

Breeches, Sword Play and Intriguing Ladies: Performing the Spanish Code of Honor as a Model for Social Formation in the Plays of the English Restoration

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Over 10% of English Restoration drama engaged its audience through plays that were translated from or imitated the Spanish *capa y espada* form of theatre. English plays modeled on this form used Spanish locations and a constructed and rigid idea of honor as a proxy for English society. While dialogue was still important, it performed physical action of this form, including frequent use of breeches roles and female characters sword fighting, allowed for different and effective critiques and models of social behavior for women in England. Particularly important were concerns about women's behavior and status in English society, and the presence of the actress for the first time on English stages heightened the effectiveness of these plays as an instrument of social discussion.

Keywords: Restoration, theatre, breeches, *capa y espada*, women, sword fighting, honor

Introduction

Clashing swords—exotic locations—women in breeches—English Restoration drama engaged its audience through these performed elements as a means of challenging, defining and constructing social roles. A significant number of plays that used these elements did so either as a translation or in imitation of the Spanish stage of that era. England saw tremendous political, social and cultural change from 1660-1714, and drama became a form of public discourse in the reshaping of British society after the Interregnum period of parliamentary rule from 1649-1660 under the Cromwells. The political shifts of the period created great anxiety within England, and expanding colonialism, international trade and religious reformation led to tensions within English society, as well as with other European nations.¹ Britain was also coming to terms with a redefinition

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¹ The Interregnum rule of the Cromwells ended in 1660 with the restoration of Charles II. When his brother, James II came to the throne, he lasted only three years before being deposed, in part because of his Catholicism. The Revolution of 1688 (often referred to as the Glorious Revolution) brought William and Mary to the throne with relatively little bloodshed. The Protestant William of Orange was married to James' daughter Mary, and was effectively invited to take over the English crown. As part of an attempt to re-take the throne and with the assistance of Louis XIV, James attacked the British through Ireland, but his hopes were defeated at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. However, the political unrest was a source of unease in England and led to increased anti-Catholic sentiment. Mary died in 1694, and William ruled alone until his death in 1702. Mary's sister, Anne, reigned until her death in 1714. During this period, Britain was also involved in the Second and Third Dutch Wars, the War of Devolution, the War of the Grand Alliance and the War of Spanish Succession. Continuing domestic religious turmoil boiled over with the Popish Plot of 1678, which resulted in 24 Catholics being executed for treason, and the Test Act, which prevented nonconformists and Catholics from holding public office.

of women's place in society. All of these concerns found their way onto the Restoration stage, and the re-establishment of the professional theatre provided a needed avenue of discussion. Over 10% of all productions from the period were plays known as intrigue plays or Spanish comedies. These plays were directly translated, based on, or modeled after plays from the Spanish stage, particularly the *capa y espada* (cape and sword) form. The physical action of this form, as well as its depiction of a rigid code of honor, was very effective as a critique and model of social behavior for women in England.

In "The Restoration Audience", Emmett L. Avery (1996) described the theatre of the era expanding its appeal to "a broad range of classes", particularly middle class patrons, like Samuel Pepys (p. 60). Pepys (1971) himself described a broad change in audiences in just the first few years of the Restoration, where "a mighty company of citizens, prentices and others" had joined the nobility and upper class patrons in the theatre (p. 2). Such a mixed audience was certainly not new to English theatre; a mix of classes and professions could be found in earlier Elizabethan and Stuart audiences, as well. But Restoration drama would speak to that audience in new ways.

Perhaps the most important change was that women legally performed on stage for the first time in England, and female patrons and authors added to the presence of women in the theatre. As Jean I. Marsden (2006) described in *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality and the English Stage, 1660-1720*,

The very existence of women representing women on the stage, of an actual female presence displayed in public, was to alter the world of English theater. It provided playwrights with a new group of professionals for whom to write and created the opportunity for new literary and dramatic effects. (p. 2)

The drama of the period, especially tragicomedies written as translations or in the form of Spanish *capa y espada* plays (and referred to as Spanish comedies, Spanish romances, or intrigue comedies or plays), were exceptionally apt at challenging, discussing and positioning new ideas about women's social positions and roles. Prescriptive treatises of the day, such as the Codrington's 1664 work *Youths Behavior, or Decency in Conversation Amongst Women* and *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest* (Astell, 1694), suggested that English women should remain closeted, veiled, and only appear accompanied by members of their families when out in public. Yet plays of the period depicted women in breeches, fighting and consorting with men, and defying their family's wishes, especially in regard to marriage. By copying the *capa y espada* play, with its large amounts of physical action, harsh treatment of women, and a rigidly staged social ideology based on honor, English authors could challenge societal norms through the behavior of the female characters. These performed actions were as important as the text in contravening commonly expressed social norms, such as those in treatises mentioned above.

In fact, one of the central difficulties in studying these lesser-known Restoration plays is that, in textual form, they can appear insignificant against the text-heavy plays that have become accepted as the canon of Restoration drama. Instead, the true dynamism and social commentary can be found by examining the plays in the context of imagined performance, as the social commentary may not be immediately obvious simply reading from the page. A woman wearing men's clothing or succeeding against a man in a sword fight are far more effective seen in production than as a short description in the text, what Jean E. Howard (2009) described as "powerfully and socially significant alternatives to normative prescriptions" for behavior (p. 115).

Paula Backscheider (1993) characterized texts as important tools with which to control "history, identity, and morality" (p. 68), and the "creation of new kinds of literature [...] proved to be ideally suited to

participation in hegemonic processes under way in the public political sphere” (p. 70). While Mediterranean locations were not new to English theatre, increased trade and military engagement meant that they took on greater relevance to English society after 1660. John Dryden’s *An Evening’s Love* shows how it imitates and embodies a recent treaty between England and Spain against France, the 1668 Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle.² *The London Gazette* described the treaty as “a happy conclusion [...] between the two crowns, [...] His Most Christian Majesty” and “His Catholique Majesty”.³ It was also noted that the Treaty needed “ratification from the Queen of Spain”, Marie Louise d’Orléans, daughter of Princess Henrietta Anne of England and granddaughter of Charles I.⁴

The queen’s importance is reflected in the actions of the play and heightened by the presence of Nell Gwynn playing the lead female role. That summer it had become public knowledge that Gwynn was now mistress to Charles II. When Gwynn’s character, Jacinta, negotiates a marriage between herself and an English Cavalier, Wildblood, the audience would have seen Nell Gwynn, mistress of the king, stating, “The prime articles between Spain and England are sealed; for the rest concerning a more strict alliance; if you please we’ll dispute them in the garden” (Dryden, 1671, p. 72). The play becomes a personification of the political alliance. But Bridget Orr (2001) noted that “The pervasive language of conquest and booty” in the play, “underwritten by the Englishmen’s local and overall victories [...], reframes the apparently equal-handed representation of negotiation between different nationals as an English triumph” (p. 220). So in this personification, Charles II (Wildblood) conquers Spain (Jacinta), and by so doing, defeats the imperialist ambitions of France.

By engaging Spain as a surrogate location, authors could effectively discuss matters of foreign policy, the military and trade, as well as discuss topics in the domestic sphere. Orr (2001) explained that “while empire, national identity and exotic cultures were all demonstrably important in Restoration drama, it would be a mistake to see these subjects as separate from more obviously domestic concerns” (p. 11).

Decades of political and religious turmoil, particularly the Interregnum and the exile of Charles II and his followers, had left English society in a state of flux. In *Royalist Identities*, Jerome de Groot (2004) contended that the Civil War had upset the traditional model of society:

The Parliamentary denial of the fundamental authority of the King led to an unmeaning, a decentring. This challenge to the structured models [...] was mapped onto all facets of society: sexual identity, religious practice, education, gender organization. [...] Their interrogation of social roles and political identities led to a conservative backlash, as texts and writers attempted to reinvest social models and paradigms with power, to reimpose structures of identity and behaviour. (pp. 5-6)

With Charles’ restoration to the throne, English society looked to other models, and the social codes of behavior in Spain (at least as imitated in the plays) remained sharply defined. In particular, the Spanish code of honor provided a crystal clear model through which English authors could position and challenge standards of behavior in England. The plays created an implicit contrast and comparison of the exotic culture with that of England, exemplifying the positives and negatives of each. In *Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage*, Cynthia Lowenthal (2003) noted that Spain was viewed as a failed empire, and authors demonized the Spaniard

² In the War of Devolution (1667-1668), France took advantage of a militarily weak Spain to invade Spanish controlled territories in the Low Countries. England, with Sweden and the Netherlands, came to Spain’s defense and halted the French invasion in May, 1668. The first printing of the play was likely in 1671.

³ *The London Gazette*, Number 258, May 4-7, 1668.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Number 259, May 7-11, 1668.

to “justify contemporary British” policy and behavior (p. 39). If, as Howard (2009) suggested, drama served as a “process” for “figuring new social relations”, then Spain became a model for behavior to be challenged and built upon by playwrights to suggest a new and different British paradigm (p. 12).

Howard (2009) described how Stuart and Carolinean plays challenged the “neat categorization of women into maids, wives, widows and illicit others and [the] valorization of sexual chastity as the prime determinant of female worth” (p. 121). Theatre dealt with heightened “anxieties about women’s conduct, chastity and proper subordination”, particularly in how the use of clothing and disguise could “elide distinctions” between women of various social classes (Howard, 2009, pp. 129, 131). These concerns were only heightened with the social uncertainty described by de Groot, and further compounded by the appearance of women on stage. Lowenthal (2003) added that

if Restoration theater performance offered a representation of ‘ideal’ behavior in its fashions, voices, and gestures, then it served as a mediating element operating between the force that established certain behaviors as ideal [...] and its application in the larger culture, as a shaping force in an audience’s self-definition and behavior. (p. 141)

Howard noted how earlier Stuart and Carolinean authors used locations within London as cultural identifiers for commentary on English society. But the de-centering of the Interregnum removed these cultural and social connotations, and Spanish culture provided a strict and identifiable cultural model, the “ideal” described by Lowenthal that could serve as a proxy for English society.

On stage, female characters push against the traditional codes of conduct and social boundaries represented by Spain, and in so doing, present new possibilities and structures for identity and behavior in England. As Backscheider (1993) asserted, the theatre was part of shaping the nation and its future, as “the national public theater [...] represented the residual and emergent structures of feeling so strongly present in the larger culture” (p. 33). Many of the plays positively contrast the treatment of women in England against that in the staged Spanish culture. Female characters pine for the freedoms enjoyed by women in England, while the restrictive treatment of the rigidly recreated Spanish culture is seen as barbarous.⁵ If, as de Groot noted (2004) above, authors were attempting “to reimpose structures of identity and behavior”, then the repeated expression of such sentiment suggests that theatre was arguing for greater enfranchisement of women in English society (pp. 5-6).

As noted earlier, female behavior became a significant concern to moralists of the period, and multiple treatises imposed the ideas that women were “subject [...] to fall into temptation”,⁶ for the “natural Dispositions” of women “incline them to a soft and easy Life” and “render them more inconstant” (Brown & Ward, 1705, pp. 2, 6). The 1664 treatise, *Youth’s Behavior, or Decency in Conversation Amongst Women*, urges “the true servants of Christ [...] to be cloath’d with innocence”, equating “soft cloathes” with “soft minds”.⁷ In 1709, *The Virgin Unmask’d* continued the complaint, stating that “Women, in strictness, should

⁵ One instance noting women’s freedoms comes from a letter written by Monsieur de Fontenelle, where describes a walk on a winter morning where he was surprised to find English women walking about in the cold: “the *English Ladies* are not so Tender as our *French Women*, who seldom, or never walk abroad in the Winter-time”. Earlier, the letter paints English women as possessing a “[...] genteel natural Air [...] free from all manner of Affectation”. Many Restoration plays reinforce De Fontenelle’s picture of women being self-sufficient, as well as trustworthy and virtuous. From Monsieur de Fontenelle. “Letter IV: From a French Gentleman in London, to his Friend in Paris, Giving him an Account of the Court of England, Particularly of the Assemblies at Kensington; and of the Celebrated Beauties There. Boyer” (Boyer, 1701, p. 214).

⁶ *Youth’s Behavior*, 35.

⁷ *Youth’s Behavior*, 22-3.

never appear in Publick but Veil'd; at least Young Women should never shew their Faces to any Men, but their nearest Relations" (Mandeville, 1709, p. 3) In 1696, *The Accomplished Ladies Rich Closet* urged women not to "stare men in the face", and to "look a little downward, for modesty is commendable" (Shirley, 1696, p. 183)

The most restrictive treatise may have been a small pamphlet entitled *A Letter Touching a College of Maids or, a Virgin-Society* from 1675. Its seven pages suggest that women are inherently corrupt and so must submit completely to their fathers' will, be carefully educated and separated from society. The anonymous author urges the improvement of "ingenuous maids" by separating "them from the contagion of common Conversation [...] and to find them decent employments [...] in a convenient house where they may have lodging and diet together, and be under government" (Clement, 1675, p. 2).

On stage, depictions of a strict Spanish culture frequently showed women enduring a life of confinement, constant male supervision and veiled faces. The Agustín Moreto play, *Nopuede ser el guardar una mujer* (You can't keep a woman), is a particularly apt example, not only depicting women being locked up, but also twice translated into English. During the play, after a scene in which his sister Ana has entertained several guests at a party (by proving her intelligence and wit), Pedro commands his friend Alberto: "Esto ha de ser; no ha de quedar abierta ventana en casa, ni ha de verse puerta sin guardaenella. Veamos si es posible guardar una mujer (This must be; close all the windows in the house, nor let a door be open but keep her inside. see if you can keep a woman)" (Moreto y Cabaña, 1940, p. 134).

As guardian of his sister, Don Pedro was responsible for protecting her reputation, and bound to keep her guarded at all times and to teach her to behave modestly. Most importantly, her honor and his depended on maintaining her sexual purity at all costs.

Later in the play, Pedro returns home, worried about his ability to protect Ana from the approaches of unknown men. He is obsessed about maintaining the honor of his family and his house, and uses the idea of honor to persuade his friend Alberto to help him keep Ana locked up: "Alberto, esto ha de ser: vossois mi duedo Y a quientoca mi honor y eldueloolbliga (Alberto, this must be: you are my kin and obliged to care and fight for my honor)" (Moreto y Cabaña, 1940, p. 134).

Don Pedro fears *deshonra* more than anything, and his actions are guided by his desire to maintain his honor at all cost, locking his sister in the house and forbidding any contact with men.

Moreto's play was a favorite of Charles II, and he twice asked author's to translate the play. The first was Thomas St. Serfe's *Tarugo's Wiles; or, the Coffee-House* from 1667, followed nearly two decades later by the 1685 play, John Crowne's *Sir Courtly Nice, or It Cannot Be*.⁸ Moreto's *No Puede ser* illustrates how the ideas of Spanish honor manifested on stage through loyalty and obligation to family. It is important to note that the idea of honor, and the code associated with it, was a construct created for the Spanish stage, and not at all how it worked in reality. According to Renato Barahona (2006), "honor—perhaps especially that of females" (pp. 39-44) is presented as "a priceless possession and quality" (p. 39), but in actuality, "Spain's alleged obsession with parental and family honor has been grossly overstated" (p. 41). Matters of honor were frequently settled through arrangements of marriage or a financial payment. On stage, however, the honor code remained absolute. And it is the stage version that English authors imitated and employed.

⁸ The first translation of *No puede Ser El Guardar una Mujer* by Thomas St. Serfe's *Tarugo's Wiles; or, The Coffee-House*, debuted in 1667 and probably incorporated portions of a shorter play that had been performed previously, *The Knaves ...* The second translation was the 1685 play, John Crowne's *Sir Courtly Nice, or It Cannot Be*. Charles II never saw the play, as it debuted shortly after his death.

Although the character names change, much of St. Serfe's play, *Tarugo's Wiles*, follows the plot of Moreto's *No puede ser el guardar una mujer*. In both the Spanish and the English version of the play, a jealous brother tries to imprison his sister only to have her escape through the manifestations of a visiting trickster. In *Tarugo's Wiles*, Liviana is subject to the "barbarous jealousy" of her brother Patricio (St. Serfe, 1668, p. 2). As her guardian, he is determined to confine her "for the preservation of [her] honour", even though she makes it clear that her nature and quality are better defenses than "all [his] restraints" (St. Serfe, 1668, p. 4). When Patricio fears that Liviana's lover, Horatio, has visited her, he determines that Horatio "shall be sacrificed to [his] revenge", and that he will "chastise" Liviana's "loose behaviour with [a] dagger" (St. Serfe, 1668, pp. 30, 31). Liviana is forced to flee her "dang'rous" house in disguise, and only marriage can free her from the "unjust slavery" of her brother (St. Serfe, 1668, 39, 54).

Here we see the attempt to confine Liviana, and the precepts of the honor code requiring the death of both her and Horatio. However, the play very clearly marks Patricio's violent intentions as excessive and wrong, instead highlighting Liviana's honor and purity. Moreover, every female character is treated harshly, whether or not her honor has been questioned. So even though the women in the play are honest and virtuous, they are all treated cruelly and unjustly. The violent pursuit of honor by the men compared to the virtuous maintenance of honor by the women creates an implicit complaint against such male behavior and control over women.

The Spanish and sometimes other Mediterranean locations of the plays also connected to the travels of the exiled cavaliers, the soldiers who were banished or fled from England after the English Civil War for supporting Charles I. As Geoffrey Smith (2003) explained, "many Cavaliers [traveled] widely in search of employment or adventure, turning up for example in the armies of the Kings of France, Spain and Sweden, of the Republic of Venice and of the grand Duke of Tuscany" (p. 6).

St. Serfe (1668) even dedicated *Tarugo's Wiles* to the young Lord Strathbogy, whose ancestors fought for "the Royal Interest", and whose "Loyalty" and "number" made them "conspicuous" in "confounding the Rebellions" (p. ii). Plays that employed Spanish locations and plots implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) expressed solidarity with the king and the exiled cavaliers.

Most intrigue plays are set in locations visited by the cavaliers between 1649 and 1660, principally Spain or its territories. Often, wandering British soldiers are the centerpiece of the plot, as we find in Aphra Behn's *The Rover, or the Banished Cavaliers*, perhaps the best known example of a play based on the *capa y espada* form.⁹ The characters in *The Rover* possess a sense of honor in which devotion to the king was valued above all, and love and loyalty to friends was valued over money. Thomas Killigrew was one such exile, and his ca. 1655 play, *Thomaso, or the Wanderer*,¹⁰ reflects the "poverty, separation from [...] family and homesickness for England" experienced by the cavaliers (Smith, 2003, p. 108). Also evident is how the characters valued loyalty and honor: "They are true blades, Hall. — Remnants of the broken Regiments; Royal and Loyal Fugitives, highly guilty all of the Royal Crime, Poor and honest, Hall [...]" (Killigrew, 1664, p. 320).

⁹ Aphra Behn's *The Rover, or the Banished Cavaliers* debuted in 1677. Despite her protestations, many plot elements were taken from Killigrew's play, *Thomaso, or the Wanderer*.

¹⁰ While *Thomaso* was written in 1655, it was never performed and not published until 1664. In addition, the author, Thomas Killigrew, was a political ally of Charles II, spent time in exile, and returned to run one of the patent-holding theatre companies until his death in 1683.

Loyalty to friends was equated with loyalty to the crown, and the display of expressing and acting on the honor code became a means of expressing support for royalism and Charles. Away from the stage, other forms of writing reinforced the unambiguous concept of honor found in *Thomaso*, such as the collection of letters published as *Lettres galantes du chevalier d'Her* (Letters of Gallantry by the Knight d'Her) in 1701. One of the letters echoes *Thomaso* as it describes the needs of friendship in relation to honor: “the Rules of Friendship are so very nice, that where many pretend, few are able to perform ’em. A true Friend’s motto is, that *he would sooner suffer for our Honour, than be reliev’d by our Fault*” (Boyer, 1701, p. 129)¹¹

Its wording suggests that the rigid idea of honor seen on stage had permeated English society.

On stage, however, plays focusing on honor had become very successful, starting with *The Adventures of Five Hours*, the first large-scale box office triumph written for the Restoration theatre. Samuel Tuke’s 1663 play is based on Antonio Coello’s *Los empeños de seis horas*, and was suggested to Tuke by Charles II. *The Adventures* is not a word for word translation, but stays close to the story of the original Spanish play, with every plot point determined by the need to secure honor or revenge honor lost. In the English version, the character Carlos clearly demonstrates how English authors interpreted the idea of Spanish honor in black and white terms, stating “I’ll save my Honor, or I’ll lose my Life” (Tuke, 1663, p. 59). In Coello’s play, Enrique tells his sister, Porcia, that “*mi honor lives viva* (my honor lives through you)”, and his sister states that “*por mi honor dando mi vida*” (for my honor I would give my life)” (Coello, 1700, pp. 39, 4). This rigid idea of honor, where one’s life is worth sacrificing in order to retain one’s status and place in society, was imitated and employed as both a tool of criticism and of possibility, especially for women.

A preoccupation with honor was by no means something new on the English stage, nor was it uncommon to find plays set in locations around Europe. However, the social disruption that occurred during the interregnum meant that the constructed idea of Spanish idea of honor took on a greater significance. De Groot (2004) asserted that the disruption of the monarchy had been viewed as a period that challenged order and society, where “The disruption of social rules and roles was represented as a challenge [...] to the order of the state [...] rejecting [social] control, prescription and categorization” (p. 21).

Most notably, as de Groot (2004) continued, “Challenges to traditional familial paradigms were represented as profound disruptions to the social fabric” (p. 117). In the borrowed Spanish model, male characters were seen in the traditional roles as protectors of the family. On stage, that model was frequently disrupted by female characters who failed to submit to the will of their male guardians. Instead, they engaged in behavior outside of prescriptive norms and which was ordinarily restricted only to men. Of course, the performance of this behavior, such as dressing as a man, escaping the confinement of the house or even fighting in duels, was perhaps more striking because it was carried out for the first time in England by female performers.

George Digby’s *Elvira, or the Worst Not Always True* from 1664 provides a strong example for how the rigid model provided a means through which female characters could present new behaviors and social ideology. An amalgamation of three plays by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *Elvira* clearly defines social roles

¹¹ Monsieur de Fontenelle. Letter XII: The Same to Mr. —; Concerning the Qualifications of a True Friend. Letters of wit, politicks and morality. Written originally in Italian, by the famous Cardinal Bentivoalio: in Spanish by Signior Don Guevara: in Latin by St. Jerome [and others] ... in French by Father Rapin. &c. Also select letters of gallantry out of the Greek, of Aristaenetus: the Spanish of Don Quevedo ... the French of Count Bussy Rabutin ... Mr. Fontenelle. &c. Done into English, by the Honourable H—H—esq; Tho. Cheek, esq; Mr. Savage. Mr. Bover. &c. To which is added a large collection of original letters of love and friendship. Written, by several gentlemen and ladies.

and establishes the male characters as the protectors of the family.¹² The plot is set in motion when Elvira is mistakenly thought to have consummated a love affair with Zanchó, and she must struggle to clear her name. Not only do her father and Fernando (who had been given permission by Elvira's father to court her) desire revenge against Zanchó and try to kill him, but her father believes it is necessary to kill Elvira in order to restore the honor of his house. Elvira is forced to flee her house in disguise until she is discovered to be "spotless in her faith", and all is made well (Digby, 1667, p. 86). Plays set in Spain frequently follow this pattern of threat to the heroine's freedom, an escape in disguise, and reconciliation at the play's conclusion.

As stated earlier, much of the discussion about English society came through the performed actions of the plays, as well as the locations, allowing the model of Spain to serve as a proxy for England. Less frequent, but also of great importance, are instances where the spoken text of the plays explicitly tied Spanish and English society together. This was especially true for female characters. In William Mountfort's 1689 play set in Sevilla, *The Successful Stangers*, Dorothea laments the stranglehold that men have over her life, first her father and then her husband to be: "[My father's] my Jail-keeper whilst I am single, You'l shortly take the office off his hands: Oh happy England, [...] where women. Have the freedom of the Light" (Mountfort, 1696, p. 9).

The first two lines describe a common plot point for the plays, where the heroine can only escape her guardian's restrictions through marriage. The second half of the verse positions women's freedom in English society as a contrast to the rigidity of Spain. John Dennis advanced the idea even further in his 1705 play *Gibraltar*. One of the central elements of the plot shows a Spanish father jealously guarding his daughters, prompting the English Colonel Wilmot to note that as he has

observ'd in most Countreys, that the Baser the Men are, and the more slaves to one another, the more they Confine and Tyrannize over the Women, whereas we, who have a due and noble Sense of Liberty, give Freedom to our Wives and our Mistresses. (Dennis, 1704, p. 3)

Clearly, the idea that English women had control over their lives is seen as a positive social ideal. Instead of marriage being a state of "confinement", as portrayed by Mary Pix (1709) in *The Adventures in Madrid*, English wives "go where, and when they please without giving their Husbands any account of it.[...] They play Masquerade, Dance, in fine, possess all Diversions without Interruption or Controul" (p. 58). If, as Backscheider (1993) stated, "works [of] mass culture have the greatest opportunities to participate in the reconfiguring of social order and value structures", then characters expressing these thoughts and sentiments are clearly positioning women's independence as an important facet of English society (p. xiv).

The effect of these statements was magnified by the presence of the actress, and reflected what de Groot (2004) noted as a "deep anxiety about gendered identity", where "women are impersonating or playing the roles of men, entering a previously inviolable patriarchal space and destabilizing normality" (p. 119). Playwrights and audiences both seemed to struggle with how female characters should behave, especially in the perceived and actual bodies of characters and actresses. The new, unavoidable, and sometimes explicit depiction of sexuality provided by the actress complicated the reception of performances and the potential for challenges to social norms and structures. Elizabeth Howe (1992) described how as "performers, the first English actresses were used, above all, as sexual objects, confirming, rather than challenging, the attitudes to gender of their society" (p. 37). Yet the sexualization of the female performer also acknowledged "a new model

¹² *Elvira* is an amalgamation of three plays by Pedro Calderón de la Barca: *No siempre le peor es cierto*, *Mejor está que estaba*, *No siempre le peor es cierto* (Hogan, 1967, pp. 56-59).

of sexual relations [...] in which the woman as well as the man was entitled to full and adequate individuality” (Howe, 1992, p. 21).

Dryden’s *The Rival Ladies* provides a good example of this juxtaposition. Rather than imitating a Spanish play, *The Rival Ladies* is instead based on based on Miguel de Cervantes’ novella, *Las dos doncellas* translated and published as *The Two Damsels* as part of *The Spanish Decameron*, published in 1687 (Saavedra & Solórzano, 1687).¹³ Notable also as only the second English play in which breeches roles were written for actresses, the sexuality of the actresses is contrasted by the display of courage and capability by the two female characters: “The breeches role titillated by the mere fact of a woman’s being boldly and indecorously dressed in male costume and, of course, by the costume suggestively outlining the actress’ hips, buttocks and legs, usually concealed by a skirt” (Howe, 1992, p. 56).

When the two leads prepare to fight each other in a duel, their sexual characteristics are noted aloud, increasing and escalating the titillation of seeing women in men’s clothing. As they ready themselves, the characters remove their outer layers of male clothing, ending up in shirts and breeches only. It is essentially a striptease on stage, with each character/actress revealing more and more of her body. As this is happening, each character speaks about the sexual features of her opponent.

The first to comment is Honoria (disguised as the boy, Hippolito). As her rival Angellina (Amideo), removes her doublet, Honoria remarks in an aside, “How’s this! Two swelling Breasts! a Woman, and my Rival!” (Dryden, 1664, p. 47).

When in her rage Honoria “‘Tears open his doublet,’ Angellina responds, ‘Death to my Hopes! a Woman; and so rare/A Beauty that my Lord must need Doat on her’” (Dryden, 1664, p. 47).

The characters’ comment not just emphasizes that the other is a woman, but the sexual features of the other’s body. They continue to argue, but as they do, each points out more and more of the other’s characteristics, marking an “Angel’s face”, “fatal Eyes”, and “invincible good features” before at last beginning to fight with swords (Dryden, 1664, p. 48). Dryden (1664) had the two disguised women “fight awkwardly, not coming near one another”, until eventually, they challenge each other to “fight nearer”, and Honoria “gets [Angellina] down in Closing” (p. 48). At this moment, a male character, Manuel, enters the scene, exclaiming, “The pretty Boys that serve Gonsalvo, fighting!” (Dryden, 1664, p. 48). He then separates the two women and disarms them.

The scene could be dismissed as frivolous, but there is actually a layered discussion of women’s abilities and identity within it. First, the two female characters have proved their resourcefulness and courage by disguising themselves and pursuing the man they each desire. Their courage is further reinforced by participation in a duel, where then they highlight the sexual characteristics of the other, emphasizing each other’s sexuality. When they begin to fight, they are inept. But although they are awkward as combatants, they continue to prove courageous as they grapple with each other. Finally, their swords are taken away by a male character, which disempowers them. The audience sees their courage, then their sexuality, their ineptness, their fortitude and then their disempowerment, confusing the status and strength of these women within the social world of the play. As noted above, the sexuality of the actress was part of her identity on stage. And in a society where women were not expected to have access to any sort of training with swords, their poor fencing would

¹³ In *The Spanish Decameron*, the title is translated as *The Two Damsels*. Later English translations of Cervantes’ story are titled *The Rival Ladies*, suggesting that Dryden may have had a different translation of the novel to work from.

likely not have been a damning commentary about their competence. The viewer may first see the sexuality of the actresses, but the characters are a presentation of strong, courageous women.

The breeches role, in which a female character disguises herself as a man, remained a complicated depiction of female bodies and abilities throughout the Restoration and into the eighteenth century. Disguised as a man, a female character had opportunities to reveal heretofore hidden abilities, and the possibility for social commentary that entailed. As noted above, though, the visual titillation of the actress's body complicated any message made through the character's actions. Such is the case with Robert Stapylton's 1663 play, *The Slighted Maid*. It was the first play in which a breeches role, Ericina, was written to be played by an actress, a development that appears to have excited the audience of the day. Samuel Pepys (1971) noted in his diary that he was "most pleased to see the little girl dance in boy's apparel, she having very fine legs; only, bends in the hams as I perceive all women do" (p. 56). Pepys doesn't mention the plot of the play that depicts Ericina pursuing "justice" against Iberio for breaking off their arranged marriage (Stapylton, 1663, p. 20).

Although not a direct translation, *The Slighted Maid* copies the story of a nearly contemporary Spanish play, Ana Caro's *Valor, agravio y mujer*, in which Leonor travels to Flanders disguised as her brother, where she will "*cobrar mi perdido honor* (regain my lost honor)" (Caro, n.d.). There, she seeks revenge against Don Juan, who like Iberio, broke off his engagement. In *The Slighted Maid*, Ericina also disguises herself as her brother to infiltrate the court of Naples, where she promises that "Justice, I'll do" (Stapylton, 1662, p. 20).

By the end of the play, Ericina has accepted a challenge to a duel, stolen Iberio's new love from him, and matched herself with a new man, Arviedo. She has proven that she has courage and abilities equal to or greater than the male characters in the play. When Ericina removes her disguise and appears before the court as a woman, she says:

In [my brother's] shape (putting off my Love and Sex)
I follow'd you, my Lord, as far as *Naples*;
Here I tri'd several Keys of Death and Fortune,
To open me a door to my Revenge. (Stapylton, 1663, p. 88)

This is almost identical to Leonor when she returns as a woman in Caro's play, stating that as

mi hermano,
fingirpudeengañosnuevos,
y ahora, arrojada y valiente,
por mi casto honor volviendo,
salí a quitarle la vida
y lo hicieraC (viveelcielo!C
a no verlearrepentido,
que tanto pueden un pecho
valor, agravio y mujer. (Caro, n.d., Lines 2724-2743)

(as my brother, I have run the risk of dying so many times—daring and brave, defending my honor, I came to take Don Juan's life—that's what Courage, Betrayal and a Woman Scorned can do to a woman's heart. And I would have killed him—Heavens above—if I hadn't seen him repent) (Williamsen & Borden, 2010, p. 5)

Each play ends with the heroine engaged with the man she loves, symbolic of the return to normalcy after the demonstration of each woman's abilities and the challenges to social expectation.

Despite this return, breeches roles engendered uneasiness with moralists who challenged such activity both on and off stage. In a passage from the 1714 treatise, *The Ladies Library*, the anonymous author complains that

Another End of *Apparel* is the distinguishing of *Sexes* and *Qualities*, which [...] is neglected and despis'd. Women, without blushing, assume the Coat, Perriwig, Hat and Feather, and ride as furiously as if there was really nothing in Sex, or they desired there should be no Difference. (Salchli, 1714, p. 69)

The passage shows that what was being depicted on stage was being echoed, at least in small part, away from the theatre. The author continues, fretting that women dressing as men creates a measure of equality between the sexes, making “their Gesture, their Language, nay, their Habit too, being affectedly Masculine” (Salchli, 1714, p. 188). Long a signifier of gender difference, clothing now had the potential to demonstrate equality between men and women and opened possibilities for statements about women’s ability and status. As Beth H. Frieman Romell (1995) noted, “cross-dressing provided spectators both an affirmation of the new norms through parodic inversion and a vicarious outlet for occupying increasingly transgressive subject positions through identification with the transvestite performer” (p. 462).

An audience identifying with a woman dressed as a man could see her as equal in ability to the male characters around her. If nothing else, a woman in a breeches role upends traditional gender signifiers, addressing the social confusion that appears to have continued since the “challenge to structured models” noted by de Groot (2004, p. 5).

Perhaps the most startling manner in which female characters displayed “new possibilities” that helped “generate [the] innovative and challenging texts” described by Backscheider (1993), was in the execution of sword fighting (p. xvi). Almost always performed as part of a breeches role, intrigue plays frequently feature female characters fighting with swords on stage, and most often against male characters. Earlier I noted that the fight from *The Rival Ladies*, staged early in the Restoration, was depicted as if the two women were unskilled. Most fights would show female fighters to be as skilled or better than the male counterparts they faced, and often more courageous.

As with other elements discussed in this paper, the incidence of a woman fighting on stage or wearing breeches while she does so is not an invention of the Restoration stage. For instance, in the 1611 play, *The Roaring Girl*, Moll Cutpurse dresses as a man and fights “Laxton into Submission” (Dekker & Middleton, 2001, p. 258). But in the period before the Interregnum when men were playing female characters, the effect was starkly different. Now we have women imitating Caro’s Leonor, who knows the “ángulos rectos o curvos; mas a don Luis he visto de Narváez, elfamoso... (the angles and curves [of fencing footwork]; More I have seen Don Luis of Narvaez, the famous [fencing master]” (Caro, n.d., Lines 2312-2314).

When Leonor fights with the male characters, she is noted for her “*terribles golpes* (terrible blows), and she is able to defeat don Juan after he has been shown to be a master swordsman. With her fighting as in all else, Leonor is shown to be the best man in Flanders.

Many Restoration characters echo Leonor’s ability, such as Marcella in Aphra Behn’s 1679 play, *The Feign’d Curtezans*. When Marcella fights (while dressed in breeches) alongside the English gallant, Galliard, she is successful as a fighter, while Galliard loses his sword during the melee. He fails, while she proves herself more than capable, and at the end of the fight the audience sees Galliard disarmed and slumping on the ground while Marcella stands triumphant above him, sword in hand. As a final reinforcement of her ability, her character is praised for her skills by the other men around her.

In a different scene, we see the courage of another woman in breeches, Laura Lucretia, juxtaposed against the cowardice of Sir Signal and Tickletext (a young English gentleman and his governor). When Laura Lucretia rushes to join a sword fight in defense of the man she loves, “Sir Signal climbs a tree, and Tickletext runs his

head in a bush, and lies on his hands and knees” (Behn, 1679, p. 19). While the two men hide, Laura Lucretia helps two gallants drive off a group of armed ruffians. Again, the visual image at the end of the fight is important, with the cross-dressed female standing strong, while two of the male characters are hiding ridiculously.

By itself, a woman’s success in a swordfight is a remarkable achievement. It would have been unusual for a woman to have trained in fencing. Yet only five years after *The Rival Ladies* showed female characters fighting “awkwardly”, in *The Feign’d Curtezans* each of the female characters proves herself equal to or better than those depicted by men. The image is a powerful one: a woman is presented on stage, dressed as a man and demonstrating prowess in sword play. She is accepted and even praised by the male characters around her. The combination of the breeches disguise and proficiency in sword play would almost certainly have challenged audiences to question beliefs about women’s social roles, skills, and opportunities.

One last example illustrates how women fighting showed status and ability for women. By 1700, it was less surprising that a woman could be involved in violence on stage and fighting for her honor, as we discover in Mary Pix’s play, *The Beau Defeated*. When two female characters find themselves rivals for the same man, Mrs. Rich challenges Lady Basset, demanding “satisfaction” with “sword and pistol” (Pix, 1700, p. 37). When Lady Basset balks, Mrs. Rich (1700) explains that “I’d have thee fight. Dare you set up for Quality, and dare not fight, pitiful Citizen: ‘Tis for thy honour”; tis modish too, extreemly *French*, and agreeable to thy own phrase. I’ll have thee fight, I say” (Pix, 1700, p. 37).

Finally, Mrs. Rich (1700) noted that she can “Fight, Ride, Play; equal the Men in any Vertue or Vice” (Pix, 1700, p. 37). In the text and actions of the characters, fighting is equated with social status (quality) and honor, as much for women as for men.

Conclusion

Sword play, Spanish locations, breeches roles, and the constructed idea of honor all acted as conduits of possibility, as spaces of exploration for new models of behavior and social roles. In the English theatre of the Restoration, plays that imitated the Spanish *capa y espada* model showed this most clearly. The rigid form of honor found on the Spanish stage was employed as a means of pushing against the restrictions that same idea of honor represented. In addition, the sexuality of the actress remained a destabilizing force on stage, allowing the actions and behavior of the character to serve as a challenge to social expectations. Through the proxy of a Spanish location, these characters challenged prescriptive behavioral norms in England. The English stage, as reflected through Spain, became a place that both reflected the status of women, and helped define new possibilities for women in Restoration society.

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