene performed on the stage. The audience sees the victim dragged to the wings of the stage and hears her cries and agony and thus they fantasize what is happening offstage. The details may be described lately throughout the victim pathos and or the speech of other characters.

The rape scenes were not only popular because of the sympathy and tears they drive from the audience or because of the novelty of the presence of female actresses on the stage. Marsden and Howe agree that these scenes provide sexual entertainment for the audience especially the males who visualize the rape in their minds' eyes. Thus the victim becomes an "object of pity and object of desire" notes Marsden (qtd in Stewart 48).



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However, the paper claims the possibility of the subversive in the she-tragedy. Yet that type of subversion is not like Nora's slam of the door in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* that would be heard about two hundred years later in Copenhagen in 1879. The possibility of the presence of rebellious female character in a serious form like tragedy is unthinkable at that time. Marsden states:

In the seventeenth century, men might rave under the effects of oppression, but their roles in drama were defined as active rather than as passive. Women, on the other hand, were expected to cultivate passive virtues such as patience and humility. In drama, the almost inevitable result of such qualities was an inability to escape suffering. (237, 238)

Then the possibility of the subversive could be observed within the moral framework of social reform. The moral side is represented by assuming the writers' intention to condemn the patriarchal injustices to women. If we turned the point of view to examine the other side: the stance of the male characters in the plays, the reader may apprehend another message. That is to say to scrutinize the moral attitude of male characters towards female characters. Dallin notes that some critics proposed that she-tragedy "are better understood as explorations of masculine values and male homosocial relations rather than female sexuality" (Lewis). Moreover, Lisa Freeman states that:

“the ethos of masculine virtue, rather than one of womanhood or feminine virtue, constitutes the controlling interest in the narratives of she-tragedies” and argues that works by Rowe, for instance, “[were] dedicated to, and informed by, the project of nation building and represented male agents and masculine virtue as the keys to ensuring the future and posterity of the nation” (qtd. in Lewis).

*The Orphan* is the first play to be discussed. It is performed in 1680 in the Duck Theater. The issue of social reform and men's responsibility towards women is indicated in the Epilogue of the play that talks about the fate of orphans in society:

YOu've seen one Orphan ruin'd here, and I  
May be the next, if old Acasto dye:  
Should it prove so, I'd fain amongst you find,  
Who 'tis would to the fatherless be kind.  
To whose protection might I safely go?

The plot is about the family of Acasto, an aristocrat and courtier who resorts to the countryside to live in his estate. He has two sons Castalio and Polydore, and a daughter Serina. Acasto takes a young beautiful orphan girl under his protection, Monimia. She was the daughter of his beloved late friend. Acasto cherishes Monimai and considers her as a member of his family. He neither allows his sons to join the army nor to go to the court because he considers it a place of intrigues, plotting, and hypocrisy. He asks them to study





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arts and politics and not to think of marriage for the time being. Ironically what he has run from in the court, he witnesses in his own house. Both of Castilio and Polydore love Monimia and when Polydore asks his brother whether he intends to marry her Castilo denies that and invites Polydore to court Monimia. Polydore hears Castilo telling Monimia that he will visit her in her room at night. Polydore decides to replace his brother thinking that Monimia is not virtuous not knowing that she has just married his brother secretly.

The example of victimization of woman through rape is very well presented in this play. The victim has been raped by a person who knows that he is raping her and who considers her unvirtuous while she is completely deceived and she behaves as a bride in her wedding night. While many reviewers think that Castilo's deed is a major flaw in the plot of the play, it is more likely that he 'Castilo' underestimates Monimia and considers her as an object otherwise he would have warned Polydor not to woo her. On the contrary Castilo denies his intention to marry her and allows Polydor to court her though he knows that his brother is a womanizer. It is envy and anger that leads Plydore to rape Monimia more than love because she refuses him: "POLYDOR: By me last night the horrid deed\ Was done; when all things slept, but Rage, and Incest" (v. ii. 68).

The dilemma Monimia passes by as she notes the indifference of Castilo after their passionate wedding night thinking that he has betrayed her, and her pathos and suicide at the end are very distressful scenes because they are presented through dramatic irony. The audience knows the truth and watches the oblivious and innocent Monimia in agony.



Most barbarously us'd me,  
Nothing so kind as he, when in my Arms,  
In thousand kisses, tender sighs and joys,  
Not to be thought again, the night was wasted,  
At dawn of day, he rose and left his Conquest,  
But when we met, and I with open Arms  
Ran to embrace the Lord of all my wishes,  
Oh then!—

.....

.....

He threw me from his Breast,  
Like a detested sin. (v. i. 48. 49)

Though the act of rape is not performed on the stage but the author facilitates imaging the act through the speech of the victim. Marsden notes that the description of Monimia's beauties on the tongue of the page at the beginning of the play in which the page describes Monimia in her bed enable the audience to fantasize Monimia and the bed. It also enables the audience to understand the sexual cravings of the twins towards Monimia and also brings about the 'catalysis' of tragedy that ends with Monimia's suicide (Hughes).

*The Fatal Marriage* is published in (1694). The original source of the play is Aphra Behn's Novella *The History of a Nun* (1689), yet Southern changes a



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great deal of the events (Sherburn and Bond 760). While Behn concentrates on the consequences of breaking the sacred vows with god, Southern has another line that focuses on the events that leads to adultery of the innocent Isabel. In the play Isabell is a beautiful woman who supposed to be a nun, but she loves Biron and therefore she breaks her vows in order to marry him. Biron's father refuses the marriage because the girl becomes poor as she has "settled all her fortune to the Nunnery". He also thinks that she is a bad omen because she breaks her sacred oath. The father Count Baldwin disinherits his son Biron and takes his younger son Carlos in his favor. Count Baldwin never cares about Carlos before.

However the couple lives happily until Biron joined the army and then reported dead in Candi's siege. Biron's father does not take care of Isabel and her child. He banishes Isabel and she struggles to survive with her child. She mourns her husband for seven years and refuses the subsequent proposals of Villeroy who claims that he loves her dearly.

In fact, Biron does not die in the war. He is captivated and enslaved and writes to his father to aid him to gain his freedom, but Carlos uses to take the letters and never tell anyone. He replies to his brother that his father still angry of him and will not pay for his freedom. Along seven years Carlos encourage Villeroy to court Isabell pretending that he loves them both Isabel and Villeroy. His real intention is to ruin both Isabel and his brother.

CARLOS: Follow her, follow her: Troy Town was won at last.

Villeroy.I have follow'd her these seven years, and now but live in hopes.

.....



CARLOS. That I can't tell: the Sex is very various: There are no certain measures to be prescribed, or followed, in making our approaches to the Women. All that we have to do, I think, is to attempt 'em in the weakest part: Press 'em but hard, and they will all fall under the necessity of a Surrender at last. That Favor comes at once; and sometimes when we least expect it.(i. i. 6, 7)

Isabel becomes highly indebted. She goes with her child to Count Baldwin begging him to help them. Instead of helping her he judges her saying that what has happened to her and his son is because she breaks her vows to God and thus she is punished by God. Then she asks him just to feed his grandson. He agrees in one condition is to abandon her child. The mother refuses. Elizabeth Howe notes that by the mid-1680s, 'female suffering has become the whole subject of tragedy' (1992: 122). (Marsden 239)

**Count Baldwin.** It touches me—and I will save him—

But to keep him safe; never come near him more.

Isabel. What! take him from me!

No, we must never part: 'tis the last hold

Of comfort I have left, and when he fails

All goes along with him: O! cou'd you be

The Tyrant to divorce Life from my Life?

I live but in my Child.

No, let me pray in vain, and beg my bread

From door to door, to feed his dayly wants,



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Rather than always lose him.

Count Baldwin. Then have your Child, and feed him with your Prayer.

(I. I. 19)

Isabell goes to her house and finds Carlos and Villeroy there. Carlos pretends that he dislikes his father's deed and he begs Isabell to marry Villeroy to save her child. Isabell knows that even if she sells her wedding ring that would not help. She agrees to marry Villeroy but she tells him that she cannot love him. She also asks him to let her wear her weed. Meanwhile the officers come to take Isabell to the prison but Villeroy tells them that he will pay for her. The couple marries and Villeroy is very happy that he finally wins his beloved Isabell.

Next day Biron comes from his prison with his friend Belford. He goes to his house. Isabell is very excited and happy to see him again but as he asks her to come to bed she realizes that she has committed bigamy and adultery. She is innocent but she cannot endure the situation. Biron understands that his father does not help his wife but he cannot understand Isabell reluctance to come to his arms. Meanwhile Carlos knows that Biron has come and he hires two gangsters to kill him. Biron is mortally injured and is carried to his house. Isabell's mental condition degenerates and when she sees Biron wounded and died she kills herself. Isabell, the devoted mother and loyal wife, has found herself betrayed and most possibly would be misjudged by society. She lost her husband and lost her love and above all lost her self-esteem.



Isabell. VWhere is that little wretch?

[They raise her.

I dye in Peace to leave him to your care.

I have a wretched Mothers Legacy,

A dying Kiss, pray let me give it him,

My blessing; that, that's all I have to leave thee.

O may thy Fathers Virtues live in thee:

And all his wrongs be buried in my Grave.

The VVaves and VVinds will dash, and Tempests roar;

But Wrecks are toss'd at last upon the Shore.

[Dies. (v. i. 80)

In *Virtue Betrayed*, or, *Anna Bullen*, performed in (1628) the plot is based on the story of Queen Ann Boleyn (1501- 1536) the executed wife of King Henry VIII and mother of the queen Elizabeth I. In the play Ann Bullen is in love with Piercy a noble man and they decide to marry. The king likes Anne but she refuses to be his mistress. With the aid of Rochford, Ann's brother, and Northumberland, the king can deceive Anna to marry him. Her brother intercepted Piercy's letters to her and convinces her that he has married to Lady Diana Talbot. The events of the play start in the middle of the plot. Anna is married to the king and their marriage is finally announced because the king has divorced his first wife queen Katherine. Rochford is disturbed and pray to God that his sister will be much fortunate with the king that the previous queen.



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Roch. Heav'n be my Witness, brave *Northumberland!*

It joyes not me, but that it is his pleasure,

Whose Happiness we all are bound to pray for;

And may my Sister's Crown sit lighter on

Her Brow, than does the Honour upon mine:

Something of boding whispers to my Soul,

And tells me, Oh! this Marriage will be fatal—

Methinks I see a Sword ty'd to a Thread,

Small as a Hair, hang o're our Pageant Greatness:

Believe me, Friend; Thrones are severest Touch-stones;

And, like the Emblem of their Guard, the Lyon,

All but of Royal-Blood they will destroy. (i. i. 1, 2)

Meanwhile there are the Cardinal Woolsey and Lady Elizabeth Blunt, the former mistress of the king who is very angry because the king married Anna. Lady Elizabeth Blunt and Woolsey decide to destroy Anne. Knowing the former love relationship between Piercy and Anna, Cardinal Woolsey decides to watch the queen and Piercy so as to catch them together and make a scandal. The Cardinal also understands the king's inclinations, so he puts a beautiful maid, fair Jane Seymour in the court so as to win the king's heart. Lady Elizabeth Blunt seduces Rochford and he writes love letters to her which she then forges

and put them in queen's closet. The letters then are used as a proof of the incest between Anna and her brother.

The queen's distress starts as she realizes that Piercy is not actually married but she behaves decently and never shows her true anger to anybody. In the meantime the king's affection towards the queen wanes. He starts to love Jane Seymour who tactfully resists him and does not agree to be his mistress. Thus he goes to Cardinal Woolsey to help him who eventually sets the plan to defeat the queen. The queen feels the impending danger and refuses her brother's plead to see Piercy. Though she loves Piercy but she does not show her affections to him when she meets him. She is virtuous and faithful to the king. She finds herself accused of adultery with a man and incest with her brother. The court convicts the queen. She behaves patiently on the scaffold and when the priest asked her to confess before her execution, she confesses that she is innocent and that she never betrays the king.

In the three plays the women are presented as victims of the patriarchy which subjected them to its will and desires. Actually, in the three plays the women are objectified. They have neither free will nor rights. Monimia in *The Orphan* in the first seen looks unhappy and distress and she prefers to die to end her sadness. Her only hope in life is her beloved Castilo who does not behave wisely to protect her. Castilo was afraid of his father's reaction because he gives orders to his sons not to marry while they are young.

The discrimination of the patriarchy in *The Fatal Marriage* is complicated. Count Baldwin judges Isabell because she leaves the church which is the chief symbol of patriarchy. Count Baldwin behaves as if he is the judge and the punisher of Isabell. First he disinherits his son and then he does not provide the





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least help for Isabell and his grandson. Second the main reason that pushes Carlos to conceal the truth of his brother's captivation is to gain the fortune of his unfair father. He believes that when Biron comes back safe his father will take him again in his favor and will abandon Carlos as he has done before. It seems that the whole problems are because of Count Baldwin's arrogant and godlike behaviors. Thus the play alludes to the discrimination of the laws of inheritance at that time which give the first son the right to inherit the whole estate of his father. The consequences of the law are fatal to the unity of the one family. The second son Carlos mercilessly brings the catastrophe of his brother and Isabel in order not to lose the great fortune of his father.

In *Virtue Betrayed* the patriarchy is most obvious. The man who wrongs the queen is the king, the husband, and the head of the church all in one person. Most of the men in the play betray Anna even her brother when he lies about Piercy's marriage. Unlike the real story of Ann Boleyn Banks makes a twist in the end and uncovers the conspiracy of cardinal Woolsey and the king gives his order to punish him.

Fatalism is acute and obvious in the three plays. The nightmare Monimia's brother has seen, the fortuneteller's warnings that his sister in danger and even the first seen Monimia appears in foretells her sad destiny. The title of the play "The Orphan" gives impression that Monimia is doomed to misery. In *The Fatal Marriage*, Isabel's preference of love and marriage over the accomplishment of her vows to be a nun also foretells her tragedy. In *Virtue Betrayed* queen Anna knows that the former divorced queen, Katherine of Aragon, has cursed her and wish her a bad destiny. Rochford foretells the bad destiny of his sister that he notes the omens in her wedding day:



Rochford :Oh! may it not be fatal to us, Heav'n!

For at the very time she gave her Hand

To th' eager King to fasten't with a Pledge,

The Ring fell off, and could no more be found.

.....

And then immediately.

When the glad Ceremonies were performed,

The amorous King bending to kiss her Hand,

A shower of Pearls broke passage from her Eyes,

And all-bedew'd his Head with ominous Tears. (i.i. 2)

To sum up, in the three plays the women are presented as victims of the patriarchy which is supposed to be their protector. Their catastrophes are the direct result of male characters. Even Villeroy who courts Isabel for seven years exploits her financial crises to marry her. While Villeroy lacks nobility, Castilo lacks the courage and confidence to prevent his brother from courting Monimia. The tragedies of female characters also lead to the misery of male characters who recognize their faults at the end. In the three tragedies, many male characters killed each other or died in the end. Castilo and his brother killed each other in a duel; Biron; Piercy; and Acasto the father who asks people to be kind to his daughter Serina after his death. The women in the three plays are being objectified. They lack independence of patriarchy and need the protection of the patriarchy. Thus the she-tragedy is a cry against the oppression that is



projected to women in the English society, and implied that recognition of women will bring happiness and prosperity to society.





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