

Reclaiming Celia's Dignity

by Samantha Zevanove, Cabrillo College

Mentor: Letitia Scott-Curtis

A long-standing consensus in literary criticism dictates that Celia, one of the few female characters in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, is flat, one-dimensional, and unworthy of serious consideration. In one scholar's discussion of Celia, he observes the consistently dismissive approach to Celia's character among the literary community, bringing up representative examples of critics castigating her as "completely, and intentionally, null" and one even going so far as to describe her as "a fatuous girl without a brain in her head and nothing but clichés in her mouth" (Hallet). The scholar further points out that those who do recognize the significance of Celia's character only regard her role in the play as a side consideration. It has become abundantly clear that an in-depth analysis of Celia is a rarity in the literary world. However, an alternative assessment of Celia's actions, rooted in feminist literary criticism and contextualized by history, reveal the ultimate short-sightedness of these criticisms. Such an analysis demonstrates that Celia in fact makes a major contribution to the philosophical fabric of *Volpone*, emerging as a substantial and noteworthy character.

In order to develop a new and improved approach to analyzing Celia's character, one must identify the drawbacks of former criticism and modify one's own critique accordingly. It may seem that, on the surface, scholars critical of Celia are coming from a legitimate feminist perspective. These scholars are displeased with Celia's apparent lack of intellect and excessive compliance with patriarchal customs, qualities that would logically frame her as an antifeminist figure. This perspective suffers from a devastating misstep, in which Celia's character is assessed within a cultural vacuum. As feminist literary criticism has evolved, feminist critics have recognized the fundamental problem with this line of thinking. In response to this issue, feminist critics have promoted "a more inclusive, global perspective" that would replace the idea of women "as a single, deterministic category" with an understanding of a "nexus of diverse experiences" that define the lives of women throughout the world (Murfin). In other words, feminist critics are increasingly emphasizing the importance of historical and cultural context when considering the significance and function of a specific female character.

It is from this more comprehensive and complex angle that we should approach Celia, as her status as a woman living in 17th-century Venice is a crucial component of her character. Celia's marginalized position in society is encapsulated by her relationship with Corvino, a man who epitomizes the abusive and misogynistic husband. His mistreatment of Celia is demonstrated by his over-reaction to an interaction between Celia and Volpone. In this scene, Volpone schemes to get Celia's attention by posing as a mountebank in front of her window and offering a product which he guarantees will increase beauty and vitality. When Celia throws down a piece of payment enclosed in a handkerchief to Volpone, Corvino interprets it as a sexual gesture. The extent of his fury gives the reader a powerful idea of how Celia is extremely oppressed within her own marriage. Corvino already imprisons Celia in the household, but his jealousy and indignation drives him to threaten her life and the lives of everyone she loves, asking her to "imagine that the murder/Of father, mother, brother, all thy race/Should follow as the subject of my injustice!" (2.5, ll. 27-29). He goes so far as to draw a weapon on her and claim that "thy restraint before was liberty" (2.5, ll. 48-49), threatening to make her wear a chastity belt and force her to do everything backwards as punishment. Celia, in response, leaves the conversation in tears.

This moment is perhaps the turning point for Celia, where many critics begin to suspect that she is a weak and pitiful character. Such a conclusion belies the historical circumstances in which Celia must try to survive. In 17th-century Venice, women were considered inferior to men, and this ideology was used to justify the disproportionate amount of power men held in society. Men had more leverage in marriage both economically and legally. Women depended on their husbands to sustain themselves, as they could rarely pursue their own career (Perry et al. 300). Men were able to divorce wives who they could "prove" were adulteresses and keep the dowry, leaving any woman accused of adultery vulnerable to both social censure and economic devastation (Greenblatt, et al.). Furthermore, a divorced woman who was supposedly an adulteress would have lost both her virginity and her virtue, greatly minimizing her societal value. Thus a woman's education was based solely on her role as a loyal homemaker and wife, which ultimately translated into a strictly religious education (Perry et al. 303). This all-encompassing oppression paralyzes Celia within an unhappy and abusive marriage. She has neither the economic means nor the legal recourse to escape from this subjugation. Instead, she is a commodity, a piece of property owned by her husband; and it is on this cultural pretense that the formerly jealous Corvino agrees to sell Celia's body to Volpone, saying with unthinking confidence "She shall do't. 'Tis done" (2.7, ll. 74). Celia's consent does not even cross his mind because it plays no role in the patriarchal paradigm of 17th-century Italy.

And yet, in spite of the sexist restraints imposed on her by society, Celia is able to maintain her own independent voice. More importantly, she holds to this voice with conviction, even in the face of intimidation, insult, and threat. When Corvino reveals to Celia his plan to prostitute her to Volpone in order to gain access to his fortune, one of her initial comments is “Was this the train?” (3.7, ll. 35). When he tries to persuade her to respect his scheme by invoking the ostensible medical explanation offered by Mosca, she completely undermines his argument, critically asking him if she should respect his scheme “Before your honor?” (ll. 38). It is clear that Celia is both aware of Corvino’s logic and the dishonorable nature of it. Rather than being a vapid woman who agrees with her husband by default, Celia demonstrates that she has a mind fundamentally distinct from her husband’s. While Corvino is obviously focused on financial gain, Celia redefines the argument and grounds it as a moral issue, asking him “Are heaven and saints then nothing?/Will they be blind or stupid?” (ll. 54-55). Celia is exhibiting an ability to think beyond the superficiality of material gain and to consider the moral implications of her actions, an ability that disrupts the constancy of self-serving behavior that has prevailed through the play up until this point.

When persuasion does not move her, Corvino turns to threats, telling Celia that “By this hand, I shall grow violent” (ll. 93) if she continues to defy his orders. He elaborates in gruesome detail on how he will both murder her and shame her if she does not comply, stating that he will “Cry thee a strumpet through the street, rip up/Thy mouth unto thine ears, and slit thy nose” (ll. 97-98). All of Corvino’s efforts, however extreme, are not enough to shake Celia’s conviction. Even when he threatens to ruin her reputation and portray her as an adulteress upon her death, she will not budge. She is against such sexual engagement, and will not participate regardless of her husband’s vehement demands. She does not yield to threats, telling Corvino “what you please, you may; I am your martyr” (ll. 107). While Celia’s offer of martyrdom is initially problematic from a feminist perspective, it would be overly-simplistic to conclude that her behavior is based on weak will. Given historical circumstances, Celia’s sexual purity is her only attribute that gives her any power in society. To give into Corvino’s demands and engage in extramarital sex with Volpone would mean the endangerment of her entire social standing. Moreover, compliance would also mean the erosion of her self-respect, an issue that Celia seems chiefly concerned with. Being a woman, Celia has deeply internalized the Catholic teachings of her era, lessons that monopolized her feminine education. These teachings emphasized a woman’s personal duty to upholding purity and virtue. Considering this patriarchal paradigm, Celia has everything to lose, societally and psychologically, from going along with Corvino’s plan. Celia makes a thoughtful decision by standing her ground, as the risk of being

completely disenfranchised of her personal worth is greater than Corvino actually following through with his death threats. She will certainly lose her honor if she consents to the act, but the likelihood of Corvino killing her over her reluctance is more questionable.

Furthermore, when one considers the cultural allusion upon which Jonson constructs this scene, the strength of Celia's character becomes all the more evident. Scholars have determined an undeniable parallel between Corvino's threats towards Celia in *Volpone* and Tariquin's threats towards the matron Lucretia in the famous Roman myth recorded by Livy (Greenblatt et al. 1493). Like Celia, Lucretia does not yield to either Tariquin's threats of death or desperate begging, as she too was steadfast in her moral chastity. However, unlike Celia, Lucretia surrenders to her rapist after he malevolently promises her that "When I have killed you, I will put next to you the body of a nude servant, and everyone will say that you were killed during a dishonorable act of adultery" (Bayet). According to the tale, this particular threat allowed Tariquin to "triumph over her virtue...having taken away her honor" (Bayet). Lucretia is so overwhelmed by grief over her stolen virtue that she commits suicide, despite the pleas of her husband and father to refrain from such self-punishment. Lucretia's tragic tale exemplifies the abuse that women suffered on account of the ideals imposed on them. Although Celia conforms to these unfair ideals, she never yields to Corvino's threats, even when he promises to posthumously ruin her reputation. While both characters have a strong sense of morality, Celia's extends beyond her social reputation and resides in otherworldly concerns. While her social preservation is a consideration, she is not solely interested in how others perceive her; rather, she cares primarily about how God perceives her and to what extent she is meeting a moral ideal, her reputation aside. It is through this exceptional conviction that Celia is able to courageously withstand any threat thrown her way. Thus her virtue extends beyond simple innocence and enters the realm of a unique kind of the bravery. It is this bravery that allows Celia to never waver or second guess her righteousness. Despite the fact that these ideals are not highly regarded by modern feminists, Celia's persistent fidelity to the values that she personally holds dear is certainly an act of independence in its own right.

The depth of Celia's character is fully revealed during her confrontation with Volpone. Forced into his room, he quickly jumps at the opportunity to seduce her, but she is not impressed. A powerful conflict emerges between feminine freedom and male desire, in which Volpone falsely believes that Celia will immediately accept his authority as the wealthy and charismatic man that he is (Marchitell). After having deceived so many men, Volpone assumes that he is unstoppable, and never suspects that a woman would be capable of dismissing the assets and

attributes that have previously given him power over the other characters. As soon as Celia enters the room, she decries Volpone's reckless abandon of morality, asking him why "Men dare put off your honors and their own?" (3.7, ll. 135) and make "modesty an exile made for money?" (ll. 138). Failing to understand the depth of Celia's argument, Volpone attempts to dominate her by using his theatrical talent and pointing out the great wealth he can offer her. It is almost as if Volpone did not hear her former assertion that men should be ashamed of placing base pursuits over their own integrity. He also believes it is appropriate to admit to his manipulation of Corvino, as if the further exposition of his vice will manage to woo her. He argues that unadulterated love is the end goal of his deceit, saying that "earth-fed minds" (ll. 139) of the likes of Corvino cannot begin to comprehend "the true heav'n of love" (ll. 140) that he experiences in her presence. Celia is not convinced by Volpone's argument, and views both Volpone's deception and obsession with material gain as morally repulsive.

Rather than being idiotic and full of clichés, Celia is able to resist Volpone's manipulation, unlike the male characters that have come before her. Through this resistance, Celia interrupts the male exclusivity of the play, establishing a female voice that remains steadfast in opposing the dominant voice of men (Martichell). Volpone's offerings of "the spoils of provinces" (ll. 196) and other treasures would be enough to entice her own husband, but not Celia. Instead, she brings the subject of the conversation back to virtue, saying to Volpone that "these things might move a mind affected/With such delights; but I, whose innocence/Is all I can think wealth or worth th' enjoying/Cannot be taken with these sensual baits" (ll. 205-208). It appears as though Celia is acutely aware of the significance of her chastity, both from a societal perspective and a religious perspective. Her explicit loyalty to innocence reinforces the historical context of Celia's reasoning and suggests that she is able to think critically about arguments that would tempt her away from social and moral self-preservation. Celia knows that she has every reason to defend her position, and that the demands of Volpone and Corvino are not to her benefit.

Celia makes a final and futile appeal to Volpone's sense of morality by stating "If you have a conscience--" (ll. 209), upon which Volpone interrupts her and dismisses a conscience as "the beggar's virtue" (ll. 210). He continues to promise her luxury and indulgence, but Celia has grown weary of his tired argument. It is in this moment that Celia gives her first and only monologue, which reaches its climax in the following lines:

If you will deign me neither of these graces,
 Yet feed your wrath, sir, rather than your lust—
 It is a voice comes nearer manliness—
 And punish that unhappy crime of nature
 Which you miscall my beauty. Flay my face
 Or poison it with ointments for seducing
 Your blood to this rebellion. (3.7, ll. 247-254).

Celia is demonstrating a shocking degree of boldness in these lines. She knows that she is in grave danger of being sexually assaulted, and yet she is willing to emasculate Volpone, accusing him of unbridled lust that is not suiting of a true man. She further establishes social commentary on the liability of her beauty, which she refers to as an “unhappy crime of nature” (ll. 250) that has motivated Volpone to take advantage of her. Celia seems to understand that her feminine beauty is commodified by society and puts her in a vulnerable position. As a beautiful woman, she is no longer viewed as a person and instead becomes a sexual object for men to exchange among themselves, as Corvino has done with Volpone. Impressively, Celia will not accept this exchange, and she calls Volpone out on his lack of honor and the carelessness with which he has taken advantage of her limited status. Celia’s preference to have her face rendered hideous by injury rather than be violated is poignant in the sense that she would rather endure the embarrassment of being ugly than continue to be treated as a commodity.

This monologue not only serves to flesh out Celia’s voice of opposition, but it also represents the evolution of Celia’s character. She is first introduced when she throws the handkerchief down at Volpone. This handkerchief contained payment for a potion that Volpone promised would guarantee the longevity of one’s beauty and vitality. Celia clearly has no interest in these attributes anymore, as she realizes that such attributes solidify her commodification and expose her to the lusts of men. Celia’s prioritization of a moral ideal over a physical ideal and her perceptive understanding of the social hierarchy represent the final stages of her character development and strongly suggest that she is not a one-dimensional character at all. In fact, her transformation from a quiet, terrified wife to a confident speaker of moral truth represents a metamorphosis that her male counterparts cannot even begin to conceive of.

As expected, Volpone takes nothing from her wisdom other than an insult to his masculinity. He extrapolates this as a threat to his sexual potency (Martichell), and thus resolves to rape her right then and there. Bonario interferes before he is successful in his assault, allowing Celia to

remain a symbol of innocence and purity (Hallet). At this point, Celia's voice has developed throughout the course of the play, and as a result, she becomes symbolic of matured innocence in particular. Her innocence is not molded by a lack of real world understanding or idealistic thinking. Rather, it is predicated on insight into the mechanisms underlying her status in society and the importance of upholding one's principles in the face of relentless intimidation and manipulation. Through these qualities, Celia becomes the play's source of justice. Her resistance prompts Bonario to interfere, leading to the eventual punishments of Volpone and his followers, the representatives of moral corruption. Her role in the fabric of the play is in no way incidental. Instead, it is the result of her conscious ability to think independently and withstand male domination.

In the modern age, our standard for a feminist character is based on our own historical and cultural conditions. It is inappropriate and disingenuous to apply these standards without regard for the diverse experiences that have defined the lives of women across nations, cultures, and time periods. There is no question that Celia is an obedient observer of the ideals imposed on women during her time. She was not a revolutionary, but Ben Jonson did not intend for her to be. Instead, she is the embodiment of the struggles Italian women faced during the 17th-century. She is the realistic portrayal of such a woman trying to mitigate the omnipresence of male dominance and exert some control over her life. At every turn, Celia exercises her free will in order to oppose the corruption of men and defend the feminine virtues that define her worth as a woman. By asserting herself as the moral compass of the play, Celia achieves her own kind of female empowerment in a man's world, a kind of empowerment she should no longer be denied by the literary community.

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