

Feminine Agency and Feminine Values in *Venice Preserved*: A Response to Elizabeth Gruber*

KATHARINE M. ROGERS

It appears to me that Elizabeth Gruber's "'Betray'd to Shame': *Venice Preserved* and the Paradox of She-Tragedy" diminishes Thomas Otway's play by reducing it to a she-tragedy that focuses on a female protagonist in order to display her victimization. This genre was promoted by the appearance of actresses after the Restoration, although it should be remembered that one of its finest examples, John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, appeared long before there was an actress to play the leading role. And it is true that *Venice Preserved* offers its audience the spectacle of the sufferings of a beautiful woman. However, it rises far above the limitations of that genre as practiced by writers like John Banks and Thomas Southerne. Belvidera is not a passive victim. Confident that 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

*Reference: Elizabeth Gruber, "'Betray'd to Shame': *Venice Preserved* and the Paradox of She-Tragedy," *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006/2007): 158-71.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debgruber01613.htm>>.

being debased by torture and then killing himself. Masculine values are thrillingly affirmed, and John Dryden or Nathaniel Lee would have dropped the curtain there. Otway, however, not accepting that comforting resolution, went on to show us what has been lost. 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. 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 159).

Gruber's reading of *Venice Preserved* "as an adaptation of *Othello*" (159) further distracts from Otway's main theme: the conflict between two incompatible sets of values, both of which are valid and both limited. The plot element of a heroine marrying a man unacceptable to her father is too common to constitute a significant similarity. Venice in Shakespeare's play is an exotic setting where a Moor might plausibly command the armies of the state. In Otway's, it has powerful significance as an ancient republic where ideals of liberty and equality were still resonant. Political concerns are fundamental in *Venice Preserved*, while the tragedy in *Othello* is personal, despite the hero's public importance. The leading characters are strikingly different: unlike Desdemona, Othello, and Iago, Belvidera is an active agent, Jaffeir is torn between conflicting ideals, and, most important, Pierre is not a villain. He fights and is ready to die for worthy masculine values—loyalty between male friends, patriotism, liberty, and justice. The conflict in *Othello* is clearly between good and evil; that in *Venice Preserved* has good and evil on both sides—peace and established order versus revolution against corrupt, oppressive government. It is fitting that Othello kills himself, because he is expiating his guilt; but Belvidera's death is surely not a poetically just punishment "for encroaching upon Jaffeir and Pierre's relationship and muddying

political waters with the force of her desire" (168). She was right to encroach, for Pierre misleads Jaffeir from his true nature and a revolution led by obviously flawed men ought to be averted. Nor is she an "unwitting victim," who is "never fully a participant in the action" (169); for she is responsible for the revelation of the plot.

City University of New York