

## THE SOURCE OF SOUTHERNE'S 'FATAL MARRIAGE.'

THOMAS SOUTHERNE'S tragi-comedy *The Fatal Marriage, or The Innocent Adultery* (1694) may be said to consist of two independent plays. It contains a tragedy the subject of which is fairly accurately described by its two titles, and which owes nothing, it may be added, to Scarron's novel, *L'Adultère innocente*. This tragedy was separated out by Garrick and printed in 1757 under the title *Isabella, or the Fatal Marriage*. The second element is an unsavoury comic underplot, which, as the author has himself admitted, is cumbersome for the progress of the main action: 'I have given you a little taste of comedy...not from my own opinion, but the present humour of the town: I never contend that, because every reasonable man will, and ought to govern in the pleasures he pays for. I had no occasion for the comedy, but in the three first acts,' etc.<sup>1</sup> Garrick had thus the best excuse for remodelling the play, and he has done so with complete success.

Not only are the tragedy and comedy in Southerne's drama easily separable, but they are distinct in origin. In Southerne's *Dedication* just quoted he says: 'I took the hint of the tragical part from a novel of Mrs Behn's, called the *Fair Vow-breaker*: you will forgive me for calling it a hint, when you find I have little more than borrowed the question, how far such a distress was to be carried, upon the misfortune of a woman's having innocently two husbands at the same time?' By most biographers and critics this curiously involved and qualified statement has been assumed to mean that Southerne was indebted to Mrs Aphra Behn for the main plot of his tragi-comedy. This interpretation was first put forward in the *Life of Southerne* prefixed to Volume I of the three volume edition of the *Plays* printed for Thomas Evans and T. Becket (1774). Although Thomas Evans

<sup>1</sup> Southerne, in his *Dedication to The Fatal Marriage (Plays, 1774, Vol. II, p. 182)*.

(1742-84), who was both bookseller and critic, is not mentioned as the author of the *Life* either in the *Dictionary of National Biography* or in the Catalogue of the British Museum, yet no doubt seems possible that it was written by him, it being signed with his initials 'T. E.' Now it was in this biography that the 'hint' of Southerne's own statement was transformed into a confession of borrowing<sup>1</sup>. Evans' statement reappears in Ward's *History of Dramatic Literature*<sup>2</sup>, in the same writer's notice of Southerne in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and in Joseph Knight's *David Garrick* (1894)<sup>3</sup>.

It is, however, a little surprising to find that not one of Mrs Behn's tales corresponds with Southerne's description in his *Dedication*, or with the subject of his tragedy. The bibliography of that authoress is so confused and the collection of her works in the British Museum so incomplete, that it is unsafe to make too sweeping statements. Among her collected novels<sup>4</sup>, there is one entitled *The Nun, or the Perjur'd Beauty*, and Mr Gosse has kindly informed me that that story is identical with *The Nun, or the Fair Vow-breaker* which appears in the *editio princeps* of 1689 (inaccessible to me). This being so, it is clear that Southerne's biographers have been in error as to the real source of *The Fatal Marriage*. For the perjured nun of Mrs Behn's novel, instead of having, as Southerne implies, two husbands at the same time, remains unmarried to the last, notwithstanding her fickle passions for three different men, and, so far from being the innocent woman described by Southerne, she is responsible for five deaths: her three lovers, the mother superior of the convent and herself. Isabella, on the other hand, is as virtuous as Mrs Behn's nun is the opposite, and she falls a victim to her brother-in-law's wiles; Southerne's play is sentimental, while Mrs Behn's story is a picture of heartless treachery, beginning with perjury and ending in bloodshed. The contrast could not well be greater.

Thus Southerne took for his play, as he himself said, no more than a hint—one is inclined to say hardly a hint—from Mrs Behn's *The Fair Vow-breaker*. An examination of Mrs Behn's other novels has not revealed any material points of analogy between these and *The Fatal Marriage*.

<sup>1</sup> '...the plot, by the author's own confession, is taken from a novel of Mrs Behn's called *The Nun, or Fair Vow-breaker*.' (*Life of Southerne*, in *Plays*, 1774, Vol. I, p. 6.)

<sup>2</sup> Ed. 1899, Vol. III, p. 421.

<sup>3</sup> Ward, *l.c.*, surmises that Southerne's *Innocent Adultery* is the book mentioned in Sheridan's *Rivals* (I, II). But was Miss Lydia Languish not more likely to have read Scarron's novel, several English versions of which had long been in existence?

<sup>4</sup> *All the Histories and Novels*, 1705.

354 *The Source of Southerne's 'Fatal Marriage'*

Much more closely allied to the theme of the play is a novel by Roger Lestrangle, *The Virgin Captive*, the fifth story in *The Spanish Decameron*, made English by Roger Lestrangle, London, 1687. In that novel, the foreign source of which I have not been able to trace, two lovers, Philocles and Aurelia, promise to wait two years for each other. A report is spread that Philocles has been killed in the wars, and when the two years are over, Aurelia resolves to become a nun. On the way to the convent, she meets a stranger in a slave's habit, who proves to be no other than her lover just freed from captivity. He claims her and marries her. This story is, however, of so common a type that its analogy with Southerne's plot is no proof that he made use of Lestrangle's work. The same type of story appears for instance, twice in the *Decamerone*, once with a tragic ending (IV, 8), and again with a happy one (X, 9)<sup>1</sup>; it then passed with Boccaccio to Spain, and from Spain found its way into English drama and fiction.

The real source of *The Fatal Marriage*, as of so many other seventeenth century plays, is Spanish. It is the story of the lovers of Teruel, which was not probably known to Southerne through an English version of the legend—the existence of which is problematical—but through the most popular Spanish version, namely, Juan Perez de Montalvan's *Amantes de Teruel* (1638). This comedia had been preceded by two others on the same theme, A. Rey de Artieda's (1581) and Tirso de Molina's (1635), it being itself based on the latter. The source of the Spanish legend is, according to the best authorities<sup>2</sup>, Boccaccio's tale of *Girolamo and Salvestra* (*Decamerone*, IV, 8).

The main point in which Southerne's drama differs from the Spanish originals is the circumstance mentioned in his *Dedication* as a hint borrowed from Mrs Behn. The Spanish heroine, Isabella de Segura, is not married to two men at the same time. She is pledged to wait for her first lover during a definite period: three years and three days in Tirso and Montalvan, seven years in Hieronimo de Guerta's *Florando de Castilla* (1616)<sup>3</sup>, and after waiting faithfully and being disappointed, she reluctantly yields to a second suitor who is favoured by her father. Thus there is only one marriage, and the Spanish Isabella is free from the charge of adultery, either guilty or innocent. On the night of the wedding the first lover, who has been falsely reported to have fallen in

<sup>1</sup> It is treated farcically in Shirley's *Hyde Park*.

<sup>2</sup> E. Cotarelo y Mori, *Sobre el origen y desarrollo de la leyenda de los Amantes de Teruel*, Madrid, 1907; Miss C. B. Bourland, *Boccaccio and the Decameron in Castilian and Catalan Literature* in the *Revue Hispanique*, XII; M. Menéndez y Pelayo, *Orígenes de la novela*, II (1907), p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup> Canto IX.

the wars, reappears. From this point onwards, the story differs considerably in the two Spanish plays; Tirso adheres closely to tradition and to Boccaccio, while Montalvan introduces several changes, some of which have been adopted by his English imitator. In Tirso the first lover meets the bride in the bridal chamber, claims a kiss and when denied, falls down at her feet and dies of grief. The bridegroom then takes the dead man on his back and carries him to the threshold of his father's house. At the funeral the bride dies upon her lover's body. In Montalvan's version of the legend the marriage is consummated and the bedroom and funeral scenes omitted; Montalvan's lover 'se dió la muerte sin espada,' i.e., dies of a broken heart behind a curtain, and when the curtain is drawn aside, the lady takes his hand, kisses him and dies also.

The English Restoration dramatist carries what might be called the prosaic interpretation of the legend a step further. He preserves Isabella's Christian name and nationality, but he transfers her from Teruel to Brussels, and makes her a runaway nun<sup>1</sup>. His heroine is not a despairing maiden, but a mourning and courted widow, and the melodramatic element is heightened by scenes of madness, the introduction of hired assassins, by the machinations of a stage villain and by suicide. While Tirso and Montalvan disregard the unity of time, Southerne's play does not cover much more than the twenty-four hours allowed by the critical doctrine of his day. The English playwright is mainly concerned with the subject of the third 'jornada' of the Spanish comedias, namely, his heroine's second marriage, and her earlier elopement from a convent is only lightly touched upon. Isabella appears here as a distressed widow and mother. Her broken vows are urged against her, she is driven to despair by her relentless father-in-law and by his fiendish son, and her innocent child is threatened with starvation, all before she consents to marry her second suitor. Thus domestic interests are brought into the foreground; the English playwright divides his heroine's feelings between two husbands and a child, and her fidelity to her first love, which was the main feature of the original legend, is obscured.

Southerne again differs from Tirso and Montalvan in the choice of the agency by which the 'fatal marriage'—with him the second—is brought about. In Boccaccio's tale there is no pledge or engagement. In De Guerta's narrative Isabella marries the second suitor after the

<sup>1</sup> Since the appearance of Marianna d'Alcoforado's love-letters, translated by Roger Lestrangé in 1678, the loves of nuns were a favourite theme in literature.

356 *The Source of Southerne's 'Fatal Marriage'*

lapse of the seven years agreed upon, but in each of the three plays an intrigue is introduced. In Tirso de Molina, the second suitor, Gonçalo, is a villain and has a messenger bring false news of the first lover's death; in Montalvan a cousin of Isabella, Elena, who is herself in love with the absent warrior, plots with the second suitor to intercept the letters to Isabella, and to have the false news brought to her. Southerne, while retaining the story of the intercepted letters and the lying messenger, introduces a new villain to carry out the intrigue. In the English play an obdurate father-in-law is substituted for Isabella's own father<sup>1</sup>, and the war takes place in the island of Candy instead of Tunis; there are also many changes in the minor characters.

Here the analogies between *The Fatal Marriage* and its Spanish prototypes come to an end, and English influences, especially of Shakspeare and Fletcher, make themselves felt. The villain Carlos, for instance, who brings about the catastrophe reminds us of Edmund in *Lear*, and a Shakspearian touch may also be detected in the despair and madness of Isabella after her first husband reappears.

For the comic underplot, or, as it is called in the *Dedication* of *The Fatal Marriage*, the 'comedy,' an English source has been pointed out, namely, Fletcher's *Nightwalker, or the Little Thief*. This play, indeed, reads like a burlesque of Boccaccio's *Girolamo and Salvestra* and its Spanish imitations; like *The Fatal Marriage*, it contains two death and burial incidents, and in both plays a miser is buried alive by his own son, and persuaded that he belongs to the nether world until he promises to renounce his avarice.

The connection between Southerne's play and Montalvan's is unmistakable, but the question is naturally still open whether Southerne was not drawing from some more immediate English source—possibly even from some lost version of the story by Mrs Behn herself. Have there been English stories on the same theme, directly or indirectly descended from *Decamerone*, IV, 8, other than Roger Lestrangle's *Virgin Captive* and Turberville's doggrel 'tragical tale' of *Girolam and Salvestra*? The latter, it may be added, is of no account in the present connection. In his *Dedication* Southerne may have merely intended to pay a compliment to his literary friend Mrs Behn; but he is certainly not likely to have troubled himself either to conceal or discover his indebtedness to Montalvan or any other Spanish source.

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<sup>1</sup> In Boccaccio this rôle is attributed to the lover's mother, assisted by his guardians, or 'tutors,' as Turberville calls them.