

Aphra Behn's Sentimental History: The Case Study of *Agnes de Castro, or the Force of Generous Love* (1688)

Sonia VILLEGAS LÓPEZ
University of Huelva

ABSTRACT

After the decline in theatregoing which followed the Popish Plot in 1678, Aphra Behn adhered to the general tendency among many authors of her time and turned to novel writing. *Agnes de Castro* is her own rendering of a tragic story with a historical base, also defined as a “sentimental tragedy” by Montague Summers in his edition of Behn’s works. *The novella* dramatizes the personal and political conflicts that took place at the Portuguese Court of King Afonso IV when his son, Don Pedro, falls in love with the Spanish gentlewoman Inês de Castro, his wife Constantia’s lady-in-waiting. Textually speaking Behn follows probably the original by S.B. de Brillac (1688), and her text becomes the closest source of inspiration for Catharine Trotter’s historical tragedy of the same title. In the light of Jacqueline Pearson and Ros Ballaster’s critical approaches, and reading this early piece of fiction in the context of other short narratives by Behn, I will contend that, in spite of the romancical content of the novella, the author is primarily interested in the practical and realistic potential of the story. In fact, the great merit of her narrative is to reconcile her gender approach to writing and her political allegiances. Further, Behn’s *Agnes de Castro* can be defined as a “sentimental history” in so far as her female characters substitute political instrumentality for personal agency or the lack of it. Finally, Behn’s text differs basically from that of her closest follower, Trotter, in that it concentrates on the ‘historical’ scope of the story to speak about contemporary history and politics, whereas Trotter enforces primarily a moral reading of female behaviour, that is not emphasised by Behn.

Aphra Behn’s *Agnes de Castro, or the Force of Generous Love* (1688), also known as *The History of Agnes de Castro*, reproduced the tragic history of Inês Pérez de Castro, the illegitimate daughter of a Galician nobleman.¹

¹ We will refer to Inês to address the historical figure and to Agnes when dealing with either Behn’s or Trotter’s fictional character.

Around 1340 she was sent to Portugal to accompany her cousin Constanza Manuel, who was marrying Pedro, later Pedro I, the eldest son of King Afonso IV of Portugal. The prince had been formerly engaged to Blanca of Castile, but the engagement was soon dissolved because the bride fell ill with some kind of mental disease, or palsy, according to Aphra Behn's story. Shortly after his marriage to Constanza, and after the birth and death of Luis, the eldest of their children, Pedro fell in love with Inês, with whom he most probably maintained a relationship and had three children after Constanza's death, which continued some five years after the marriage. It is also believed that they had been married in secret, since the king would never accept a lawful union of his son with Inês. In fact, he seemed to have been responsible for her murder in 1355, especially since the influence of Inês and her two brothers on the prince had provoked hostility at court. The reasons for Inês's assassination were, thus, double: first, the king's opposition to the marriage and the problematic succession to the throne of Portugal (some of the king's advisors believed that some member of the Castro family could even plot to kill Fernando, Constanza's and Pedro's heir, to promote Inês's sons to the throne), and second, the conflicts with Castile, in which Pedro engaged with the purpose of claiming the Castilian throne as grandson of Sancho IV.

Textually speaking, Aphra Behn's *novella* follows probably a French account of the story by S. B. de Brillac (1688),² and her text becomes the closest source of inspiration for one of her literary heirs and a member of the so-called Nineties Generation, Catharine Trotter, and her historical tragedy of the same title, performed at the Theatre Royal in 1695 with great success.³ Behn seems conscious at all times of working on a tragic story

² According to Janet Todd, in her edition of Behn's works, the same year of Behn's publication of *Agnes de Castro* there was another version in English of the same story, *The Fatal Beauty of Agnes de Castro; taken out of the History of Portugal Made English, out of French by (P.B.) G.*, author by Peter Bellon, a popular hack writer of the time (Todd 1995:xv). On the other hand, Dolores Altaba-Artal, in *Aphra Behn's English Feminism* adheres to the theory that suggests that the sources for Behn's *Agnes de Castro* are either Spanish —Lope de Vega— or Portuguese —Camoens. The critic does not rely, then, on the French text by Brillac in spite of being published the same year, 1688. Altaba-Artal also argues that Behn's novel reproduces a political intrigue, rather than simply a love story, and that it follows the basic historical facts of Inês de Castro's life story (1999:151).

³ Trotter's play was printed anonymously in 1696. This early play was dedicated to the earl of Dorset and Middlesex, and was based on Aphra Behn's *novella* of the same title. Her reputation after this performance made her acquainted with William Congreve, who praised her success as a playwright.

endowed with a strong historical base. Agnes's story provides Behn with the opportunity to reflect on contemporary history and politics. This approach is in accord with her proto-feminist agenda and her political sympathies and, on a narrative level, with the romancical content of her narrative. In general terms, it must be also stated that the use of fiction by Behn, as it happens to many other late seventeenth-century prose writers, becomes a means of historical representation (Mayer 1997:157).⁴ As regards plot, there are slight differences between Behn's and Trotter's texts, most of them due to dramatic conventions. Whereas Behn concentrates basically on the 'historical' scope of the story and on women's situation as victims and objects of male desire, Catherine Trotter's tragedy is concerned primarily with a moral reading of female behaviour that makes of women either virtuous or vicious characters.⁵

Only nowadays there seems to be a critical consensus about the stature of Aphra Behn the writer, or else Aphra Behn the fiction writer. Critics have both applauded and condemned her for sundry reasons, among them because of her supposed indecency (*Literary Garbage* 1872:109). In fact, it is no easy task to find agreement on the question of her view about gender politics. As Jacqueline Pearson contends: "some critics find her a vigorous feminist, making 'suffragette' claims for women, while others argue that she compromised with a male-dominated literary establishment and that her work displays consistently a 'masculine set of values'" (Pearson 1999:111). In " 'Pretences of State': Aphra Behn and the Female Plot", Ros Ballaster also hints at the reconciliation between Behn's royalist allegiances and her gender approach, particularly in her short fiction. The critic refers to a number of her most relevant stories — *Oroonoko* (1688)⁶ and *Agnes de Castro* (1688) among them— to claim that:

⁴ The claim to historicity was commonplace in the narratives of the period. By alluding to the historical content of their novels, late seventeenth-century writers like Behn attempted to break with the tradition of romance, though some of them with more success than others. In that sense, Mayer compares the work of Behn and Manley with that of Defoe, and considers the latter as the first author who manages to give a real sense of the historical to his novels (1997: 157).

⁵ For a detailed commentary on the moral dimension of Trotter's heroines in *Agnes de Castro*, see my article "Catharine Trotter's *Agnes de Castro*, or the Revision of Female Virtue".

⁶ Ballaster considers that *Oroonoko* represents Behn's royalism at its highest. Other critics like Pacheco read this *novella* as "distinctly royalist" in offering an overview of her contemporary historical circumstances and in showing her sympathies for the coming deposition of James II (Pacheco 1994:491).

These novels provide ... a means of articulating party politics through the mirror of sexual politics, in which the feminine acts as substitute for the masculine signifier to his signified. Embattled virginity, virtue rewarded or ravished, what we might call the female plot, serve to reflect and refract male plotting, or, in other words, the party, dynastic, and ideological conflicts of late Stuart government. (Ballaster 1993:193)⁷

Perhaps one of the aspects that captures the reader's attention in approaching Agnes de Castro is the absolute centrality of female characters, that is, Ballaster's "female plot" at its highest. On the other hand, and in spite of the historical responsibility of the male figures in the story, King Alphonsus, Prince Don Pedro, and the king's favourite, Don Alvaro appear only marginally in Behn's narrative. Apart from them, Trotter included in her tragedy the names of the men who designed, and executed Agnes's murder: Pedro Coelho, Alvaro Gonçalves and Diego López Pacheco. In spite of them, and back to Behn's text, the figures of Constantia and Agnes represent the reconciliation of politics and gender that we referred to above, or in Ballaster's words, the "dual articulation of Tory myth and feminocentric individualism" (Ballaster 1993:190). This is perhaps one of the most controversial arguments in relation to Behn, whose Toryism was considered to be at odds with the kind of political statements she made about women's roles in society.

In this respect, I think it would be useful to analyse the roles played by the female characters in the *novella*, all of whom stand out either for their active involvement or for their passive resignation. In *Agnes de Castro* we find a constant feature in Behn's fiction: political instrumentality is substituted by woman's agency and sexual determinacy. Perhaps two obvious examples are Miranda in *The Fair Jilt*, and Elvira Gonçalves, sister to Don Alvaro and one of the prince's lovers before his marriage to Constantia, in Agnes's story. In general terms, and when looking at her other pieces of short fiction, it seems that Behn does not have any other way but to restrict female activity to the sentimental sphere, and that may be perhaps one of the grounds for which she is acknowledged as a writer. This feature is especially present in her historical *novella* *Agnes de Castro*. Even though Elvira's sphere is restricted to the sentimental, her plottings and actions are immediately responsible for the tragic denouement of the story. She spies on the prince and steals his verses while he is sleeping; then she adds Agnes's

⁷ "Female plot" is Ros Ballaster's expression for Aphra Behn's female focus in her narrative, and designates both narrative voice and characterization (1993:187-193).

name to them, thus explicitly pointing to his designed love object, and makes the princess read those lines and become acquainted with the case. Hence, Elvira is described by Behn as a woman of unfeminine behaviour: "She had a Spirit altogether proper for Bold and Hazardous Enterprizes; and the Credit of her Brother gave her so much Vanity, as all the Indifference of the Prince was not capable of humbling" (*Agnes de Castro*, page 129).

At the other end of the pole we find two representations of heroic passivity, Constantia and Agnes, who symbolize "virtuous merit that resists social or domestic tyranny" (Ballaster 1993:192). In their lack of agency or, in other words, in their embodiment of self-sacrifice as a sort of political stance—in a similar fashion to other remarkable characters like Oroonoko—both women also address contemporary political issues. More specifically, Agnes represents one of the remarkable figures in the years after the Popish Plot, that of the perjurer, represented by the figure of Titus Oates, and later embodied in plays and fiction by Aphra Behn and others, like Mary Pix in *The Inhumane Cardinal*, as the heroine felt divided between two vows: the duty paid to religious life and to a lover, or the choice between two lovers (Ballaster 1993:193). Other short pieces by Behn—*The Fair Jilt; or, the Amours of Prince Tarquin and Miranda* (1688) and "The History of the Nun; or, the Fair Vow-Breaker" (1689)—deal explicitly with the topic of the breaking of vows: Miranda breaks her sacred vow as a beguine and tries to seduce Friar Francisco and make him break his; and in "The Fair Vow-Breaker" Behn's plot deals with a man who comes back after a long period of absence and finds her wife married to another. Agnes de Castro is torn between her undivided friendship to Constantia, and her passionate love for the Prince, once Constantia dies. That is why she considers from the start the possibility of returning to Spain, a solution that Constantia never contemplates, especially because she did not want to contradict the Prince. That is also why Agnes's and Constantia's stances are political. The Princess must confront the same choice: she is torn between her love for the Prince and her love for Agnes, a decision that she never comes to make since she finally dies from grief (*Agnes de Castro*, page 152).⁸

⁸ This sentimentalization of political figures is a recurrent strategy in Restoration tragedies, ever present in authors like John Dryden and Thomas Otway. In Dryden's *All for Love*, for example, Cleopatra competes with Octavia for the love of Antony. Catharine Trotter uses the same commonplace in her first play *Agnes de Castro*, and reproduces the topic in subsequent tragedies, namely *The Revolution of Sweden* and *The Fatal Friendship*.

In spite of being the perfect heroine of a “sweet sentimental tragedy” (Summers 1967:211), Agnes’s use of language also reveals an unconventional woman, especially in her exchanges with men. She tells Constantia about the Prince: “he is a blind and stupid Prince, who knows not the precious Advantages he possesses” (*Agnes de Castro*, p. 133), meaning his wife. And later on, when Alvaro declares his love for her, and wears her colours in a tournament against the Prince, Agnes confronts him thus:

What a time have you chosen to make it appear to me (pursued Agnes) is it so great an Honor for me, that you must take such care to shew it to the World? And do you think that I am so desirous of Glory, that I must aspire to it by your Actions? If I must, you have very ill maintained it in the Turnament; and if it be that vanity that you depend upon, you’ll make no great progress, on a Soul that is no fond of Shame. (p. 138)

As these two examples make plain, women are the ones to take the floor, even those who embody primarily a passive attitude, like Agnes. This seems to be another common device in Behn’s narratives, according to Pearson: to bestow her female characters with male clothes, language or attitudes (Pearson 1999:128). Gender reversals pervade *The Fair Jilt*, in which Miranda usually adopts the role of the sexually aggressive, ambitious and domineering woman who imposes her will on Francisco, and later on the Prince Tarquin. In *Agnes de Castro* this transvestism takes the shape of features traditionally assigned to males and females but reversed in the *novella*: contrary to what we would expect, reason and virtue are associated to Agnes and Constantia, whereas the Prince, the King and Alvaro are basically passionate characters who follow their instincts. Curiously enough, in the conversation with the King, even as he accuses her of imprudence and ambition, Agnes’s image is one of dignity and almost ‘regal’ honour:

The Courageous Agnes was scarce Mistress of the first Transports, at a Discourse so full of Contempt; but calling her Vertue to the aid of her Anger, she recover’d her self by the assistance of Reason. And considering the Outrage she receiv’d, not as coming from a great King, but a Man blinded and possess’d by *Don Alvaro*: She thought him not worthy of her resentment;... (p. 143)

In clear contrast to Agnes’s restraint, all male actions are violent: the King suggests Alvaro to “force” Agnes against her will (p. 144), the King’s advisors kidnap Agnes and take her out of Coimbra (p. 145), and later on Don Pedro avenges Agnes’s death: “he ravaged the whole Country, as far as

the *Duero* Waters, and carry'd on a War, even till the Death of the King, continually mixing Tears with Blood, which he gave to the revenge of his dearest *Agnes*" (p. 161).

The end of Behn's *novella* agrees with the historical rendering of Inês de Castro's story. Catharine Trotter's ending is more conventional and less historical; maybe with the purpose of complying with dramatic requirements, King Alphonsus closes the final scene, and his words reinforce the strong moral reading about the moderation of human passions that the whole play emphasizes. Finally, I think that one of the central scenes in the play, Constantia's death at the hands of Elvira, marks the difference between Trotter's and Behn's texts, since Behn chooses a simpler, and perhaps more romantic death for the Princess. This divergence suggests a major change of perspective: Constantia's and Agnes's friendship is even stronger than Constantia's passion for the Prince in Trotter (Agnes gives as well more importance to female bonds than to those between the sexes, a stance that has won Trotter an association with lesbianism). Meanwhile, Behn is once again more 'respectful' for the chronicle of Agnes de Castro's life, and, though Constantia's devotion for Agnes never falters, both characters appear more humane and less rigorous in their actions.

In conclusion, we could argue that *Agnes de Castro* was an appealing story, not only for Aphra Behn but for many other writers even before her time.⁹ At first sight, and in spite of its evident historical content, Behn's *novella* still retains many of the common elements of romance: the nature of the characters, all of them noblemen and women, the amatory plot, the language of the court, etc. Yet the story Behn reproduces has a great realistic potential, too, since Inês de Castro's story provides and, thus, propitiates historical parallels with Behn's own time (basically as the figure of the perjurer, so common after the Popish Plot, is concerned) and a deep study of female characterization. As stated above, in spite of women's activity being restricted to the sentimental, Behn's female characters manage to intervene in politics either by means of their agency—like in Elvira's case—or by the lack of it—like in the examples of Constantia and Agnes.

⁹ Think for example of the Portuguese version of the historical tragedy by António Ferreira (*Castro*) and the Spanish adaptations by Vélez de Guevara (*Reinar después de morir*), Lope de Vega (*Doña Inez de Castro*), and by Jerónimo Bermúdez (*Nise Lastimosa* and *Nise Laureada*).

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Author's address:

Universidad de Huelva

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

Campus El Carmen - Avda. de las Fuerzas Armadas, s/n

21071 Huelva, Spain

sonia.villegas@dfing.uhu.es