

Monika Karpinska

---

## Bawdily Manipulations: Spheres of Female Power in *The Birth of Merlin*

Early modern dramatic representations of women show that the fraction of control a woman has over her life revolves around the use of her body. Though the body is commonly relegated to a private space, its implications, especially in relation to men's perceptions of women, readily infringe upon the public sphere. Because parentage, inheritance, and birthright were of such importance at the time – both in courtly realms and those of the common folk – issues of virtue, vice, chastity, and adultery hang like pestilence in the air around the women represented in early modern drama. In Rowley's *The Birth of Merlin*,<sup>1</sup> three women make conscious choices to use their bodies in very specific ways: the marriage-bound sisters, Modestia and Constantia, choose to live out their days in a nunnery and the seductress Artesia uses her body to divide a kingdom. The outcome of each of these maneuvers illustrates an upheaval of the male-dominated public space – a twist in the straight line of social order. In contrast to the nonstandard heroines of Modestia, Constantia, and Artesia, Joan Go-to-'t illustrates an *inversion* of this power: a woman tricked by her own body as she is seduced by the Devil to bring forth his progeny. The truth about female bodies straddles the space between the public and private spheres and between the worlds of illusion and reality as knowledge is manipulated by women who are aware of their bawdy power.

Though Modestia's and Constantia's dual vow of virginity is problematic in terms of a lack of precedent in early modern drama,<sup>2</sup> their existence as independent agents discourages a dismissive reading of their choices within the play. By essentially taking themselves 'off the market' and confounding the social order by a vow of chastity, they serve not only as useful foils for other extreme characters in the play, but also as illustrations of females attempting to carve out a niche within a male-dominated world, and finding that in order to do so, they must step outside of it. Their self-enclosure can be read as a victory where they are able to assert autonomous agency over the fate of their bodies in a way that defies the plans of all interested male parties,

including their father and the two suitors who pursue them for their dowries and child-bearing loins.

The irony of the sisters' names adds another layer of confusion to their behavior within the play. Constantia, the incarnation of constancy, should by definition embody 'perseverance ... firmness, stablesnesse, soundness'.<sup>3</sup> Surely changing one's mind nearly in the midst of one's wedding ceremony is a far cry from 'a fixed abiding in a thing reasonable'.<sup>4</sup> Yet as Modestia persuades Constantia to leave her wedding, we see another reversal of male expectations as the scene plays out. Because Modestia already has a reputation as the 'difficult' sister, both Gloster and Donobert are convinced that witnessing Constantia's wedding will change Modestia's stubborn mind: 'It now begins to work, this sight has moved her' (3.2.69).<sup>5</sup> Instead, Modestia's words move Constantia and persuade her to join her sister in a single life. Constantia is converted by Modestia's speech and soon takes on a similar style of address, suddenly expressing sentiments not unlike her sister's: 'all our Life / Is but one good betwixt two Agee-days' (3.2.118–19).

In terms of chastity, Modestia does indeed remain 'modest'; yet by the early modern definition of the word, she is certainly not a woman who acts 'shamefastly, bashfully'.<sup>6</sup> Just as Constantia acts counter to her female label, Modestia too flies in the face of her name. Readily dismissing her suitor in front of both fathers in the first act, Modestia argues that she neither wants to be a mere 'necessity' (1.1.36) as an heir-producing machine, nor a temporary satiation of Edwin's appetite, particularly since he is a man who is 'employ'd in blood and ruine' (1.1.33) – an occupation that she obviously opposes. Donobert dismisses his daughter's words as temporary hard-headedness and encourages Edwin to further his suit, offering him 'what's mine in her' (1.1.43), thus foreshadowing the property that Edwin will receive at the end of the play, in lieu of the daughter herself. Later in the scene, Modestia undermines her name and role once more as she demands to see the hermit of recent military fame. The otherworldly powers of Anseleme the hermit fascinate Modestia; his role as a religious figure is reinforced in Modestia's soliloquy as she laments the base lives of 'these best of creatures' (1.1.116) and searches for a higher purpose to human life. Flouting the expectations of the men from her first appearance onward, Modestia is surely not an emblem of temperance and diffidence (as her name might suggest) in their eyes.

The inversions of both the names of the sisters and the social behavior expected of them help more fully account for what Isaac claims is the 'baffling and disillusioning decision'<sup>7</sup> of pious virginity in this play. Perhaps a philosophically inclined and eloquent woman *is* baffling as Modestia's contempla-

tions step outside a traditionally female line of thought both in her private ruminations – ‘if what the sense/Calls pleasure were our ends, we might justly blame/Great natures wisdom, who rear’d a building/Of so much art and beauty to entertain/A guest so far incertain, so imperfect’ (1.2.119–23) – and in her public conversion of Constantia:

This world is but a Masque, catching weak eyes  
 With what is not ourselves but our disguise,  
 A Vizard that falls off, the Dance being done,  
 And leaves Deaths Glass for all to look upon;  
 Our best happiness here lasts but a night,  
 Whose burning Tapers make false Ware seem right. (3.2.85–90)

After this reflective contemplation, Modestia once again discards child-rearing as a viable reason for marriage – ‘At best we do but bring forth Heirs to die, / And fill the Coffins of our enemy’ (3.2.109–10) – while simultaneously expressing anti-war sentiment for the second time in the play. Though in the end these two strange maidens are ‘[s]ecluded from the world and men for ever’ (5.2.21), they have used their bodies by refusing to use them within the male public sphere in the traditional forms of marriage and reproduction. In reversing male expectations, they have reversed their names, and expressed reversed sentiments within the public sphere, in regards to both love and war.

In a slightly different framework, the play as a whole seems to support a moral middle ground where characters that do not go to extremes, but rather succumb to human folly and repent, are celebrated. In this sense, Uter and Joan form the heroic couple as they both fall to the ‘devil’ (in various gendered representations) but survive to redeem themselves and learn a moral lesson. In this configuration, Modestia serves as a foil to *Aurelius* as they move to opposite poles. The girl is in ‘in love ... With vertue’ (1.2.228–9) and the king, essentially, with vice (in the form of Artesia). This pattern is particularly clear in act 1 scene 2 when, immediately following the enflamed scene of wooing and betrothing between Aurelius and Artesia, we see the solemn Modestia seeking the advice of Anselme the hermit. Here, Anselme forms a central axis around which these two extremes, one male and one female, move on and off the stage.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the fates of these two drastic characters are commensurable as well: death for the king and bodily suicide for the daughter (metaphorically, as Modestia rejects her physicality). This kind of reading, however, is not incompatible with a more heroic view of Modestia – heroic in the sense of a female acting simultaneously as an autonomous agent in determining her fate and stirring the social pot of male expectations.

If we can applaud virgins for a little upheaval in the public sphere, seductresses should come a close second. Artesia shares with Modestia the knowledge of the power of the female body, and though both use it to different ends, both effect disorder by a conscious manipulation of themselves within a male-dominated arena. Artesia's seductive powers are clearly meant to act solely on the two royal brothers – the other males remain unaffected by her beauty – thus causing further rift within the kingdom as the king quarrels not only with his own kin, but with his advisors as well. Although Gloster, Donobert, Edol, and Anselme advise the king otherwise, they appear to be no match for the charms of Artesia. As the quintessential evil woman, Artesia uses men's eyes against them; for Uter, 'one poor sight was all,/Converts my pleasure to perpetual thrall' (2.1.105–6) and Aurelius confesses: 'sdeath, her beauty mazes me, / I cannot speak if I but look on her' (1.2.91–2). Artesia consciously uses her sexual power to destroy Aurelius's kingdom by placing her sexuality between the natural love of two brothers. In the men's eyes, this complete upsetting of the social order surpasses the merely 'bewitched' sisters of Modestia and Constantia; Artesia is equated with the devil him/herself.

Both Joan and Uter wander the forest looking for essentially the same thing: the devil in two forms, one a gentleman, one a gentlewoman. Upon revelation of Artesia's true character, the Prince confirms her status: 'Oh, my sick heart/She is a witch by nature, devil by art' (3.6.93–4). Just as the Devil is successful in his manipulations (at least insofar as he meant to sire Merlin and not just have some fun with a wench in the wood), so Artesia is successful in dividing the brothers, killing Aurelius, and wreaking a fair bit of havoc before she is captured and punished. Just as willingly as the sisters enter their self-appointed convent, Artesia is ready to leap into the cell designed for her, convinced she will 'starve death when he comes for his prey' (5.2.67). Confident in the powers of her body to the very end, Artesia, along with the sisters, has to step completely out of the male-dominated sphere in order to continue to exist.

In contrast to the bodily agency Modestia, Constantia and Artesia take, Joan Go-to-'t illustrates the passive female whose physical body is wielded by male figures throughout the play. Her name, in contrast to Modestia's and Constantia's, illustrates her sexual proclivity quite fittingly. Shakespeare tells us that the 'wren does go to't, and the small gilded fly / Does lecher in my sight',<sup>9</sup> while Joan goes-to-'t with the devil himself. Joan neither succeeds as a virtuous woman (she is a reborn virgin a little too late) nor as a seductress. Her repentance and promised chastity leave her enclosed as much as the other

females in the play but without any say in the proceedings. As a seductress, she fails not only because *she* is the one seduced, but also because she does not manage to secure a suitable father for her child (though granted, once with child it is usually difficult to seduce men). Throughout the play Joan is either under the influence of the Devil, her brother in the comic race to find a father, or Merlin, her own son. Though Joan can be seen as having some agency in her repentance, she is not given any voice regarding her future, unlike the other women in the play. Because of her initial repentance, Merlin saves his mother from another seduction by the Devil, after which point we never hear from Joan again. Instead of using her appearance/body to her advantage, Joan is effectually tricked by it – her own vanity leads her straight into the Devil’s hands. Joan does indeed illustrate, as Isaac has argued, a ‘chaste, silent, and obedient’<sup>10</sup> conduct-book woman, in the sense that she does not have the ability to use her body to manipulate knowledge or power within the public sphere.

Though Joan acts ‘naturally’ as a female of the time, there is something a tad unnatural about her, not only because she is chosen by the Devil (in the same way the Virgin Mary is not quite a ‘natural’ woman) but also because she admits a denunciation of nature during her repentance speech, confessing her youthful vanity to Vortiger: ‘I chid the winds for breathing on me,/And curst the Sun, fearing to blast my beauty’ (4.1.197–8). Thinking herself superior to the natural world of which she is a part, Joan divorces herself from the female regenerative forces of nature with which women are traditionally aligned, thus leaving her open to an birth of unnatural proportion. This rejection of nature is reinforced by Merlin’s distrust of his own mother, expressed most clearly in his encapsulation of her body in Stone Henge, an effectual convent for one (though perhaps more prestigious) – but notably, a convent *not* chosen by Joan like the convent of the sisters or like the cage Artesia throws herself into as confidently as she approached the rest of her plot. Here Joan must ‘weep away this flesh [she has] offended with’ (5.1.96) rather than be free to rage or pray as one imagines Artesia and the sisters do in their respective confines. Yet though both Joan and Uter are successfully seduced by the devil – since Artesia did accomplish what she set out to do in the same way the Devil did – the contrasting consequences for them are reflective of the gendered results of body use.

Though *The Birth of Merlin* does offer glimpses of female agency within the public male sphere through the use of the body, none of the female characters manage to remain active within the public space at the end of the play. Though Modestia and Constantia are self-determining agents in terms

of their bodies, this power is only granted if enclosed by convent walls. Donobert, in contrast, loses his bodily property in the form of his two daughters (who take possession of themselves) and at the end of the play, distributes his real property to the two suitors as an apparently suitable consolation prize – stripping his daughters of their dowries, keeping land ownership in male hands, and maintaining the ‘Honor of [his] Fathers House’ (5.2.35). In the convent, Modestia and Constantia escape the fate of becoming the bodily property of men, but also lose any real property they had in the public sphere.

Attempts by female characters to extract agency within male-dominated public arenas take multiple shapes in early modern drama, but most often the shape of the female body. As women are often relegated to a solely private sphere, their attempts to assert their rights in public are complicated and often hindered by external forces. If the females can be seen to have any agency in the public sphere it is through their use of their bodies. Though in the case of *The Birth of Merlin*, one may argue that these attempts are rendered futile, perhaps it is because they push the inversion of male expectation and social order to an unsustainable degree. Female power channeled in the private sphere seeps into the public through conscious manipulation of the body, and hence, of the male gaze. Though Modestia’s and Constantia’s self-containment can be read as a triumph, thwarting the plans of all the men interested in their bodies, this victory is balanced by the forceful enclosure of Joan Go-to-’t and Artesia, both deemed ‘unnatural’ wielders of female power. None of the radical women in *The Birth of Merlin* manage to stay functionally within the public sphere. At the end of play, the Devil and the women suffer the same fate: all are relegated to enclosures of various kinds, regardless of whether they stepped freely into them or were brought there by force.

## Notes

---

- 1 For discussion regarding the authorship of *The Birth of Merlin* (hereafter *BoM*) see C.F. Tucker Brooke’s introduction, *The Shakespeare Apocrypha, being a collection of fourteen plays which have been ascribed to Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1908); Mark Dominik, *William Shakespeare and “The Birth of Merlin”* (Beaverton, 1991), as well as Donald Foster’s review of Dominik’s book in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (1998), 118–23. The parallels with *King Lear* in relation to authorship are discussed in R.F. Fleissner, ‘Merlin Reclad: Shapeshifting and

- Shakespeare Unregistered', *Ben Jonson Journal* 7 (2000), 555–66. The most recent dating of *BoM* is based on N.W. Bawcutt's discovery of a documented date of 1622, see *The Control and Censorship of Caroline Drama: the records of Sir Henry Herbert, Master of Revels 1623–73*, N.W. Bawcutt (ed) (Oxford, 1996), 136.
- 2 Megan Lynn Isaac, 'Legitimizing Magic in *The Birth of Merlin*', *Early Theatre* 9.1 (2006), 109–22 (this issue). Though there are several instances of women vowing virginity in early modern drama, the conversion of one sister by another, as Modestia convinces Constantia, seems to be unique. Theodora Jankowski discusses repudiations of marriage and vows of chastity in chapter 6 of *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in early modern English Drama* (Philadelphia, 2000), 170–93 but limits her discussion to Isabella of *Measure for Measure* and Lady Happy from *The Convent of Pleasure*. She observes that 'once women achieve a sense of personal and physical autonomy, as represented by their virginity, they fit only queerly into the prevailing early modern social system' (170) which is precisely the case for Constantia and Modestia whose behavior mystifies both their father and their potential husbands. Like these other virgins, Constantia and Modestia become uncategorizable as either 'whore or wife, chaste or unchaste' (Jankowski, 173).
  - 3 *Early Modern English Dictionaries Database*, Ian Lancashire (ed), 15 October 1999, <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/english/emed/emedd.html>> (31 August 2005), s.v 'constancy'. Hereafter cited as *EMEDD*.
  - 4 *EMEDD*, s.v 'constancy'.
  - 5 C.F. Tucker Brooke (ed), William Rowley, *The Birth of Merlin; or, The Child Hath Found His Father*, in *The Shakespeare Apocrypha, being a collection of fourteen plays which have been ascribed to Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1908). Citations of act, scene, and line numbers appear parenthetically in the text and will be derived from this edition of the play.
  - 6 *EMEDD*, s.v. 'modesty'.
  - 7 Isaac, 111.
  - 8 For a short review of a performance of *BoM*, see Joseph Stodder, 'Mucedorus and *The Birth of Merlin* at the Los Angeles Globe', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.3 (1990), 365–71.
  - 9 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, R.A. Foakes (ed), Arden edition (London, 1997), 4.6.112–13.
  - 10 Isaac, 113.