A Woman's Tragedy: Catherine Bernard's 'Brutus'

Nina Ekstein

Trinity University, nekstein@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/mll_faculty

Part of the Modern Languages Commons

Repository Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.
The theater has traditionally been a male domain. The ranks of authors, directors, and even actors have long been overwhelmingly dominated by men. In Western drama, no women playwrights have gained admittance to the literary canon. While never absolute, the relative exclusion of women from dramatic authorship is even greater when the type of theater in question is tragedy. Carol Gelderman asks bluntly: "Why is it that no woman has ever written a great tragedy?" A number of explanations have been put forward that suggest deep-seated links between men and tragedy: Susan Gilbert and Susan Gubar find that "the structure of tragedy reflects the structure of patriarchy" and that Western tragedies almost invariably focus on a male "overreacher". Sue-Ellen Case perceives close links between tragedy and male sexuality. Gelderman views tragedy as a natural tool for male self-assertiveness. The most rhetorical, albeit least enlightening, response comes from Voltaire who, when asked why no woman had ever written a tolerable tragedy, replied, "Ah, the composition of a tragedy requires testicles".

The fact is that women have written plays – including tragedies – and have had them produced. In fact a number of significant women playwrights appeared for the first time in the seventeenth-century: Aphra Behn in England, Ana Caro in Spain, Antonia Pulci in Italy, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in Mexico. In France during the 1600's, the female dramatic presence was even greater: Marie-Catherine Desjardins de Villedieu, Françoise Pascal, Antoinette Deshoulières, Anne de La Roche-Guilhen, and Catherine Bernard all wrote for the stage. Their names are generally unfamiliar, however, because their dramatic production has been almost entirely obscured in the annals of literary history.

While women in the seventeenth-century wrote plays, it would be foolish to claim that they produced a feminist theater. Women playwrights were operating in an essentially male arena, one which, particularly in France, was highly codified and increasingly weighed down by tradition and glorious models of dramatic skill. In order to succeed as playwrights, women had to write in a male, classical mold, and find less obvious ways of expressing their difference as women. Elizabeth Berg articulates the issues well:

Caught in a masculine tradition – one might say a masculine language – and responding necessarily to masculine demands,
women writers must assume a phallogocentric system of representation while at the same time attempting to inscribe their own language or figure in their own work. Like male writers, but for other reasons, they must both reproduce the masculine system of representation and attempt to introduce (or produce) another figure within their representations.

In this study I propose to examine specifically how one female playwright, Catherine Bernard (1662-1712), inscribed a female voice within what appears to be a traditionally male tragedy, Brutus. Bernard was a multi-talented and prolific writer. She wrote novels, short stories, tables, poetry, and two tragedies, Laodamie (1689) and Brutus (1690). Both plays were well received and had successful theatrical runs in their day. They deserve to be reread today, not only for their intrinsic merit (which is considerable), but especially as illuminating examples of how tragedy may be written by women.

While it is on Brutus as a work of literature that I wish to focus, the literary fortune of Bernard’s dramatic oeuvre may help us understand how female-authored plays are traditionally read, and why they are neglected. After publication in 1691, Brutus was reprinted twice in the eighteenth century. Since that time, however, there have been no further editions. In fact, until very recently, mention of Catherine Bernard as a playwright was invariably accompanied by the names of two men: Pierre Corneille and Bernard de Fontenelle. Catherine Bernard is not perceived as an independent woman writer, but as a woman whose talent is a function of the men of letters around her. Even more alarming, her Brutus has been regularly attributed to Fontenelle, and reprinted as his in certain collections of his work.

There is no solid reason to believe that Fontenelle wrote this play; the preface is signed by Catherine Bernard. Two rather unsubstantial facts seem to have supported such a conclusion: 1) they were friends (or relatives) and thus Bernard may well have shown Fontenelle a manuscript of the play, and 2) Bernard demonstrates mastery in Brutus of the most classically male components of seventeenth-century tragedy (fathers and sons, honor, glory, and Roman virtue). Bernard’s skill in this domain is evidenced by Donneau de Vise’s comment on Brutus: “Mlle Bernard vient de faire voir qu’elles [les dames] savent pousser avec force les sentiments héroïques, et soutenir noblement le caractère Romain.” The attribution of her work to Fontenelle is by no means anomalous; other women playwrights of the period were accused of having received extensive male assistance in the composition of their plays as well.

When Bernard’s plays are not attributed to Fontenelle, they are often dismissed as inferior. One focus for the attacks on the plays themselves is the accusation that they are merely derivative of Racine or Corneille. While it is difficult to discuss any seventeenth-century French tragedy without reference to Corneille or Racine, in the case of the women playwrights such critical comments are so frequent as to be obsessive. What might be interpreted as intertextual enrichment is frequently cast as a denigration of the value of the play. Thus critics have employed a variety of strategies to obscure both the authorship and the value of Bernard’s theater.

The plot of Brutus is relatively simple. Brutus and Valerius are the consuls of Rome. Octavius, an emissary of Tarquin (the overthrown king), arrives and argues unconvincingly for the return of Tarquin to the throne. When Octavius leaves, Brutus announces his plans to have his elder son, Titus, marry Valerius’s sister, Valerie, and to have his younger son, Tibérinus, marry Aquillie. This arrangement is problematic because both Tibérinus and Titus are in love with Aquillie, and she loves Titus. Valérie, suspecting Titus’s true feelings, sends her slave to spy in Aquillie’s household. In the second act we discover that Octavius’s true purpose for coming to Rome was to confer with Aquillie (Aquilie’s father) to plan an immediate overthrow of the consuls and return Tarquin to the throne. In order to be successful, they need Titus’s help. Tibérinus has already gone over to Aquillie’s side. Aquillie proposes offering Aquillie’s hand in exchange for the gate to the city that Titus controls, and sends Aquillie to make the offer. At first Aquillie refuses to even raise the matter with Titus. When she is finally forced to do so, Titus does not want to listen and is clearly torn by the conflicting demands of his love for her and his loyalty to his father and country. He later capitulates only when his brother boasts that Aquillie will be his. Meanwhile, Valérie’s slave has discovered the conspiracy and reveals it to the consuls. Brutus is first confronted with Tibérinus’s betrayal and then, far worse, with Titus’s. Titus repents wholeheartedly and requests to be put to death in accordance with the law. Brutus is deeply touched by Titus’s contrition and courage. Valérie dissuades the consul from simply ordering his sons’ death, urging him to turn to the Senate for a final decision. The Senate returns the matter to Brutus, ruling that he alone must decree his sons’ punishment. As consul, he decides that he must order their death, but is destroyed by his own decision. Valérie wants to commit suicide over Titus’s body but is
of the very structure of patriarchy. In fact the absence of a tragic hierarchy which normally would organize our reading of the play may even be interpreted as a calling into question of the very structure of patriarchy. In fact Brutus presents twin patriarchies, two male-dominated political orders competing with each other: a monarchy with a single ruler (the traditional patriarchal structure) and a consulate (with double rulers, Valerius and Brutus). While the point of view of the play clearly favors the consulate, casting the exiled Tarquin in a negative light, there is an undercurrent of an opposing position. The young people of Rome clearly favor the return of Tarquin³⁶, and their feelings are at least in part shared by Brutus's son(s). If the young support Tarquin, how might we determine which is the old order and which the new? A hierarchization of the two becomes impossible.

The generational organization of the play seems simple, with the old making the laws and the young rebelling against their authority. But here again, there are signs of dissymmetry. Brutus and Valerius are theoretically doubles, but they do not seem to belong to the same generation. Brutus's son is to marry Valerius's sister, not his daughter. Brutus was also consul before Valerius, thus reinforcing the difference between them. There is a pattern in this play of "establishing difference at the heart of similarity", as Linda Hutcheon puts it³⁷, and of creating doubles where normally there should be only one.

The case of the two female characters is particularly complex. On the one hand the contrasts between the two women seem to replicate the oppositional structure found in the case of Titus and Tibirinus. Aquilie is loved and Valérie is spurned. At the end of the play, Valérie is prevented from witnessing the death scene, while Aquilie manages to be present. Valérie is left alive at the end of the play, while Aquilie dies. The opposition between them extends to their respective relations with their confidants: Valérie has perfectly traditional discussions with Plautine in which she takes her into her confidence, while Aquilie repeatedly pushes Albine away³⁸. The opposition between Valérie and Aquilie does not, however, extend to the moral domain: unlike Titus and Tibirinus, one cannot be labeled good and the other bad. Unlike the brothers as well, the two women never appear together on stage. Their inability to occupy the same space coupled with their love for the same man suggest identity rather than difference.

A different form of doubling occurs in the context of the intertextual relations between Brutus and several of Racine's tragedies. While critics do seem overeager to dismiss Bernard's work as derivative, there are indeed specific similarities between elements of this play and of Racine's work. Like Bérenice, Brutus is a tragedy of separation. Like Phèdre, Brutus presents an obsessive, jealous love as well as a father whose role it is to judge his son and condemn him to death. The
references go beyond what might be viewed as unconscious, a simple function of Racine's recent and overwhelming popularity: for example, Aquilie prefaces her presentation of the conspiracy to Titus with an unmistakable echo of Phèdre: "He bien, je vais parler, c'est vous qui le voulez" (III, i)21. Bernard seems to invoke Racine repeatedly, thus presenting her own work as a kind of double, similar to his. Why employ such a strategy? Does Bernard believe herself to be the equal of Racine? It is a dangerous strategy, in that it leaves her open to charges of being merely a pale imitation of the great master22. I would like to suggest that Bernard may have used these similarities, as she does the doubles within the play, in order to draw attention instead to difference. Titus and Aquilie must indeed separate, but unlike Racine's Titus and Bérénice, they reject patriotic and familial reasons for doing so. Valérie's love for Titus, unlike Phèdre's, is an innocent love, and Valérie cannot be held responsible for Titus' fate. Brutus judges his son, but not hastily. The similarities are only superficial ones, which upon the slightest examination reveal diametrical differences23.

The figure of the double is one of the means that Bernard employs to inscribe a female presence in her tragedy. It is not, of course, an explicit means of doing so. Rather, doubling sets up a structure that admits a second, and dissonant, voice. A second technique, that Bernard uses is to establish a powerfully patriarchal system and then critique it.

The structure of patriarchy dominates the dramatic universe of Brutus, almost to the point of tyranny. The two institutions represented, the political and the familial, are both controlled exclusively by men. The familial domain is a seamless extension of the political: Brutus decides on marriages with the same authority and dispatch with which he rejects Octavius' offer. The sons and the women are no more than pawns, tokens in alliances between the fathers. Bernard draws attention to Aquilie's and Brutus' love for their offspring, yet paternal affection counts for little when contrasted with the fathers' political projects. The child must take his or her place in such projects (the conspiracy, Brutus' choice of a wife for Titus) or be severely punished24. The play begins with Brutus disposing of his sons through marriage and ends with him disposing of his sons through death.

The language in which the males express themselves in this play is replete with traditional patriarchal values: Brutus, Octavius, Valérieus, and later Titus, speak unremittingly in terms of country, honor, and duty, and a constellation of similar values. Rome (or République) is mentioned 63 times in the play, vertu (virtue) 29 and loi (law) 2226. The political domain is so fraught with these values that Brutus, the patriarch, associates the political with the absolute. His reaction to learning of the conspiracy is: "On conspire! ô Rome, ô droits sacrés!" (IV, 2). He confides his own tenuous hold on political power with divine selection.

The patriarchal structure dominates Brutus, but is accompanied by an implicit critique. The two male tragic figures, Brutus and Titus, despite their oft-voiced adherence to Roman values, are both torn by internal conflict. Titus wavers between his love of country and father, and his love for Aquilie. Brutus is similarly divided between his love for the law and his love for Titus. Bernard heightens the force of Brutus' internal conflict by making him ironically the source of the very law that condemns his son to death. The law of the land – which is simultaneously and literally the law of the father – triumphs over Titus, but it is a hollow victory27. A law that allows for no repentance or atonement is self-defeating. Indeed, Brutus seems to be a representation of the patriarchal system destroying the future of the patriarchy. By rigidly insisting on the death of both sons, by being incapable of distinguishing between them, the law destroys the very males who were to perpetuate the system.

The play is an implicit critique of the traditional conception of male heroism as well: Mazouer notes that Bernard's heroes are different from those of the early Corneille: "avant de choisir l'héroïsme, Titus et son père Brutus connaissent la faute ou la faiblesse". He accounts for the diminishment of the hero by saying that triumphant heroism was no longer fashionable at the end of the seventeenth century: "la tragédie n'exalte plus les héros, elle les abat et les démit"28. Indeed, tragic heroism is less than pure and triumphant in Brutus. Titus adopts the stance of the tragic hero, eager to die for his sins in order to uphold law and country. But his tragic arena is not the battlefield; instead the only heroic act left open to him is to retain his composure while being put to death in disgrace. Brutus too upholds law and country in the face of great personal suffering. But instead of triumphing over his private feelings, he is destroyed by them. Male heroism in this dramatic universe leads to the destruction of the hero.

Certain critics have voiced reservations about the two male protagonists. Specifically, they find both Titus and Brutus to be inconsistent. Lancaster is troubled by Titus: "[t]he fact ... that so fine a man consents to betray his father and his city is not made convincing"29. Mazouer notes this inconsistency in Titus' character as well, but is more struck by a similar dissonance in Brutus: "on est frappé de voir
Brutus, père dur et assez proche des pères de comédie à l'acte I, devenir ce père pathétique et héroïque des deux derniers actes
d. I would suggest that the inconsistency and fragmentation that these critics
note in the characters is not accidental nor is it a sign of Bernard's lack of
dramaturgical skill. I read these strong shifts in character as a
splintering of the traditional model of male tragic heroism. This model
is no longer operational, nor even inhabitable by a mere mortal. The
two heroes cannot remain equal to themselves throughout the play.

In both cases, the inconsistencies of character arise as a result of
love, be it erotic or paternal. Titus agrees to betray his father and
country because of his love for Aquilie, while Brutus questions the law
and his own authority out of love for his son. Love as a value is situated
in a position diametrically opposed to law-honor-country. Private, as
opposed to public, love is closely associated with women. This leads us
to the third and most direct means that Catherine Bernard employs to
inscribe a female presence in Brutus: the valorization of both the
female voice and the values associated with women.

Women are valorized, first of all, by their representation as
desiring subjects. Both love Titus
. While the action they take in
support of that desire is mediated – Aquilie is forced by her father to
offer herself to Titus as a reward for betraying Rome, and Valérie
employs a spy to discover the secrets of Titus's heart – their defense of
the condemned Titus is direct and forceful.

Unlike the male heroes, the two women experience no internal
conflict. They are not divided, fragmented, or inconsistent. Bernard
grants the realm of the absolute, traditionally associated with tragedy,
to the women characters. Aquilie and Valérie, although they never
meet or speak, are both equally and totally committed to love
. In their
unwavering adherence to this particular absolute value, they seem to
belong to a universe different from that of the men. The male ethos
of law-honor-country is completely alien to Aquilie and Valérie. Aquilie
expresses to Titus her indifference to all matters political: “Et que me
fait à moy leur [les Tarquins] retour, leur absence?” (III, i)
. Most
interestingly, despite the unequal balance of power between the sexes,
feminine-coded love triumphs over the male values of law-honor-
country, at least temporarily. Titus betrays his country and his father
for the love of Aquilie. Goldwyn reads the end of the play as a final
victory for masculine values
, but I disagree. Titus cannot simply go
back to his former values, as his condemnation makes clear. Brutus
cannot simply act the role of consul and judge. Titus's espousal
of “Roman” values and Brutus's condemnation of his sons in accordance
with the law merely mask the fact that for both men love has taken the
upper hand.

The role of women in this play is not particularly large
. It is,
however, crucial. Without Aquilie, Titus would have no reason to
betray his father and country, and without Valérie, the conspiracy
would not have been discovered in time. Although divorced from the
political universe by their powerlessness and by their refusal of male
values, Aquilie and Valérie nonetheless speak. Their voices formulate
an assault on male values. Like their acts, their language can focus only
on love, excluding male values and thereby calling into question the
pertinence of such values. Tibérius’s betrayal comes to light in IV, iii.
Through the following scenes Valérie repeatedly injects her voice and
interpretation, blaming Aquilie for Tibérius’s crime: “Que par son
amour seul son crime fut commis; / Aquilie a tout lait” (IV, v).
Satisfying Valérie’s desire for revenge against her rival, these accusations
also have the effect of denying any political motivation on Tibérius’s
part. Brutus tries to protect his son from Valérie’s perspective, claiming:
“L’amour à des forfaits ne peut servir d’excuse” (IV, v). Valérie,
however, is tenacious in interjecting her voice in the scenes between
father and son(s) in the last two acts. The confrontations are very much
between men, and focus on loyalty, betrayal, patriotism, and the
law. Valérie will not, however, allow Brutus full control of the scenes. In IV,
vii, Valérie herself claims responsibility for Titus’s crime: “Par moy ce
que j’adore est tout prest d’exprimer, / Je prepare le fer qui doit trancher
sa vie”. Her voice is matched by that of her female counterpart: Aquilie
appears before Titus in the next scene and insists on revealing to
Brutus that she is to blame for what Titus has done. The women
actively strip Titus and Tibérius of their own responsibilities for their
choices, and of any possible motivating factors other than love. In a
situation that excludes them, both Aquilie and Valérie insist on their
own role and their own centrality.

The most profound influence of the women in Brutus can be seen
in what we might call the feminization of the male hero. Titus's crime
is that he accepted the female value of love and relativized, albeit
temporarily, the masculine values of patriotism and honor. In the last
act of the play he returns to these masculine values, championing them
now as absolute. He recognizes his crime, demands to be put to death
for it, and absolves everyone but himself of responsibility. He has
become the consummate Roman. But the mark of the feminine is upon
him, as his imminent death indicates. Brutus, too, is overcome by love,
but interestingly, not at the same time as his son. At the very moment
that Titus returns to the fold, Brutus, in reaction to the valor of his son, begins to relativize the values that the masculine code presents as absolute. Most striking is that Brutus is convinced by Valérie to appeal to the Senate. He is seduced into believing that some solution might be found to his tragic situation. Valérie thus imposes a feminine logic that prioritizes questions of the heart, and relativizes all else: law, politics, and country. In contrast to Titus, who seeks to bring his father back to traditional values ("Adoptez la Patrie au lieu de vos deux fils", V, vii). Brutus comes to see his own cruel decision in relative terms: "A Rome en te perdant ... / Peut-estre je deviens plus criminel que toi" (V, vii).

He acknowledges that another (non-heroic) perspective on his decision exists. It is Valérie who provides that perspective in V, ix, accusing Brutus of parricide. The female perspective which discounts all considerations of law and country can only see Brutus as a criminal. That Brutus can admit this perspective himself is a sign that he has been to a certain degree feminized. As the play ends, Brutus is transformed from the self-righteous, absolute patriarch to a divided and destroyed ex-father. The reaction of the two women to Titus's death is as painful as that of Brutus – Aquillie dies and Valérie seeks the same fate for herself – and yet they are in no way divided and fragmented. They remain absolute to the end.

It is clearly by the denouement that a female figure of representation has been inserted deeply within the play. Specifically, it operates in large measure by subtly subverting the traditional forms and structures of male dramatic representation: patriarchy, symmetry, hierarchy. To conclude, I would like to quote Elizabeth Berg once more:

"French classicism is one of the great masculine fantasies. As a return to order after a period dominated by women – by a queen mother on the political plane and by salon women on a literary plane – and as a body of literature created primarily by great men, French classicism may serve to illustrate the phallogocentric structures inherent in Western representation, as well as the ways in which those structures may break down to allow another figuration to become perceptible (176).

The theater, and more specifically tragedy, belongs by and large to men. Nevertheless, as Catherine Bernard demonstrates in Bruttus – a tragedy that at first seems eminently typical of the standard tragic canon – phallogocentric structures may indeed break down and allow another, a female, figuration to materialize on stage.

NINA EKSTEIN
Males dominate the play at every level. The first two acts of the play open with male characters; in fact no female appears onstage until the last scene of the first act. Men speak 60.5% of the lines, a number which is obviously quite high. In Racine's tragedies, for example, women speak less in only Bérénice and Mérope, both plays that have a single woman protagonist.