"She, Alas, Was but the Instrument": Female Figures Exploited by, and Appropriating, Masculinity in *The Maid’s Tragedy*

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Introduction

One unique plotline in *The Maid’s Tragedy* (c. 1611)—a collaborative work of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher—is the onstage assassination of a king by a woman. The murderess Evadne ties the king to a bed and stabs him multiple times to avenge the dishonour she has suffered. How the play continues after this bloody, and somewhat voyeuristic, killing—the aftermath and what it reveals about two main female characters (Evadne and Aspatia)—is the main interest of this paper.

Before our analysis of those women, it is pertinent to refer to an otherwise overlooked female character—a woman who has no name and has virtually never been noticed in the criticism of the play to date—in order to establish a background to the status of the women in the play, which will constitute our first section.

The second section examines how patriarchal ideology in the play brought about Evadne’s demise. “Patriarchy” is concisely defined by Anthony Fletcher as “the institutionalised male dominance over women and children in the family and the subordination of women in society in general” (xv), and this definition allows two classifications of the concept—one familial and the other extrafamilial. How her death comes as a result of conflict between these two types of patriarchy will be discussed in this section.

Finally, in the third section, we will explore the possibility of whether Aspatia is a more transgressive force than initial appearances may suggest by focusing on her decision to disguise herself as a man and end her life in single combat.

Both Evadne and Aspatia frequently attract unfavourable comments from critics. Phillip Finkelpearl, for example, calls Evadne an “amoral force” who, even after converting to “virtue,” “plays the innocent maiden vil-

lainously debauched” (205). Another critic describes her as being “so lacking in moral substance that it is difficult to attach moral significance to the regicide she commits” (Broude 255). On the other hand, Finkelpearl insists that Aspatia is “helpless” since her engagement to Amintor was unduly annulled by what is essentially a whim of the king (“a helpless victim of the king’s absolute power” 195, “helpless and pathetic” 205).

These interpretations of the two characters (the wick-
ed Evadne and the helpless Aspatia) may come to seem inadequate in the light of further analysis made by this paper. They, therefore, demand re-evaluation.

1. The Nameless Lady

At the beginning of the play, Melantius mentions a certain “mistress” of his, whom he will take with him to the wedding of Amintor and Evadne:

**MELANTIUS.** But I have a mistress
To bring to your delight, rough though I am;
I have a mistress and she has a heart,
She says, but, trust me, it is stone, no better;
There is no place that I can challenge in’t.
(1.1.148)

However, not only does she remain nameless, but no information concerning her identity is given in the play except that she is a “lady.”

The woman appears once on the stage at the beginning of the wedding scene (Act 1, Scene 2), and the stage direction to her entrance reads “Enter MELANTIUS with a Lady” (1.2.29 SD). The only modifier attached to her is an indefinite article that does nothing to distinguish her from any other lady; there is no indication of her relationship to Melantius, not even of the fact
that she is the same "mistress" that he mentioned earlier. Melantius himself fails to elucidate who she is and refers to his companion simply as "this lady" (1.2.30). She makes no speech and is summarily sent to an off stage location by Melantius with a brief statement ("When I have seen you placed, madam, I must attend the king . . ." 1.2.34-35). Although the lady will not be seen again after this short appearance on the stage, her existence will be mentioned from time to time.

One such occasion arises in the same scene after Melantius returns from seating his mistress. Calianax, a lord who is hostile to Melantius, protests against her placement: "Who placed the lady there? So close to the presence of the king? . . . The place is kept for women of more worth" (1.2.65-66, 68). He continues to make vitriolic remarks about the lady who is no longer on the stage ("men's wenches" 1.2.73, "your whore" 1.2.76). As those quotations clearly indicate, those remarks are not only meant for the nameless lady, but primarily to her companion, Melantius. The insult to the woman is both intended to be and interpreted as an attack on him as Melantius's words demonstrate: "This Rhodes, I see, is nought / But a place privileged to do men wrong." (1.2.89-90, emphasis added). This nameless lady with many titles — "mistress," "lady," "madam," "wench" and "whore" — is not an entity in her own right; she is used instead as a site for the confrontations between men. The sole reason for her existence is to become, as it were, an instrument to provide such opportunities.

The incident between Melantius and Calianax is referred to later in the play (Act 4, Scene 2) and once again the nameless lady is used as a ploy for another confrontation between men. In this scene, Calianax informs the king that the latter is the target of an assassination attempt by Melantius. However, in order to counter this accusation and ultimately to obtain the fort Calianax is entrusted with, Melantius successfully discredits the old lord in the eyes of the king. In the course of convincing the king of Calianax's madness, Melantius retells the incident of Calianax insulting the lady:

MELANTIUS. Mark his disordered words; and at the masque
Diagoras knows he raged and railed at me,
And called a lady 'whore' so innocent
She understood him not. (4.2.191-194)

Not only does Melantius refer to his mistress as "a lady" without giving any indication of their relationship, but he also describes the nameless lady as being too unworldly to understand the insult against her, when in truth, the insult he repeats here was spoken only after she was carried off stage by him. The alteration of the circumstances is made by Melantius to further his plan, and so too is the lady rewritten for his convenience.

The nameless lady is a mere malleable instrument to be used, at first, by Melantius as a placeholder, someone to accompany him to the wedding of his friend, and then by men on both sides of a confrontation to initiate attacks against each other. A similar status is imposed upon Evadne, even though she plays a major part in the plot and seems to possess a more autonomous character than her anonymous counterpart.

2. Evadne

Evadne's apparent independence arises from her treatment of her newly wed husband, Amintor. She reveals to him in their wedding night that her marriage to him is a sham to hide her amorous relationship with the king. Furthermore, she not only refuses to consummate their marriage, but also makes Amintor assent to the extra-marital relationship between his wife and the king. The qualities which she shows — sexual desire and assertiveness — deviate from patriarchal ideals of women, namely chastity and obedience. Evadne even brags to her husband of her sexual appetite:

EVADNE. [1]
In this heart
There dwells as much desire, and as much will
To put that wished act in practice as ever yet
Was known to woman, and they have been shown
Both . . .
I do enjoy the best, and in that height
Have sworn to stand, or die. . . .
(2.1.289-293, 296-297).

By her sneering remark on her loss of virginity ("A maidenhead, Amintor, at my years?" 2.1.194-195) and her statement that Amintor was chosen to "father" the king's offspring (2.1.316-317) Evadne is portrayed (and is portraying herself) as a sexually active and assertive

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1. The number [1] indicates a note or footnote. The rest of the text continues from here.
woman who poses a threat to the patrilineal society depicted in the play. However, the above quoted speech of Evadne illuminates another aspect of her that is different from the "unchaste woman" figure that becomes a threat to patriarchal society by disrupting male lineage. Evadne's boasting of her paramour's status ("the best," which, in fact, is that of a king) reveals that she is able to take such an aggressive attitude towards her husband only because her lover outtranks him. Moreover, although Evadne proclaims her own will and desire in the matter, the fact that she instinctively relies on the masculine hierarchy attests to her internalization of the patriarchal ideology which treats female sexuality as a commodity that can be exchanged between men:

Tempting as it may be . . . to accept Evadne's view of her control and power, we must recognize that her choice to become the king's mistress does not reflect a revision of patrilineal modes of female commodification. In fact, she invokes the hierarchical basis for patrilineal authority bragging about her lover's rank. (Alfer 319)

Her acquiescence to patriarchal ideology is further pronounced when in the same speech she uses the passive voice ("have been shown") to describe the realization of her desire. Such phrasing of the event calls her autonomy in the matter into question. On one hand, Evadne does indeed take part in an extramarital affair with the king and thus defies her patriarch's (in this case, her brother, Melanitius, at first, and after their wedding Amintor) prerogative to treat her sexuality as a commodity. On the other hand, the act is carried out at the behest of the king, the one who occupies the apex of patrilineal authority.

As if to reiterate the fact, Evadne states to the king how she regards Amintor thus: "As one that, to fulfil your will and pleasure, / I have given leave to call me wife and love" (3.1.159-160). Thus, Evadne is merely complying with the "will and pleasure" of the king in marrying Amintor. Ironically, she is allowed to have independent sexual desire provided that she remains an object of the king's unrestricted desire.

The following speech of Evadne, directed at the king, would further illustrate her situation:

EVADNE. I swore indeed that I would never love
A man of lower place, but if your fortune
Should throw you from this height, I bade you trust
I would forsake you and would bend to him
That won your throne. I love with my ambition
Not with my eyes. (3.1.170-175)

She seems to regard masculine hierarchy as an instrument to fulfill her own desire and ambition; she values it, as William Shullenberger puts it, "insofar as it helps her to secure her own place" (148). She states that her sexual desire towards the king is motivated in some degree by the social advancement that such a relationship might afford her ("I love with my ambition"). Consequently, the statement is generally regarded as proof of her being an independent and assertive woman. However, this speech also refers to the mutability of kingship; even monarchs are susceptible to shifts of "fortune." Her words inadvertently expose her own unstable status in this patriarchal society since, after becoming a royal paramour, her station in such a society is dependent on the shaky ground that is her lover's royal status.

Furthermore, her situation involves what Shullenberger calls "a curious and ultimately fatal split in consciousness":

An independent, sexually aggressive woman, she is utterly dependent on the masculine hierarchy for her status in the court. In choosing the king for her lover, and vows to have no one less than a king, she binds herself to the power of the place in the patriarchal system. That system, she knows, has no mythic authority other than the conventions it proposes to perpetuate itself; it is merely a distribution of power. (148)

Even though she might believe herself to be an independent woman who has her own desire, she is so immersed in the patriarchal system that she must paradoxically be dependent on the king's rank.

The unstable nature of Evadne's status and the fact that she lacks the authority to control her own desire is made apparent in the following quotation. After the wedding night, in order to hide the true nature of their sham marriage and preserve his reputation, Amintor proclaims that he and Evadne have indeed consummated
their marriage. On hearing Amintor's words, the king suspects that Evadne has betrayed him. Enraged with jealousy, he threatens to terminate the relationship with Evadne:

KING. Take him farewell. Henceforth I am thy foe, And what disgraces I can blot thee with, look for. (3.1.202-203)

Despite the fact that Evadne is able to calm the anger of the king instantly by forcing her husband (with the aid of royal authority) to admit to their true marital status, the sequence of events makes the matter clear: Evadne is placed in a situation where her refusal of her lover's desire will result in a king becoming her enemy. Although she claims that she formed this amorous relationship to satisfy her own ambition and sexual desire, the inequality of power revealed in the speech of the king contradicts her opinion; she simply cannot refuse the king's desire. Furthermore, her insistence on having control over the matter attests to her internalization of patriarchal ideology. Cristina Alfer explains that female characters under the patrilineal system are capable of making decisions that would undermine themselves because they internalize morality based on that system and she refers to those decisions as "masochism":

[T]he ontology of female masochism is not a biological imperative but an effect of the woman's being a market good, of never being an agent. Therefore, women are presented in the theater as capable of making choices that are irrevocably masochistic because, as non-agents, as merchandise, women fulfill only the desire of an other. (315)

As a commodity exchanged between men, as one who is subjected by others' agency, Evadne may voluntarily accept choices that are detrimental to her and claim it as her own desire. Her masochism is located in her willingness to satisfy the mandate of the patriarchal system, which in turn represses her autonomous agency.

Evadne's belief in her independence thus seems to derive from her internalization of patriarchal ideologies. However, within the play, there are two variations of patriarchal ideologies contending for control over Evadne: one with patriarchs of each household at its head and the other with the king as the symbolical father figure of the nation.

The latter concept, which reflects the approved doctrine under James I, holds that kings are above earthly laws and only answerable to God. This is the core principle of the play's king, Evadne and her husband, Amintor, whom Finkelpearl labels a "[s]ervile jure divino royalist" (193). As a proponent of the divine right of kings, even after realizing the reason behind the king's decision to marry him to Evadne and calling the king a "tyrant" (3.1.222), Amintor proclaims the religious, even magical, quality of the authority held by monarchs: "But fall I first / Amongst my sorrows, ere my treacherous hand / Touch holy things!" (3.1.248-250). Accordingly, he eradicates any intention of revenge against the king and, furthermore, grudgingly agrees to facilitate their affair ("A bawd!" 3.1.270).

On the other hand, Evadne's brother, Melantius, advocates patriarchal ideology based on individual households. When Amintor discloses the extramarital relationship between the king and Evadne, her brother shows no hesitation in pursuing revenge against the king for the shame his household has suffered at the hand of the king, whom he sees as a mere mortal ("this proud man" 3.2.193). T. W. Craik asserts that Melantius "never for a moment considers regicide to be a terrible crime (or indeed, in the circumstances, a crime at all, rather a duty or even a pleasure)" (12). His decision to take revenge against the king arises from this sense of patriarchal duty. By turning Evadne into a "whore" the king has discredited the honour of Melantius's household, which he holds in the highest regard:

AMINTOR. What is it then to me, If it be wrong to you? MELANTIUS. Why, not so much: The credit of our house is thrown away. (3.2.186-188)

Even when he confronts his sister over her relationship with the king and draws her confession out by threats of violence, Melantius resolutely focuses on the "honour" of their household:

MELANTIUS. He has undone thine honour, poisoned thy virtue,
And of a lovely rose left thee a canker.
EVADNE. Let me consider.

MELANTIUS. Do, whose child thouwert,
Whose honour thou hast murdered, whose grave
opened... 
Speak, you whore, speak truth,
Or, by the dear soul of thy sleeping father,
This sword shall be thy lover; tell, or I'll kill thee!
(4.1. 84-87, 95-97)

Melantius, who in all likelihood assumed the status of
patriarch after his father's death, exercises the patriarchal
prerogative of controlling the sexuality and sexual desire
of Evadne. He puts patriarchal ideology in practice by
referring to the honour of their father and labelling his
sister a "whore." He again refers to their father when he
tells his sister that the king has performed an act of in-
gratitude towards the service rendered by their house-
hold: "My worthy father's and my services / Are liberally
rewarded" (4.1.126-127).

After being coerced into contrition through the intimi-
dation of her sibling, Evadne begins to re-indoctrinate
herself with the variation of patriarchal ideology which
Melantius upholds. She regrets her actions and asks for
his forgiveness: "O, I am miserable!... I have offended,
noble sir, forgive me" (4.1.111-112). Upon her confes-
sion of remorse, Melantius orders his sister to murder the
king who has tainted monarchical authority:

MELANTIUS. Dost thou not feel... one brave anger
That breaks out nobly and directs thine arm
To kill this base King?
EVADNE. All the gods forbid it!
MELANTIUS. No, all the gods require it:
They are dishonoured in him. (4.1.142-146)

As her interjection shows, she falters and (as Amintor
does) deems the king too holy to be assailed. She wavers
between the two variations of the ideology. However, she
finally accepts her brother's command to assassinate the
king. Evadne internalizes patriarchal ideology based on
individual households and condemns herself for deviat-
ing from its mandate: "I am monstrous, / For I have
done those follies, those mad mischiefs, / Would dare a
woman" (4.1.182-184).

Having embraced the patriarchal ideology of individ-
ual households, Evadne kneels before Amintor (4.1.188
SD) to beg for his forgiveness as if to demonstrate to her
husband her reinstatement into the ideology:

EVADNE. I do present myself the foulest creature,
Most poisonous, dangerous, and despised of
men... 
I am hell,
Till you, my dear lord, shoot your light into me,
The beams of your forgiveness. (4.1.229-233)

It is evident from her humblest abasement of herself to
Amintor — the man whom she has originally married to
conceal the liaison with the king from the world — that
the ideology which Evadne now internalizes has severely
limited her choice. Within the system based on such ide-
ology, female existence is secured as long as she is deemed
valuable by men, in other words, an object of male de-
sire. In order to become valuable to her patriarch again,
Evadne reinvents her own image according to this ideol-
y and portrays herself, as she does before Amintor, in the
vilest and most degrading manner.

For the same reason, she accepts the task assigned by
her brother to take revenge on the king, which she now
claims to have originated from her own will ("my ven-
gence" 5.1.30, and 5.1.101, "my revenge" 5.1.71) and
declares that it is the only way to atone for her misdeeds:

EVADNE. This steel
Comes to redeem the honour that you stole,
King, my fair name, which nothing but thy death
Can answer to the world. (5.1.61-64)

As Craik contends, Evadne's ruthlessness ("I am a tiger"
5.1.67) arises from "her conviction that she can expiate
her guilt by killing her seducer." Furthermore, in her last
words to the king ("Die all our faults together! I forgive
thee" 5.1.113), Evadne "even rises to moral generosity"
(12).

Upon assassinating the king, Evadne returns to
Amintor, her hands still covered in blood (5.3.105 SD),
and tells him that she has atoned for her "mischief.
However, what is to her an act of purification, to her
husband is regicide, the ultimate transgression:

AMINTOR. Why, thou hast raised up mischief to
his height,
And found one to out-name thy other faults. . . .
Thou hast touched a life
The very name of which had power to chain
Up all my rage, and calm my wildest wrongs.
(5.1.129-130, 134-136)

Since Amintor internalizes this patriarchal ideology which holds monarchs as a symbolic patriarch of the state, and Evadne abides by the patriarchal ideology of individual households, the two are not able to understand each other at the same level. In a masochistic attempt to restore her status and be "valuable" to her patriarch, she inadvertently alienates herself from him. Evadne concludes that the only alternative left to her is to destroy herself to prove her loyalty to her husband: "Amintor, thou shalt love me now again. . . . / Evadne, whom thou hast, will die for thee. Kills herself" (5.1.167, 169). Therefore, Evadne's suicide represents, as Alfer explains, "her powerlessness to recover the value she once embodied":

Because her subjectivity is constituted by her position as a commodity, losing that position makes her a nonentity. Her suicide becomes not just a sacrifice to the patrilineal order, but the only choice left to her. (329)

In the scene where the king is found murdered and Evadne's involvement was suspected, one of the attendants utters her role in this conspiracy (and in the play as a whole):

STRATO. Never follow her,
For she, alas, was but the instrument. (5.1.139)

Trapped between the two variations of patriarchal ideology, Evadne loses her status as a "valuable commodity." After failing in her masochistic attempt to reinstate herself, she is simply used as an instrument, similar to the nameless lady, in a confrontation between men.

3. Aspatia

When the king decides to marry Evadne to him, Amintor, not yet aware of the true intent behind that decision, seems more than willing to accept this match to please the king. However, for his fiancée, Aspatia, this sudden alteration deprives her not only of a prospective husband but also of her social status:

[T]he engagement between Aspatia and Amintor had been a contract that designated her fate: in dissolving it, Amintor denies Aspatia any future in their society, since such a contract is all too close to a marriage. (Low 280-281)

Furthermore, as a woman in a patriarchal society and a character whose explanation in the dramatis personae of the play reads "troth-plight wife of Amintor," the damage sustained by Aspatia extends well beyond the emotional and mental suffering of being jilted by her fiancé; it amounts to a catastrophic blow to her own identity.

In response to such an ordeal, Aspatia expresses her grief publicly as if to adopt the customary role of an abandoned woman. Although the role she performs is a conventional one and seems to be within the mores of the society she belongs to (to use Naomi Liebler's words, Aspatia's grief is in one respect "socially compliant" (365)), the manner in which she performs it is described by the king's brother as both harmful and contagious:

LYSIPPUS. [T]his lady
Walks discontented. . . .
She carries with her an infectious grief
That strikes all her beholders. . . .
(1.1.89-90, 97-98)

Since her grief appears to be within the boundaries of custom, it evades suppression and, furthermore, exhibits some potential for disruptiveness; Aspatia's grief is virulent in a society immersed in a fiction of closely virtue, and therefore, as Liebler writes, it betrays "the fiction of order, harmony, and good government in Rhodes" (365).

The infectious quality of her grief not only forces those around her to face the tragic result of the whim of the king but also reveals that Aspatia, contrary to general agreement on her passivity, has some degree of power to affect others. Even though Aspatia never directly protests against the king, her melancholy alone is enough to im-
ply and implant in others her disapproval of the royal interference in private affairs.

Her grief is, indeed, enough to evoke a remorseful reaction from her erstwhile fiancé when they meet again on his wedding night. After Aspasia exits, Amintor seems to regret his decision, even if it is for a brief moment:

AMINTOR. I did that lady wrong. Methinks I feel
Her grief shoot suddenly through all my veins;
Mine eyes run; this is strange at such a time.
It was the King first moved me to't, but he
Has not my will in keeping. . . .
My guilt is not so great
As mine own conscience, too sensible,
Would make me think: I only brake a promise,
And 'twas the king that forced me.
(2.1.127-136)

Although Aspasia’s grief may exert a certain degree of influence upon him, at the end of his speech, Amintor reverts to his strongly embedded conviction in the authority of the king. This demonstrates that her grief is not strong enough to convert the almost blind acceptance of the royal authority of the king by his subjects, and this seems to be what ultimately leads Aspasia to her death; it is brought about not only by the king’s tyranny, but also the court’s (and especially Amintor’s) unwillingness to censure their monarch.

Finding no solace in her situation and overwhelmed by her own grief, she contemplates suicide: “I . . . must try / Some yet unpractised way to grieve and die” (2.1.123-124). According to Rowland Wymer, in contemporary medical understanding, suicide was regarded as one of the likely courses taken by forsaken lovers who suffer “love-melancholy” (118). As if to demonstrate this belief, The Maid’s Tragedy depicts several instances of unrequited lovers taking their own lives on stage including that of Aspasia. Evadne, as we have seen, commits suicide, ostensibly, because of Amintor’s rejection of her love. Amintor, in turn, kills himself when he realizes that he has unwittingly killed Aspasia. And, finally, Melantius attempts to kill himself in reaction to Amintor’s death. Although he is stopped by others, Melantius declares that he will die in another way: “I vow, Amintor, I will never eat, / Or drink, or sleep, or have to do with that / That may preserve life: this I swear to keep” (5.3.288-290).

Nevertheless, the manner in which Aspasia reaches this goal is rather unorthodox. When she re-enters, Aspasia rejects dying a quieter and more private death. Instead, she chooses to confront her former fiancé who has brought her torment by duelling with him and in so doing she intends to die at his hand. However, since single combat can only be achieved by means of cross-dressing, she decides to disguise herself as her own brother (“Enter ASPATIA in man’s apparel.” 5.3.0 SD). In both aggressively seeking her own death and disguising herself as a man, Aspasia seems to defy the passivity and obedience expected of women. Therefore, disguising herself as her male sibling could extend to more than merely how she looks; it may involve Aspasia’s attempt at an appropriation of masculinity.

Cross-dressing by female characters is one of the prominent features of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. According to Peter Berek, Shakespeare portrays his cross-dressed heroines as “a strategy for enhancing a woman’s ability to discover her own mind”

2 Whether his love for Amintor is sexual or not, Melantius’s reaction here and his attitude towards Amintor throughout the play indicate that he has strong feelings for his friend. Furthermore, Melantius’s decision to die by starvation seems to be echoed in two female characters appearing after this play: Penthe in John Ford’s The Broken Heart, who starves herself to death after she is forced to marry a man whom her brother has chosen instead of her intended lover, and Anne in Thomas Heywood’s A Woman Killed with Kindness, who rejects earthly sustenance to expiate her adultery and to receive her husband’s forgiveness.

3 Linda Woodbridge explains how much attention was given to the subject of female crossdressing in literary works (including pamphlets) during the late 16th to early 17th century: “During the 1590s and early 1600s, the female transvestite movement was apparently quiescent: woman in male attire received almost no literary attention. . . . Literature again took notice of women wearing breeches and sporting weaponry beginning around 1606. . . . From then on, the movement gained momentum, public and literary interest in it climaxing between 1615 and 1620.” (141)
Meanwhile, Berek maintains that, in the Beau-
mont and Fletcher cannon, female cross-dressing "some-
times enacts a male fantasy about woman's unthreat-
ening devotion to men and sometimes enacts a parallel
fantasy – really an anxiety – about the instability of gen-
der identity" (360). An example of the first category of
"fantasy" can be observed in Philaster, another collabora-
tive work by the two authors. Euphrasia, the daughter of
a courtier, disguises herself as a boy to serve the epony-
ymous hero as his page. When Philaster suspects a roman-
tic involvement between his lover and the page, tragedy
is averted only by the revelation that the boy is in fact a
woman who is so much in love with him as to have tak-
en such an extreme measure just so that she can be close
to him. On the other hand, even though she disguises
herself as a man to gain access to Amintor, Aspatia, unlike her counterparts in Philaster and Shake-
speare's works, does so in order to use her former lover as
an instrument of her own death.

At the moment when she challenges Amintor to single
combat, Aspatia makes a remark on the social climate
surrounding duelling: "The age is strict / For single com-
bats, and we shall be stopped / If it be published"
(5.3.62-64). This statement seems to refer to the injunc-
tion against duelling at the time the play was written.
According to Fredson Bowers, after the ascension of
James VI of Scotland to the English throne, England ex-
perienced a "sudden extraordinary increase" in the cases
of duelling (31). By 1610, the problem had become "a
serious menace" (33) and it led to a series of proclama-
tions and treatises by James I of England: "James's first
proclamation against duelling was issued in 1610, his fa-
mous Edict in 1613, and his Peacemaker in 1618" (281).

As a cross-dressing woman who challenges her former
fiancé to single combat, Aspatia's transgression is, there-
fore, twofold; she disregards the prohibition against du-
ellng and appropriates a role traditionally reserved for
men. The latter point is emphasized when she strikes
Amintor who is initially unwilling to fight against a per-
son who claims to be Aspatia's brother, being too over-
whelmed with remorse at her reported death ("She strikes
him" 5.3.86 SD, "She kicks him" 5.3.93 SD) as Adri-

en Eastwood points out, Aspatia's cross-dressing makes
"a bolder point about the appropriation of masculine
traits by a woman" (15). In taking the actions that her
male disguises allow her to, she is shown to be capable of
performing a "masculine" role.

However, Aspatia's purpose for performing the "male"
role of goading another to fight her and meeting death
in combat is ultimately to achieve a "female" role, that is,
her unthreatening devotion to Amintor. This is made
clear when he finally decides to take arms against dis-
guised Aspatia; she does not fight back and refuses to
harm Amintor:

AMINTOR. Thou canst not fight: the blows thou
mak'st at me
Are quite besides, and those I offer at thee
Thou spreadst thine arms and tak'st upon thy
breast,
Alas, defenceless!

ASPATIA. I have got enough,
And my desire. There is no place so fit
For me to die as here. (5.3.100-105)

By appropriating the action which is meant to restore
honour by defeating the opponent, Aspatia seems to
have been aiming to achieve the same goal – restoration
of her honour – through defeating herself. She uses men
and masculinity as instruments for what amounts to an
act of self-determination. Thus, even though what Aspa-
tia accomplishes at the end may well be summed up as
her unthreatening feminine devotion towards her man,
the means she uses "appropriates, exploits, and under-
mines" the masculine code, and therefore, shows the
possibility of female appropriation of masculinity.

Conclusion

At the end of the play, the only two female characters
on the stage, Evadne and Aspatia, are both dead. The rest
of the women are nowhere to be seen. One of these for-

5 The words in the quotation marks are taken from Jonathan
Dollimore's work when he explains his term "transgressive reinscrip-
tion," which he ascribes to those characters who "[haunt] the
very power structure which has alienated [them], seeking reinscrip-
tion within it but at the same time demystifying it, oper-
ating within and subverting it at the same time" (57).
gotten women is the nameless lady who accompanies Melantius to Amintor's wedding. This lady appears only to be immediately carried off the stage. All that is required of her, it seems, is her existence, or even the mere concept of her existence that can be exploited by men as an instrument to advance their own agenda. Calianax uses her to indirectly insult Melantius, and that event is in turn used later by Melantius to discredit Calianax.

Evadne, whom Liebler describes as "the play's primary active principle" (369), is placed in a similar position to that of the nameless lady. Despite her claims of having her own autonomous will and sexual desires, Evadne is, in truth, subservient to the many forms of male dominance affecting her decisions. Ironically, at her core she is still an obedient member of the patriarchal system that underlies the play; though her actions may seem to transgress the boundaries of that system she remains within either of its two manifestations. At first, her sexual desire is managed by the king who exists at the pinnacle of male hierarchy, and later, by her brother when she agrees to restore her honour by killing the king. Her death comes as the result of having been an instrument to the two manifestations of patriarchal ideology which she fails to reconcile at the end.

Aspatia, too, takes the role of women prescribed by masculine ideology when she loses her fiancé. Nevertheless, set within the general submission to the monarchical authority - out of blind approval or fear - her grief is the only voice of dissonance at the beginning of the play. Furthermore, in the end, taking it upon herself to respond to the hardship she suffered as a result of living in a male-centred society, Aspatia appropriates masculine roles and seems to display some degree of control over her death.

Works Cited
Low, Jennifer. "Women are Words, Men are Deeds: Female Duellists in the Drama" Eds. Woodbridge and Beehler. 271-302.