

The Queens of Pathetic Tragedy: Belvidera, Isabella and Anna Bullen Acted by the Prestigious English Actress Elizabeth Barry

Pathetic Tragedyannın Öncüleri: Dönemin En İyi Tiyatro Oyuncusu İngiliz Aktris Elizabeth Barry'nin Canlandırdığı Roller Belvidera, Isabella Ve Anna Bullen

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Abstract

During the last quarter of the seventeenth century, well before the opening of Nicholas Rowe's (the first editor of works of Shakespeare) theatrical career, women acquire an extraordinary prominence in the drama. Many of the most celebrated and influential plays, including those of Thomas Otway, John Banks, and Thomas Southerne, depend on the designation of a female protagonist. In this paper Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682), John Banks' *Anna Bullen*, *Vertue Betrayed* (1682) and Thomas Southerne's *Fatal Marriage* are going to be analyzed within the framework of pathetic tragedy. These tragedies were successfully acted by Elizabeth Barry, who was a successful comedian depicting a variety of Restoration comedy heroines throughout her career, however, her greatest impact on Restoration drama was as a tragic actress. Her capacity for projecting pathos was an inspiration to playwrights, Thomas Otway and Thomas Southerne in the three famous tragic roles they wrote for her: Monimia in Otway's *The Orphan* (1680), Belvidera in Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682), and Isabella in Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage* (1694).

Keywords: woman in distress, pathos, pathetic tragedy, restoration drama, she-tragedy

Öz

On yedinci yüzyılın son çeyreğinde, Nicholas Rowe'un (Shakespeare'in eserlerinin ilk editörü) tiyatro kariyerinin başlamasından çok önce, kadınlar dramada olağanüstü bir önem kazanır. Thomas Otway, John Banks ve Thomas Southerne da dahil olmak üzere en ünlü ve etkili oyunların çoğu, bir kadın kahramanın belirlenmesine bağlıdır. Bu bildiride Thomas Otway'in *Venice Preserved* (1682), John Banks'in *Anna Bullen*, *Vertue Betrayed* (1682) and Thomas Southerne'nin *Fatal Marriage* adlı yapıtları pathetic tragedy'de çerçevesinde incelenecektir. Bu tragedyalar, kariyeri boyunca çeşitli Restorasyon komedi kadın kahramanlarını tasvir eden başarılı bir komedyen olan Elizabeth Barry tarafından başarıyla canlandırılmıştır, ancak Restorasyon draması üzerindeki en büyük etkisi tragedy'de aktrisi olmasıydı. Acımasızlığı yansıtmaya kapasitesi, oyun yazarları Thomas Otway ve Thomas Southerne için onun için yazdıkları üç ünlü trajik rolde bir ilham kaynağı oldu. Otway'in *The Orphan*'ındaki Monimia gibi *Venice Preserved*'ün Belvidera'sı, John Banks'in *Anna Bullen*'i ve son olarak Thomas Southerne'nin *Fatal Marriage*'in Isabellası dönemin kadın sorunlarını resmetmiş, Barry kadın sorunlarını Rönesans Tiyatronun aksine patriarkal düzenin neden olduğu ve kadınların yaşadığı sıkıntıları sahnede performe etmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Acınma duygusu, pathetic tragedy'de, Restorasyon Tiyatrosu, she-tragedy, felakete sürüklenen kadın

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Introduction

The early days of the Restoration Drama were aristocratic, yet the drama of the eighteenth century is sentimental, moral, and overtly bourgeois. By bourgeois, it is meant that ideology tropes have changed in the subgenres of tragedy to convey from aristocratic to a dominant bourgeois ideology after the revolution of 1688. The image of the heroine in the eighteenth century drama stands between these two formal and ideological poles: aristocracy and bourgeoisie. From the 1680s to the first decade of the eighteenth century, English drama was determined by two interrelated phenomena. Women play an important, often primary role in the tragic plot; and these women characters are constantly portrayed as victims of their husbands, fate, circumstances, unintentional mistake, or love. These facts indicate that the fundamental transition of the tragedy of the late 17th and early 18th centuries used the passive woman as the pivotal point. (Brown, 1982, p. 430) Restoration Drama remains resistant to change essentially, affirming the aristocratic ideology in the teeth of the challenges till the Glorious Revolution called forth the new bourgeois ideology.

During the last quarter of the seventeenth century, well before the opening of Nicholas Rowe's (the first editor of works of Shakespeare) theatrical career, women acquire an extraordinary prominence in the drama. Many of the most celebrated and influential plays, including those of Thomas Otway, John Banks, and Thomas Southerne, depend on the designation of a female protagonist. In this paper Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682), John Banks' *Anna Bullen*, *Vertue Betrayed* (1682) and Thomas Southerne's *Fatal Marriage* are going to be analyzed within the framework of pathetic tragedy. These tragedies were successfully acted by Elizabeth Barry, who was a successful comedian depicting a variety of Restoration comedy heroines throughout her career, however, her greatest impact on Restoration drama was as a tragic actress. Her capacity for projecting pathos was an inspiration to playwrights, Thomas Otway and Thomas Southerne in the three famous tragic roles they wrote for her: Monimia in Otway's *The Orphan* (1680), Belvidera in Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682), and Isabella in Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage* (1694). These three roles, wrote the prompter, John Downes, "gain'd her the Name of Famous Mrs. Barry, both at Court and City, for whenever She Acted any of these three Parts, she forc'd Tears from the Eyes of her Auditory, especially those who have any Sense of Pity for the Distress't" (Howe, 1992, p.119). These three female heroines depict the social and the cultural conditions of the period after the revolution. Mrs Barry is the trendiest tragic figure of the pathetic tragedy.

With tragedies waning so much in the late 1680s and early 1690s, serious drama was revived in the mid-1690s, aided by the good acting of tragedies like Elizabeth Barry and Thomas Betterton. The popularity of the tragedy was due to the fact that London once again had two theatres; In 1695, Thomas Betterton, Elizabeth Barry, Anne Bracegirdle and several other leading actors left Drury Lane to form a new company. Jean I Marsden states in his book *Pathos and She-tragedy* that absence of the theatre companies paved the way for a new theatre company to perform much more tragedies on the stage. "The existence of two theater companies meant more new plays, and especially more new tragedies, because the new company's talents were particularly strong in serious drama. The playwrights responded to this interest with the new play, with most she-tragedies becoming popular" (Marsden, 2006, p. 238).

Since the 1680s, the pathetic tragedy of Otway in *Venice Preserved* and the so-called she-tragedies of John Banks had been popular. Such tragic pathos came much into vogue with Nicholas Rowe's 'domestic tragedies' which are *The Fair Penitent* (1703), *Jane Shore* (1714) and *Lady Jane Grey* (1715). Rowe combines sentimentalism and sophistication as he tells a story of a lady in distress through the depiction of Jane Shore. Instead of focusing on the usual

subject matter for tragedy, the fate of kings and empires, Rowe asserts in the “Dedication and Prologue” to *The Fair Penitent* that “We never can pity what we never can share”; therefore, a humbler theme was selected for his play: A melancholy tale of private woe wherein the audience will find sorrows like your own (qtd in Owen, 2001, p. 299).

Venice Preserved; or, A Plot Discover'd (1682), set in republican Venice, depicts a failed conspiracy against the senate as a highly emotive dramatic piece. Were the senators presented as patriots and the plotters as rebellious ruffians, the adoption of the play by the Tories would come without surprise. But, given that the Venetian government is shown to be as corrupt as its opponents, its preservation is hardly cause for rejoicing. So what made the play so appealing to the Tories? How can so ambiguous a piece have been proclaimed a loyalist manifesto? (Owen, 2001, p. 374).

Venice Preserved has elicited a number of competing interpretations, some critics locating its Toryism in the satiric representation of rebellion, others pointing to fatherhood as a sign of contradictions within Otway's Tory stance, but of course there are essentially apolitical readings that focus on the role of pathos and the sentimental.

The well-meaning but weak Jaffeir wavers between love for his wife and loyalty to his friend Pierre, and between upholding the senate in order to 'preserve' Venice and joining a rebellion which vows to scour the corruption from Venice's government by destroying it. Jaffeir's indecision mirrors that of heroes such as Dryden's Antony, and he inhabits a world in which all options appear equally corrupt. The play's pessimism is deep-seated; even the purest of emotions, friendship and marital love, lead to betrayal and ultimately to death. (Owen, 2001, p. 236)

The play is about a conspiracy. It is first staged after the Popish Plot of 1678. Otway was a Tory and the royalist when he wrote *Venice Preserved*. The Whigs who are political opposers of the Tories are depicted as conspirators in the play. Apart from the political implications of the play, this quote above implies that there is also an apolitical reading of this play which are from the perspective of friendship, marital love and betrayal.

“The most well-known play of the time, *Venice Preserved*, also revealed the form the tragedy would take in the following years, with its take on Belvidera, one of the most vivid female characters in the Restoration drama. A figure who is neither as sublime as an empress, nor as simple as an empress, like the queens of Lee and Dryden, is at the center of the play's action and, most importantly, evokes pity for the poignancy of her death” (Marsden, 2006, p.236).

Belvidera is an amiable, consistent character, constant and rational in affection, superior to the frowns of poverty, yet possessed of quick and delicate sensibility; she towers above misfortunes, while they affect circumstances only, but naturally sinks under an accumulation of unhappy effects wrought by them. It is true that *Venice Preserved* offers its audience the spectacle of the sufferings of a beautiful woman. Belvidera is not a passive victim. Her feminine values of love, tenderness, attachment to family, and abhorrence of bloodshed are superior to the masculine political goals of the conspirators; she actively advances her values by pressuring Jaffeir into revealing the rebels' conspiracy to the Senate. She is responsible for her fate in that this action precipitates her destruction, as well as that of Jaffeir and Pierre. Her death scene does not merely evoke pity for a suffering woman character, but makes us painfully aware that the indispensable values she represents—love, compassion, humanity—are constantly destroyed in a man's world. To emphasize this point, Otway concluded his play with her totally bleak death. There is a tragic resolution in the death of the two men, as Pierre dies with his values intact and Jaffeir redeems himself as a man by saving his friend from being debased by torture and then killing himself. Belvidera, the only

character untainted by selfishness and cruelty, cannot have an uplifting death, because the values which give meaning to Jaffeir's and Pierre's deaths have none for her, and the values she advocates cannot survive in a patriarchal society (Rogers, 2007, p.197-198).

The final words of the play express Priuli's recognition, too late, of the harm done by "cruel fathers"—or patriarchy. Masculine values triumph in *Venice Preserved*, but Otway makes clear that they triumph at the expense of equally important feminine values; thus he does not reassert "tragedy as a masculine space" (Gruber, 2006, p. 159). Brown states,

Otway's plays obviously give priority to pathetic effect, and this demonstrably affective orientation is equally evident in the works of the other major pathetic tragedians, John Banks and Thomas Southerne. The emotionalism and the self-conscious Shakespearean "naturalness" of their language establishes a context of sympathetic immediacy for the dilemmas which they depict. Their actions are typically shaped to produce and sustain a high level of physical or psychological violence. They resort frequently to scenes of madness, suicide, or sexual violation. And, most important, they rely consistently for plot, action, and denouement upon the female victim - upon characters like Belvidera (*Venice Preserved*), Anna Bullen (Banks, *Vertue Betrayed*, 1682), Isabella (Southerne, *The Fatal Marriage*, 1694). (Brown, 1982, p.434)

Regarding the quote, the scenes of madness, sexual violation and violence are depicted through the female victim in Restoration tragedies. Roger asserts the focus here is the female victim by the vices of male characters Unlike the Renaissance tragedies; it is not a tragedy as a masculine space.

Another tragedy written by John Banks, the second major figure in the development of she-tragedy and later seventeenth-century drama, focuses on the suffering of women whose love is hindered by duty or betrayal in his last plays. There is a clash between love and honour and it is likened to the heroic plays of the 1670s. Banks portrays various heroines and depicts both conflict and misery it causes. Her plays focus on women from England's past (even *The Unhappy Favorite* takes as its subject Elizabeth's passion for Essex). Although two of Banks' tragedies, *The Innocent Usurper* and *The Island Queens*, were initially banned due to their political ramifications, both *Vertue Betray'd* and *The Unhappy Favorite* quickly became popular, making women both erotic objects and pathos to exploit their sexual possibilities. *Vertue Betray'd*, for example, portrays Anne Boleyn as a virtuous woman who is forced to renounce her love for young Piercy and marry Henry VIII. When he ascends the throne, he is quickly cast aside by the king and slandered by his enemies. She goes to the block as a Protestant martyr, her innocence only discovered after her death. The play does not depict any heroic acts, only the motive of the unhappiness of its hero. "As Elizabeth Howe noted in the mid-1680s, "women's suffering became the whole subject of tragedy". The established pattern of female suffering in the plays of Otway and Banks would prevail into the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries" (Marsden, 2006, p. 238). As it is depicted in the play of *Venice Preserved*, like Belvidera, Anna also pursues a planned life as the patriarchy desires. Like Otway, John Banks portrays the royal class as tyranny, oppressive and controlling mechanism.

Vertue Betray'd is the story of a woman who is subjugated so harshly by a man, but also the tragedy of a woman destroyed by the tyranny of a king. The play begins with Anna marrying King Henry, despite the objections of Cardinal Wolsey and the king's former mistress, Elizabeth Blunt. Anna was secretly engaged to young Piercy, but their respective families had different plans for them: Piercy's father wanted her to marry the heir to Shrewsbury, and Anna's family thought that marrying the king would increase her daughter's

social status. When her own brother tricked Anna into believing Piercy was married, Anna consented to the marriage to the king, despite what we were told from the very beginning.

“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” (I.i.2).

Although Anna foresees the dangers of her situation, she cannot go against the demands of her king and family.

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. (I.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.

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. 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: 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). Anna Bullen is so desperate that she yields herself to the patriarchal power and relinquishes her life obeying the orders of the King.

The real tragedy of the play is that Anna manages 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 (Owen, 2001, p. 272). The image of the king as *Parens Patriae* (The Monarch) is severely challenged since, as Banks repeatedly emphasizes, unnatural fathers might lead their offspring to destruction. (Pando Mena 169). As it is aforementioned that the monarchy is challenged in a severe manner and the catastrophe stems from the patriarchal domination.

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. (Pando Mena 173). As Elizabeth Howe explains, the actresses’ “talent and popular success fostered a shift from male-based drama to female” (Howe, 1992, p. 192).

The last she-tragedy to be analysed in this study is *The Fatal Marriage (1694)* by Thomas Southerne. *The Fatal Marriage (1694)* is the dark life of a good woman who, through excesses, forms her own fatal destiny. Like Monimia, Southerne's Isabella innocently commits a sexual sin, Southerne's masterpiece focusing on the prolonged misery and even humiliation of her heroine. She is overwhelmed by poverty and marries just to support her son. The final scenes of the play detail her reaction to the mistimed arrival of her first husband, her confession of sin, her fall into insanity, and her eventual death. The pain was alleviated only by Southerne's inclusion of a funny subplot. Despite the inclusion of the subplot, the play is unique in representing the suffering of women. In the mid-eighteenth century, David Garrick stripped the play of its comic elements, leaving Isabella's fate inexorably tragic. In this form, the play was shown due to the almost extreme boredom that the suffering of its protagonist caused in the audience. While a few playwrights would imitate Southerne's comedic use, many would imitate her emphasis on Isabella's distress, and particularly on the representation of a sexually endangered heroine (Marsden 238-239). Unlike the other tragedies, *The Fatal Marriage* includes comic elements in the original text, but in order to illustrate the female distress in the play, the humor is removed in the later play texts.

The Fatal Marriage concentrates on the sexual contamination of a virtuous heroine and her subsequent suffering and death. Isabella is a victim of circumstance, a mournful figure who nonetheless accepts the blame for all she endures. "Southerne develops the image of the innocent heroine, a victim of desire in a homosocial economy over which she has no control" (Marsden, 2006, p. 87). Isabella accepts her fate passively, refusing in one instance to act because "I was born to suffer" (2.2.66). Southerne's play presents a world in which all eyes converge on the heroine's bedchamber on the bed in which the fatal marriage is consummated and the innocent adultery committed. Isabella, believing her husband, Biron is dead, marries her former suitor Villeroy in gratitude for his financial assistance. Biron lives, however and his existence is concealed by his younger brother, the day after the marriage, he returns. The female gaze cannot operate in such a world, as the fate of Isabella demonstrates. "When she possesses the gaze, when she looks on her son or sleeping Biron, the effect is markedly masochistic" (Marsden, 2006, p. 90). In the first instance, the face of her son reminds her of her husband, causing pain. Later in the play, Isabella look on Biron. The scene draws, showing Biron asleep on a couch. Isabella enters and beholds him, "Pleasure grows again/With looking on him....Sure I may take a kiss" (5.2.14). But the effect of the female gaze is radically different from that of a man in a similar situation. Rather than becoming inflamed by desire and inviting the audience to participate in her excitement, Isabella suffers; she becomes the victim of her own vision, throwing herself on the floor and noting that the act of watching has unhinged "the great machine... the reasoning faculties are all deposed" (5.2.28). The female gaze leads not to desire but to madness. Raving by the end of the scene, she has become spectacle rather than spectator, and has so far lost control of the gaze that she does not even recognize her husband. "Isabella's madness represents the final stage in the *Fatal Marriage's* dramatization of female misery" (Marsden, 2006, p. 90). Madness is the major theme in this last play rather than the other dramatic works. The suffering is depicted especially via madness here.

Besides madness, transgressive sexuality and rape lead to the desperation as Isabella's innocent adultery resulted in her desperation. Madness inevitably results in death, as the mad heroine takes her own life, translating the blows of fate into violence on her own body. Since they deprive the heroine of personal agency, representations of madness present a potent source of pathos. A victim of chance and vagaries of her own mind, the heroine cannot act and becomes no more than a spectacle (Marsden, 2006, p. 92).

Two outstanding actresses Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle who perform the roles of Belvidera, Anna and Isabella were the best actors of the era. Another major reason for the success of *The Fatal Marriage* was these two actresses. The role of Isabella was written for Barry, who also created key roles such as Monimia, Belvidera, and Anna Bullen, while Bracegirdle played the role of Victoria in Southerne's subplot. Before long, the two actors would define the form of the tragedy. Barry was famous for his ability to represent passion and yet shed tears from even the toughest of audiences; For nearly two decades, two actresses have defined the role of women in the drama (Marsden, 2006, p.239).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Like Belvidera's madness which leads to her death in *Venice Preserved*, Isabella is driven to madness too. In the plays of *Anna Bullen and Fatal Marriage*, both Anna and Isabella are deceived by their own brothers. This fatal deceitfulness brings about female calamity, distress and pathos. Their passivity to their horrid predicament leads to innocent and virtuous female protagonist's madness and death. Thus, these characteristics make these tragedies pathetic. Isabella, Anna, Belvidera do not resist against their doomed fate. They are the victims of that patriarchal society. Through the three plays' display of female sexuality, it becomes intriguing but at the same time obvious that they identify punish and control the potential threat of female desire.

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