A HISTORY GONE WRONG: TRACING THE FEMALE BODY AND AGENCY IN HISTORICAL AND DYSTOPIAN CONTEXTS (WEBSTER, CAVENDISH, ATWOOD)

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ABSTRACT

Women have been fighting forever for something that should be normal: the right to study, to have a profession, to vote, to exist outside their father's or husband's subjugation, and to have an impact on society, other than bearing children. Up to a point in history, women weren't even considered citizens of the polis they lived in. The right to assert their independence and agency was considered something from the realm of science fiction. Had no one fought for our rights, would the world be as we know it today? Had the feminist movement not taken place, would we be empowered to have a mind of our own? Or would we be reduced to our bodies, objects of desire and procreation? Even more, as technology advanced, the oppression of women would have gotten violent and cruel. This article aims to analyse how women and the female body have been perceived throughout history, depicting a fresco of the 17th century mentality and beliefs. Moreover, to raise awareness, I wanted to put on the spotlight this "what could have been" scenario, as dangers face us, even today. I believe the works I have chosen provide a fairly accurate image of the shifting mentalities, but also of how oppression and totalitarianism can occur at any given time.

Keywords: feminism, feminist movement, women in history, women in literature

The Contrast between Reality and Fiction: How are Women Represented in the 17th Century, or how does the description of the Duchess depict or affect reality?

Women, by tradition, had always been seen as lesser than men, starting from the great Civilizations such as the Ancient Greeks or the Romans. However, women have on multiple occasions been monarchs, who ruled with an iron fist clothed in a velvet glove consolidated Empires. Still, they were secluded and seen as the property of their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Any possession or contribution they might have had to society had to be hidden. Richard Braveman argues in *Plots and Counterplots. Sexual Politics and the Body Politic in English Literature, 1660-1730* that this mentality gravitates toward the fact that society has developed around the concept of a patriarchal

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family. From Plato's *Republica*, the polis meant that society had developed as an empirical natural organism that had to be led by the smart and educated ones: the men. Women, children, and slaves were considered futile material, possessed by the "pater familias", and women had no rights or possession of their own, let alone agency in public life or over their bodies. The same Richard Braveman says that: "Though it <<sprang>> from the family, the polis was superior to the household: it was the public arena in which citizens realized their ethical potential by participating in politics, whereas the household was the sphere of domestic virtues appropriate to private life"[1]. Thus, the distinction between political and private life has been made clear. In more modern, Christian societies, this mentality transferred, and the father led the way, the country, being considered the predecessor of God Himself.

As soon as Enlightenment emerged, however, this sense of equality and freedom of speech entered the collective conscience, and women in positions of power fought hard not to be just another pretty object, but rather to have autonomy and a voice of their own. In Margaret Cavandish's *The Blazing World* and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, we see round, complex characters grounded in reality, as they depict real-life people. They are part of the aristocracy and hold positions of power and influence, Margaret Cavendish playing a double role: her character and her persona. Being in the spotlight has directly shaped their personalities, being constantly torn between privileges and responsibilities. Moreover, their status validates their choices, and political intrigues directly influence their statuses. Their body does not belong to them but is put in service to society. So, here comes the distinction between body natural and body politics. But in this new era of light, the distinction is not as strong as we encounter it in the Antiquity's philosophy.

Body natural is the physical component of a ruler's body. It is the biological corpse, which is doomed to degradation and ultimately, death. It belongs to the private aspect of a monarch's life. This distinction can be traced back to the Middle Ages, and it occurred in several literary contexts. While the natural body is doomed to illness and death, the body politics lives on forever. It is a metaphor for the place of the monarch within society. It identifies with the people and the country and takes upon it the well-being of the nation. This terminology is very important in this chapter, as these concepts are being used in both literary works I am analyzing. They reflect the mentality of the time, as well as how their understanding can affect the life of a ruler, and eventually of a country.

[1] Richard Braveman, *Plots and Counterplots. Sexual Politics and the Body Politic in English Literature, 1660-1730*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 11.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster's heroine fails to create a successful reign as a widow souveran, as she challenges the Jacobean society's views. She forgets she must keep the balance between her private life and political duties. She chose to ignore this duality, which must coexist, and focused on her body natural as part of her womanhood, even concealing it from the public eye. Tearing these two entities apart, she neglects her duties towards the people she is united with, through the characteristics of her body politics. Ferdinand's obsessive desire to preserve her chastity derives from his fear that she will dispose of her body as she pleases and become an excessively sexual creature, casting upon her the reputation of a diseased woman. However, we cannot help but wonder if the brothers try to control their sister's actions as a political being, or as a woman, who is related to them, yet inferior, and must be subjugated? As Theodora A. Jankowski has put it:

> This ideological juxtaposition can be observed as early as I.1, where three major questions are introduced: first, the political context of the play as a whole, specifically the first presentation of the Duchess as a reigning sovereign and public figure; second, the presentation of the brothers and their political and familial relationship to the Duchess; and third, the presentation of the Duchess as a private figure and the character's development of her unusual "new world and custom" in her secret marriage to Antonio. The display of contesting ideologies characteristic of this scene may make the play difficult to analyze, but simplification of the work through unified readings deprives it of its ideological complexity[2].

From the first act, we cannot see constancy in the Duchess' actions. The boundaries between the two bodies of the central character overlap; they are almost indistinct. She uses her political power to invest Antonio as Lord and to officiate the matrimony. However, choosing him as a husband and not a consort, proves that she values more her private life as a woman, than her status as monarch. The famous last line of the Duchess is spoken before her ultimate death. Despite her claims of her political self, she has lost her power, due to her marriage to Antonio. We witness her death as both the death of the Duchess, and the one of Antonio's wife. However, the fact that she identifies as the body political, reinforces her nobility, as she takes responsibility over both, her life and death. This is a way of restoring the cosmographic order and unifying both her identities: not into a corporal one but into a spiritual state of grace. Her cry, *I am Duchess of Malfi still* (The Duchess, Act 4 Scene 2)

[2] Jankowski, Theodora A., *Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi,* in *Studies in Philology*, vol. 87, no. 2, 1990, p. 221.

becomes ironic, for this seeming validation of her political self occurs within a context that more completely validates her private self as wife and mother.

In opposition to the Duchess of Malfi comes the figure of the duchess as presented by Margaret Cavendish in *The Blazing World*, also reflecting an alter ego of the Authoress. She becomes the Empress and is the main ruling figure. She is characterized by wit and ambition, which she puts in the service of her land. She seeks to stimulate women to be involved in scientific discoveries, politics, religion, and so on while asserting these to her persona. She envisions all sorts of caballas, made exclusively for women so that they can exercise their autonomy. She also fights for equality in the instruction and learning process. Cavendish seeks to mock the Royal Society, as her: " interest in the proceedings of the Royal Society is surely in the background of the newly made Empress's <<[erecting] schools, and [founding] several societies>> in <<Blazing World>>"[3], as Tessie Praks puts it in *A World of her own Invention: The Realm of Fancy in Margaret Cavendish's The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World.* Thus, both Margaret Cavendish the Authoress, and the Duchess of Newcastle have the same noble purpose: to set an example and lead the way toward creation. Women are as capable as men to be writers, to be active in the scientific field, or to have political implications in important affairs. Their voice, and our voice, must be heard, our thoughts shared, and we must be the only deciders in our lives.

Body, Mind and Soul: Female Agency, Autonomy and Identity in "The Duchess of Malfi" and "The Blazing World"

Female agency is another important aspect of a woman's life, which must never be dominated. It's been quite a struggle for women to become independent in every aspect of their lives, as the objectivation of women is a serious problem, that yet again has its roots in Antiquity. These core values have been reinforced by the Middle Ages' doctrine, leaving the Enlightenment movement to fight against these injustices. Literature reflects the painful process through which the idea of female agency took shape: strong-willed women, tired of obedience, who decided to take their fates into their own hands, behind closed doors. Only in an idealized world could such a bizarre concept be the norm, hence in a fictional one.

In John Webster's play, we can observe the contrast between the two "traditions" - one that validates male family members' rights over the bodies of their female "property" and one that mandates a woman's free choice as a

[3] Tessie Prakas, *A World of her own Invention: The Realm of Fancy, in Margaret Cavendish's The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*, Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies, vol. 16, No. 1, 2016, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 129.

moral necessity. The Duchess challenges the patriarchal discourse via which she is being submitted; she chooses the path that gives her a certain autonomy, as it is analyzed in *Norton Critical Editions*: "Duchess and Antonio have exited and thus gets the last word in the first act, which gives her comments the weight of a broad, cumulative moral judgement of the clandestine marriage that has just taken place"[4].

Throughout the entire play, the Duchess proves nothing but her wit, power of character, self-acknowledgment, and control over her body and her desire. She is a young widow, a free spirit, who has embraced womanhood fully, which includes being a wife and a mother, as well. She also has the power to deny her husband, as she is nobody's subject. The fact that she has prioritized her private life could come across as selfish, but only through the obsolete lenses of that society. The fact that she managed to keep her family out of sight, while still being a capable ruler, shows once more, her fortitude and integrity. By performing the wedding ceremony, the Duchess manifests her political authority as a representative of the Church. Her marriage is irregular, as it is not sanctified, but that does not make it any less legal; Such a marriage, as Margaret Loftus Ranald in *As Marriage Binds, and Blood Breaks': English Marriage and Shakespeare* indicates, "created the status of virtual matrimony at that moment, without future action on the part of the persons concerned. It could even be upheld in courts against a later, consummated contract."[5] These themes are even better depicted by Margaret Cavendish's own "Blazing World". As Marina Leslie put it:

> "However, in order to make of her text an authoritative body of knowledge, Cavendish must transcend the limitations of the physical body and those contemporary views of female "nature" which would associate her with inert materiality rather than animating spirit of masculine intellect"[6].

The Empress had unbound agency in her ideal world and thus exercised it empowering women and leading the way to an equalitarian system. Her interest in science made her a pioneer and role model, somehow advocating for what was to become much later the reality. Her statement of how the world should be, one only possible on an ideological or a fictional level, is a paradise

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[4] Michael McNeil, <<*The Duchess of Malfi*>> *by John Webster*, „*Norton Critical Editions*", p. 107.
[5] Margaret Loftus Ranald, *As Marriage Binds, and Blood Breaks': English Marriage and Shakespear*e, in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, volume 30, Issue 1, 1979, p. 71 (https://doi.org/10.2307/2869662).
[6] Marina Leslie, *Gender, Genre and the Utopian Body in Margaret Cavendish's Blazing World*, in *Utopian Studies*, volume 7, no. 1 (1996), p. 9 (http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719470).

for women. But not only does she stop here. She asserts her agency over her own persona, as being the sole ruler. She implicates herself in military strategies and even battles.

How is the female agency in "Duchess of Malfi" and "Blazing World" affected by the genre?

John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* is a revenge play, and this implies that vengeful male characters seek revenge for apparent wrongdoings. Betrayal, violence, and retribution are usually present, as well. Here, we have the Dutchess as the central figure. The roles are somehow reversed, as she is the one disobeying and betraying her brother's wishes. In this scenario, she used her agency and willpower as weapons, to combat the patriarchal system. However, this leads to her downfall, as it defies the norms of society at that time. Still, her actions speak about a great deal of courage and are motivated by her brothers' vanity and manipulation. In contrast, *The Blazing World* by Margaret Cavendish is a narrative utopia. Thus, its main focus is on harmony, progress, and the pursuit of intellectual knowledge. The Empress is free to use her agency in creating parallel realities, which is unbound. She shapes an entire fantastical reality, based on her values and beliefs. Moreover, she emphasizes the agency of the body, as well, making women's desires from inside and out heard.

From Utopia to dystopia: how female identity, body, and agency are seen throughout history

In the Jacobean period, the female body and agency were disregarded. They were subjects, and had to marry to fulfill some transactional duties or their duty to society: bore children or in some cases heirs. Nevertheless, they had no say in the choice of the husband. The only way they could exercise their will was behind secluded doors, or through the realm of imagination. Loopholes or exceptions from this rule indeed existed, however. The former is very well exemplified by John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, while the latter can be found in The Blazing World, as it is a utopian narrative. Even if it is written in the same period, historically, as Webster's play, Cavendish's work mimics society but reverses the roles. Had the feminist movement not taken place, the present (or future) could have had an entirely different outlook, as Margaret Atwood presents in *The Handmade's Tale*. This dystopian novel presents a parallel world, where women have been reduced to their reproductive rights. When Offred, the protagonist tries to rebel against the system and assert her autonomy, her downfall is imminent.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmade's Tale* is an inverse dystopia, as it has a female narrator at its core. It reverses the canonic form of the genre, as

the unique perspective of the handmade creates the illusion of understanding this struggle. By oppressing female rights, and reducing them to their reproductive function, their agency and personality are entirely stripped away from them. Not only their bodies are subjugated to this external abuse, but also their intellectual capacity is being shut down. We could even argue it is a bit of a reverse of "The Blazing World". The flashbacks Offred has of the society of Gilead in the past are representative of how any totalitarian regime takes over. Bit by bit, basic rights disappear, and any form of protest or oppression is immediately shut down.

> There is a scene in the novel where Offred has flashbacks to her college days when she attended a feminist rally. In this scene, Offred reminisces about the energy and passion of the women advocating for gender equality and reproductive rights. This scene can be examined through Françoise d'Eaubonne's theory of ecofeminism, which highlights the interconnectedness of the oppression of women and environmental degradation[7].

In contrast, in Cavendish's world, the Empress reigns over a realm rich in culture, intellectual wit, creativity, and balanced gender dynamics. This universe is characterized by a harmonic order, where self-expression and individuality are encouraged, and are expressed without fear of subjugation or oppression. Moreover, the Authoress challenges the patriarchal dynamics and subverts them, and this innovative characteristic can be found in every aspect of the play. However, Margret Atwood's novel presents such a cruel "reality", that patriarchal values seem to dominate every aspect of Gilead. The commander's wife, Serena Joy, has internalized these norms and values and supports the abusive process of the system. This could also mimic the natural process of degradation. In a toxic environment, even the most pristine places become dirty and polluted. For example, the water of a river that exists among factories cannot be pure for long. Water, the element of life itself being destroyed, what chance does a man have to subvert the whole system? Had heroines such as Margaret Cavendish not existed, who knows what perverted reality of this dystopia might we live in today?

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article manages to analyze how women's identity is a sensible subject, and that has been highly neglected throughout history. However, in the 17th Century, due to a shift in mentality and progress, women's voices and

[7] Ridha'a Ali J. and Samira Sasani, *"Nature, Gender, and Resistance in Atwood's Surfacing and The Handmaid's Tale", International Journal of Arabic-English Studi*es (IJAES), vol.24, No.2, Shiraz University, Iran, 2024, p. 9.

perspectives were heard for the first time. In Webster's play, The Duchess of Malfi, we can observe incipient signs of representation, as the Duchess, the central character, breaks societal expectations. Not only does she manage to use her witt as a ruler, but she asserts the independence her position gives her in her private life. She escapes patriarchal dominance and makes her own choices regarding who to marry, while also taking control over her body and desires. Her tragic death is a key to moralizing the values of society, and to raising awareness regarding how poorly women were treated. In contrast, Margaret Cavendish's The Blazing World is an even better example of a movement toward empowering women. Not only does it describe a utopian view of how women should and could have it all, but by being written by a woman, it encourages others to step in her footsteps and challenge the old conventions and mentalities. Her prologue and epilogue to the readers play an important role in surpassing the story into more than a novel. However, totalitarian regimes and the socio-political climate could escalate quickly, and disastrous occurrences such as the one Margaret Atwood presented in The Handmaid's Tale, could have been the normality, had the feminist move not taken place.

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