

## Unmanning the Self: The Troublesome Effects of Sympathy in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*. A Response to Elizabeth Gruber\*

ROLAND WEIDLE

In her essay "'Betray'd to Shame': *Venice Preserved* and the Paradox of She-Tragedy" Elizabeth Gruber reads Otway's play as a deliberate adaptation of *Othello*. She argues that the "she-tragedy" paradoxically reasserts tragedy as a male space and as a site of male privilege by presenting the heroine Belvidera as a threat to male bonds. Viewing the play along these lines is plausible and corresponds to other readings of *Venice Preserv'd* which focus on the tension between male public sphere and female private space.<sup>1</sup> I would like to argue, however, that Belvidera as representative of her sex is not "a means of disrupting political machinations" (Gruber 163) in the male realm and thus does not in herself pose a threat to the men in the play. Instead, the threat to male bonding lies inside the male protagonist Jaffeir, who in the course of the play is confronted with two mutually exclusive models of self-perception.

Derek Hughes has convincingly shown that *Venice Preserv'd* radically questions the concept of a stable personal identity and that it instead offers a Hobbesian perspective on the self:

[...] the self offers no stability, for its essence is incoherence and dislocation, and the characters are subject to uncontrollable shifts of intention and outlook in which reason is revealed as the slave and creation of material desires.  
(300)

He even views Jaffeir as "a precursor of the case later postulated by Locke" (301), referring to Locke's famous *fission examples* in his *Essay*

---

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

*Concerning Human Understanding*, where the philosopher argues that theoretically one body could contain two consciousnesses.<sup>2</sup> Hughes concludes that Jaffeir is a Lockean subject illustrating that the “shifts between the irreconcilable claims of competing memories reveal human character to be an unstable, fluctuating complex of discrete, externally derived sensations” (302). Although I agree with Hughes in his assessment of Jaffeir as an illustration of the unstable nature of the human self, I disagree with him as to the precise nature of that instability. Rather than viewing it in Lockean terms as the result of consciousness and memory, I see it connected to the discourse on sympathy that emerged in the late seventeenth century.

At a first glance Jaffeir, as the central figure in the play, is characterized by the traditional conflict of loyalties: on the one side to his friend Pierre, who demands that he join the rebellion against the senate, on the other side to his wife Belvidera, the senator’s daughter, who begs him to reveal the plot and betray his friends. Under closer scrutiny, however, the conflict turns out to be less between competing alliances and more between different modes of self-perception. Belvidera in this sense threatens Jaffeir’s self but she does so through his imagination and his perception of himself and her, as can be seen in the following lines where he reflects on the fate of his banished wife:

Ah *Pierre!* I have a Heart, that could have born  
 The roughest Wrong my Fortune could have done me:  
 But when I think what *Belvidera* feels,  
 The bitterness her tender spirit tastes of,  
 I own my self a Coward: Bear my weakness,  
 If throwing thus my Arms about thy Neck,  
 I play the boy, and blubber in thy bosome.  
 Oh! I shall drown thee with my Sorrows! (1.270-77)<sup>3</sup>

Imagination plays a vital role in Adam Smith’s understanding of sympathy, as expressed in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It not only enables us to become social beings but it also affects our sense of identity. For Smith, the ability to imagine to ourselves the feelings and

thoughts of others comes close to transgressing the boundaries of our self:

It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, *we enter as it were into his body*, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensation, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them.<sup>4</sup>

Smith's notion of sympathy has been repeatedly viewed as a precursor of George Herbert Mead's interactional concept of the self<sup>5</sup> which needs others to come into being, a claim supported by the following passage in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where the author stresses the importance of exchange and communication in identity formation:

Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. [...] Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before.<sup>6</sup>

But sympathy also has its downside, it not only constitutes but also endangers the self. Smith's concept requires a precarious balance between transgressing and fortifying the boundaries of identity.<sup>7</sup> If the "spectator" and the "actor" (terms repeatedly used by Smith to denote the sympathetic onlooker and the sufferer) are not able to exercise a certain degree of restraint in their "fellow-feeling"<sup>8</sup> and suffering, sympathetic communication and a successful formation of the self will fail.

It is Jaffeir's propensity to sympathize with his wife and her plight, to think himself into her mind, or, as Adam Smith writes, to put himself in her "case,"<sup>9</sup> that weakens his resolve and makes him adopt a sentimental mode of communication ("throwing my Arms about thy Neck," "blubber in thy bosome," "drown thee with my Sorrows"), which throughout the play is described as effeminate and dangerous

to the male self. Jaffeir himself repeatedly reflects on the effeminizing influence of sympathy on his self<sup>10</sup> and is particularly susceptible to Belvidera's non-verbal, kinetic forms of interaction that undermine his masculinity:

*Jaff.* Nay, *Belvidera*, do not fear my cruelty,  
 Nor let the thoughts of death perplex thy fancy,  
 But answer me to what I shall demand,  
 With a firm temper and unshaken spirit.  
*Belv.* I will when I've done weeping—  
*Jaff.* Fie, no more on't—  
 How long is't since the miserable day  
 We wedded first—  
*Belv.* Oh h h.  
*Jaff.* Nay, keep in thy tears,  
 Lest they unman me too.  
*Belv.* Heaven knows I cannot;  
 The words you utter sound so very sadly,  
 These streams will follow [...] (5.251-60)<sup>11</sup>

Jaffeir's propensity to emulate his wife's sympathetic code of interaction is also noticed and commented upon by Pierre, who equally defines it as unmanly and detrimental to their plot:

[...] what, hunt  
 A Wife on the dull foil! sure a stanch Husband  
 Of all Hounds is the dullest? wilt thou never,  
 Never be wean'd from Caudles and Confections?  
 What feminine Tale hast thou been listening to,  
 Of unayr'd shirts; Catharrs and Tooth Ache got  
 By thin-sol'd shoos? (3.2.219-25)

Assessing the textual evidence so far it does indeed seem—as Gruber and others have indicated—that women or rather, as argued above, their particular form of emotionally charged, sympathetic interaction, pose a threat to the male community and that, as Pat Gill states, men in the play can only arrive at an acceptable sense of (male) selfhood through “the objectification of women” (“Pathetic Passions” 199). But Jaffeir does not succeed in objectifying Belvidera and resolving his conflict. This has to do with the fact that he is subjected to yet another

mode of sympathetic interaction represented by his friend Pierre, and it is the oscillation between these two competing interactional modes that accounts for Jaffeir's destabilized self.

Julie Ellison has convincingly argued that sensibility as cultural paradigm and attitude already existed in the late seventeenth century and that it was employed by a male, politically oriented group:

Late seventeenth-century sensibility manifested itself in the civic prestige and mutual friendship practiced by men of equally high social status. The dilemmas of Whig masculinity turned on the problem of negotiating between the power of indifference, or emotional discipline, and the power of sensibility. Sensibility as a cultural ethos took shape in England significantly earlier than we once thought, as part of the culture of elite men with an affinity for republican narratives and parliamentary opposition. (9)<sup>12</sup>

For Ellison, the political environment of the late seventeenth century was a fertile ground for male bonding that was practised as sensibility within "affectionate communities" (25). The nature of this bond, however, is asymmetrical and characterized by a "dignified upper-class sufferer whose very self-control provokes his friends to vicarious tears" (10). Ellison draws attention to the fact that in *Venice Preserv'd* it is Pierre who represents the stoical, self-controlled part whereas Jaffeir stands for the passionate other half displaying sympathy and emotion.<sup>13</sup> Jaffeir engages in two sympathetic relationships at the same time, which poses a problem for him. On the one hand, his vivid imagination leads him to sympathize with his wife and her fate, a propensity that he reflects upon and views as dangerous to his sense of (masculine) self, on the other hand, he is a member of the affectionate male community of the conspirators and sympathizes with his friend Pierre, thus doing what is expected of him and what is meant to strengthen his male identity.<sup>14</sup> Therefore sympathetic interaction poses a double-bind for Jaffeir: it constitutes and at the same time undermines identity.

The threat to Jaffeir's self therefore does not, as Gruber argues, solely emanate from "Belvidera who functions as the evil that must be contained" (169). Moreover, a clear cut dichotomy between male

public realm on the one hand and female private sphere on the other, equally suggested by Gruber, does not exist. The feminizing effects of both sympathetic relationships in which Jaffeir engages blur gender boundaries. As Debra Leissner has argued, Jaffeir is situated between homoerotic and “hermaphroditic” relationships (27), and Gill concludes, “gender issues are far from resolved. While wallowing, fawning, and begging are regarded as effeminate maneuvers, in Jaffeir they simultaneously become strangely ennobling masculine exercises” (“Revolutionary Identity” 249).

Jaffeir’s counterpart, Pierre, on the other hand succeeds in acquiring a stable sense of self by distancing himself from a sentimental code of interaction. After Pierre relates Belvidera’s fate to Jaffeir, the latter throws himself around his friend’s neck and wants to “drown thee with my Sorrows!” (1.277). Pierre, however, rebukes his friend and urges him to forego sorrow and instead revenge Belvidera’s punishment like a “man”:

Burn!

First burn, and level *Venice* to thy Ruin!  
 What starve like Beggars Brats in frosty weather,  
 Under a hedge, and whine our selves to Death!  
 [...]  
 Man knows a braver Remedy for sorrow:  
 Revenge! the Attribute of Gods, they stamp it  
 With their great Image on our Natures; dye! (1.277-88)

Pierre keeps reminding Jaffeir of the male bond that unites their souls.<sup>15</sup> Eventually he has to invoke the symbol of the dagger (a recurring motif in the play representing a patriarchal order) to persuade Jaffeir to join the rebellion:

[*Jaff.*]                Senators should rot  
 Like Dogs on Dunghills; but their Wives and Daughters  
 Dye of their own diseases. Oh for a Curse  
 To kill with!  
*Pierr.*                Daggers, Daggers, are much better!  
*Jaff.* Ha!  
*Pierr.*    Daggers.



*Jaff.* But where are they?  
*Pierr.* Oh, a Thousand  
 May be dispos'd in honest hands in *Venice*. (2.120-25)

By ritualistically invoking the dagger as phallic symbol Pierre entreats Jaffeir to take part in a masculine form of interaction.<sup>16</sup> In this manner the circulating dagger on stage becomes an expression of a specific kind of sexual but also political identity that Pierre provides his friend with in the latter's attempt to stabilize his self.<sup>17</sup> Jaffeir is aware of the dagger's constitutive role for his identity. When the disappointed Pierre reproaches his friend for having betrayed their holy "communion" (4.365) and hands Jaffeir his dagger back as a "worthless pledge" (4.362), Jaffeir realizes that through Pierre's rejection of the offered dagger he has also forfeited the possibility of acquiring an alternative mode of self-perception:

He's gone, my father, friend, preserver,  
 and here's the portion he has left me. [*Holds the dagger up.*]  
 This dagger, well remembred, with this dagger  
 I gave a solemn vow of dire importance,  
 Parted with this and *Belvidera* together [...] (4.376-80)

Significantly, even the final reconciliation of the two friends is brought about by the dagger: Jaffer stabs first his friend and then himself to death, thus achieving exclusive entry to the realm of male sensibility, at the cost, however, of the ultimate annihilation of identity, death.

While Pierre in his self-perception remains true to the ideals of the male community until the end, Jaffeir constantly oscillates between the alternative modes of masculine and feminine sensibility, the latter of which he views as both desirable and a threat to his self.<sup>18</sup> Jaffeir's sensitive disposition is therefore a double-edged sword. In undermining traditional patriarchal value systems of courage, honour and manliness, it presents "a revolutionary conception of masculine self-evaluation" (Gill, "Revolutionary Identity" 252). But Jaffeir's position between Pierre and Belvidera also shows that the transition from an old to a new interactional and perceptual paradigm has not been achieved yet. Jaffeir's ability, or rather desire, to take part in the

emotional lives of others by means of his imagination and empathy is therefore not only responsible for his ambivalent character but also a constituent feature of the tragedy. Sensibility, sympathy and sympathetic imagination thus represent both the problem and the solution for the sensitive protagonist Jaffeir. Jaffeir's wish to "melt" with Pierre as well as with Belvidera, to "partake the troubles of thy bosom" (1.223) is not only a conflict of loyalties, but also a transgression of identity boundaries that eventually leads to the 'liquidation' of his self.

Ruhr-Universität Bochum

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Munns, and Gill, "Pathetic Passions."

<sup>2</sup>Cf. chapter 27 in the third book of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

<sup>3</sup>Ghosh's edition of the play, which I used for this essay, does not provide scene divisions for acts 1, 2, 4 and 5.

<sup>4</sup>Smith 10 (I.i.1.2); my italics.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. for example Seigel 145 and Schwalm 11.

<sup>6</sup>Smith 110 (III.1.3).

<sup>7</sup>For a more detailed discussion of this ambivalence cf. Wegmann 52.

<sup>8</sup>Smith 10 (I.i.1.3).

<sup>9</sup>Smith 12 (I.i.1.10).

<sup>10</sup>Cf. for example where he condemns his compassion for his wife: "Rather, Remember him, who after all/ The sacred Bonds of Oaths and holyer Friendship,/ In fond compassion to a Womans tears/ Forgot his Manhood, Vertue, truth and honour,/ To sacrifice the Bosom that reliev'd him" (4.14-18). See also his urge to hold back his tears when parting from Belvidera (2.382) and his decision "Yes, I will be a Man,/ [...] for from this hour I chase/ All little thoughts, all tender humane Follies/ Out of my bosom" (2.188-94).

<sup>11</sup>Cf also 4.495-97, 528-29.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. also Owen (158) who has located the "rise of the sentimental" in the late 1670s.

<sup>13</sup>"The relationship between Jaffeir and the soldierly Pierre is the crux of manly affection in the play. Their friendship exhibits the standard republican preoccupa-



tion with the interdependence of sensibility and stoicism" (Ellison 42). Ellison's view of sympathetic interaction as operating between a self-controlled sufferer and a sympathetic fellow sufferer is based on Adam Smith's understanding of sympathy formulated in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (see particularly 21-22 [I.i.4.6-8]).

<sup>14</sup>There is abundant evidence in the play for close male bonding between Pierre and Jaffeir. Cf. for example Pierre calling Jaffeir the "honest Partner of my Heart" (1.121), his "hearts Jewel" (3.2.472), but also Jaffeir's wish "Let me partake the trouble of thy bosom" (1.223) and his declaration of love for Pierre (4.99).

<sup>15</sup>"When last we parted, we had no qualms like these,/ But entertain'd each others thoughts like Men,/ Whose Souls were well acquainted" (2.104-06).

<sup>16</sup>For a Lacanian reading of the play cf. Leissner.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Munns 184-86.

<sup>18</sup>In the play Otway employs imagery of tears, fluids and water to draw attention to the threatening quality of a sensitive disposition that can 'dissolve' male identity. Pierre imputes contagious and harmful qualities to Belvidera's tears: "Hadst thou but seen, as I did, how at last/ Thy Beauteous *Belvidera*, like A Wretch/ That's doom'd to Banishment, came weeping forth,/ Shining through Tears, like *April* Sun's in showers/ That labour to orecome the cloud that loads 'm,/ Whilst two young Virgins, on whose Arms she lean'd,/ Kindly lookt up, and at her Grief grew sad,/ As if they catch't the sorrows that fell from her:/ Even the lewd Rabble that were gather'd round/ To see the sight, stood mute when they beheld her;/ Govern'd their roaring throats, and grumbled pity" (1.256-65). Cf. also Jaffeir's disdain and contempt for Belvidera's tears (3.2.27-37).

## WORKS CITED

- Ellison, Julie. *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Gill, Pat. "Revolutionary Identity in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*." *Illicit Sex: Identity Politics in Early Modern Culture*. Ed. Thomas DiPiero and Pat Gill. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1997. 239-55.
- . "Pathetic Passions: Incestuous Desire in Plays by Otway and Lee." *Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation* 39.3 (1998): 192-208.
- Gruber, Elizabeth. "'Betray'd to Shame': *Venice Preserved* and the Paradox of She-Tragedy." *Connotations* 16.1-3 (2006): 158-71.
- Hughes, Derek. *English Drama 1660-1700*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999.
- Leissner, Debra. "Divided Nation, Divided Self: The Language of Capitalism and Madness in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 32.2 (1999): 19-32.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1979.

- Munns, Jessica. *Restoration Politics and Drama: The Plays of Thomas Otway, 1675-1683*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1995.
- Otway, Thomas. *Venice Preserv'd, or, A Plot Discover'd*. 1682. *The Works of Thomas Otway*. Ed. J. C. Ghosh. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1932. 2: 197-289.
- Owen, Susan J. "Drama and Political Crisis." *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*. Ed. Deborah Payne Fisk. Cambridge: CUP, 2000. 158-73.
- Schwalm, Helga. *Das eigene und das fremde Leben: Biographische Identitätsentwürfe in der englischen Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007.
- Seigel, Jerrold E. *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century*. New York: CUP, 2005.
- Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984.
- Wegmann, Nikolaus. *Diskurse der Empfindsamkeit: Zur Geschichte eines Gefühls in der Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988.