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Betsy Bolton
Swarthmore College, bbolton1@swarthmore.edu

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Hannah Cowley, Gender Identity, and 
*A Bold Stroke for a Husband*

An odd incident in the history of sentimental drama occurs as Hannah Cowley concludes the main plot of *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* (1783). In the fifth act, the cross-dressed heroine, Victoria, tricks her husband’s mistress, Laura, into destroying her claim to Victoria’s property—but then, having vanquished her rival, Victoria is startlingly conciliatory:

*Victoria.*—To you, Madam, I fear, I seem reprehensible; yet when you consider my duties as wife and mother, you will forgive me.—Be not afraid of poverty—a woman has deceiv’d, but she will not desert you! *Laura.* Is this real? Can I be awake? (71)

"Be not afraid of poverty": Victoria offers financial support to her husband’s mistress, a woman who had intended to impoverish Victoria’s entire family. This nod toward female bonding is so extreme that Cowley’s audience must have wondered, along with Laura, how real the offer could be. Yet Victoria’s apology and promise of support also underscore what might otherwise be overlooked as mere plot device: the sentimental heroine, the pure wife and mother, has acted in a way indistinguishable from the male rake. Seducing another woman under false pretences, Victoria has
indeed behaved reprehensibly, and no degree of moralizing can erase that central problem. When, in her next breath, Victoria calls on Laura to reform, Laura quite rightly responds, “So, by a smooth speech about virtue, you think to cover the injuries I sustain. Vile, insinuating monster!” (72). Laura’s insistence on her injuries, along with the extremity of the epithet “monster,” suggests that Cowley and her characters take Victoria’s male impersonation, her lesbian seduction of Laura, more seriously than one might expect. This aspect of Bold Stroke makes the play a rich resource for graduate seminars on cross-dressing and gender identity in the eighteenth century, while the play’s overall structure and stageworthiness suggest its inclusion in courses on eighteenth-century women playwrights.

Why does Cowley allow her villain to rebuke her heroine so strongly at this moment of plot resolution? Why does she allow the specter of this “vile, insinuating monster” to arise at all? Perhaps because the playwright was unwilling to abandon either one of two conflicting ideas structuring the comedy: an idealizing critique of gender relations and a performative critique of gender identity. Victoria’s offer of financial support is consistent with Cowley’s critique of gender: in Cowley’s romance of female autonomy, women insist on alliances with other women, resisting men’s attempts to divide and conquer. Yet Cowley’s performative critique of gender identity disrupts the assumptions that would allow for this ideal unity of all women. Through cross-dressing, social masquerade, and conversation, Cowley highlights the performative, nonessential qualities of gender identity, dissolving some of the bonds between women. As Florio, Victoria is a better, more seductive man than the husband she seeks to regain, but how can two women become allies when one of them has been seduced and abandoned by the other? Sustaining two incompatible modes of critique as she interweaves her sentimental main plot and comic subplot, Cowley considers, from multiple perspectives, the question of what women want—only to enclose her outrageous answers within layers of conventionally gendered narratives.

Cowley’s choices in A Bold Stroke for a Husband are somewhat more pointed than eighteenth-century historical trends. Randolph Trumbach, in his analysis of “London Sapphists,” argues that, for most of the century, women “did not yet define their gender identities in terms of their relationship to other women . . . . Women were still given conventional female status because of the way they behaved with men” (130). Victoria exemplifies this double standard: as Florio, she seduces Laura but remains exaggeratedly devoted to her husband, Carlos, thus retaining her status as a virtuous
wife. Yet Cowley’s romance of female alliances pushes against this structure of identification: women’s alliances in *Bold Stroke* are not sexual, but Cowley’s emphasis on female relationships may still summon up the specter of the monstrous woman-loving woman. Kristina Straub’s survey of “the guilty pleasures of theatrical crossdressing” at mid-century suggests that the cross-dressed actress served to criticize men for not living up to contemporary masculine ideals and to intensify the commodification of the actress’s body even while evoking a “hateful idea” of feminine sexual desire exceeding the limits of “normal” heterosexual love (128, 134, 137). Cowley’s cross-dressed heroine does, indeed, exploit the sexuality of the actress, though without ever acknowledging the fact: the virtuous wife Victoria was played by Mary Robinson, infamous for her affairs offstage. Yet Cowley displaces her criticism of men onto the figure of the femme fatale—the villain Laura—with the result that Victoria’s cross-dressing also pointedly returns to the idea of a feminine desire that exceeds heterosexual norms.

Cowley’s revision of gender relations and her critique of gender identity both come into sharper focus when one compares *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* with Cowley’s source material: Thomas D’Urfey’s *The Virtuous Wife* (1680) and Thomas Otway’s *The Atheist; or, The Second Part of The Souldiers Fortune* (1684) (Genest 6: 271; Link, Introduction xxx). From D’Urfey, Cowley took the idea of a cross-dressed wife wooing her husband’s lover and attempting to regain the riches squandered on that mistress. From Otway, Cowley took the figure of a husband fleeing an overly loving wife, whom he woos unwittingly, failing to recognize her beneath a veil. *Atheist* also includes two women, one cross-dressed, fighting for the affections of a single man. Most important for Cowley’s idealized revision of gender relations, however, is *Atheist’s* odd masque episode, in which the widow Porcia has her lover kidnapped and brought to her house, which has been transformed into a palace of romance. Within this “very fair House, adorned with rich Furniture and Lights,” Porcia’s lover Beaugard is greeted by a dwarf:

Welcome thou best-lov’d Man of the fair World. . . . My Orders are to lead you to repose in a Rich Bed prepared for Rest and Love. . . . Such are the Orders of the Power I serve. For you are come a long unmeasurable Journey. . . . Drawn by wing’d Horses through the untract Air. (31–32)

In this realm of romance, men are at women’s disposal. Beaugard meekly undresses and is led off by two black women; his companion, Daredevil,
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asks the dwarf where they are and is answered, "A Chrystal Castle built by Enchantment in a Land unknown to any but the fair one that Commands it: The Spirits of the Air keep guard about it, and all obey her Charms" (40). Thus informed, Daredevil likewise submits to his "Enchantment." Yet this castle of female power is far from impregnable: Porcia's brother-in-law attacks the house, wounds Daredevil, and imprisons Porcia and her women in what should be their stronghold.

Cowley's Bold Stroke has no equivalent romance episode, but the play could be said to take place within a similar realm of romance. In the world of Cowley's play, women are granted the power of self-determination: Victoria succeeds in winning back her errant husband and the lands he squandered; Olivia successfully avoids unwanted husbands while bringing her chosen mate up to snuff in less than forty-eight hours; even the young Marcella is threatened with a repulsive marriage for only a few moments before being given a reprieve that lasts for the duration of the play. These women achieve control over their lives in part by exploiting the power of female alliances: Victoria is able to follow her husband to town because she can stay with her cousin Olivia; Olivia is aided in her performance as an unmarriageable "vixen" by the supporting performance of her maid Minette and the connivance of her neighbor Marcella (83). Indeed, when Olivia's father asks Marcella to keep the falsity of their engagement a secret from his daughter, Marcella rejects his overtures in favor of an alliance with Olivia:

Enter into a league with a cross old father against a daughter! why how could he suspect me capable of so much treachery? I cou'd not answer it to my conscience. No, no I'll acquaint Donna Olivia with the plot; and, as in duty bound, we'll turn our arms against Don Caesar. (51)

Ironically, a failure to betray the father is reframed as treachery against the daughter: Marcella has no compunction—no conscience—about betraying Don Caesar's confidence, even though he could make her miserable by insisting on marriage. Women in Bold Stroke define their duty as a united front against male authority rather than as obedience to their fathers or husbands—and Cowley's plotting ensures that they do not suffer for it. This united front stands in strong contrast to the female characters of Restoration drama, each of whom seems primarily devoted to her own interests: Otway's Porcia and Sylvia may be cousins, but they lack the intimacy and mutual support that define Cowley's Olivia and Victoria. Cowley's insistence on female unity pushes beyond the familial unit, and
even beyond a single social level, to include the servant Minette and reach out to the fallen woman Laura.

Only Laura resists the model of feminine unity promoted by Cowley’s play—either because, despite Victoria’s rhetoric, a fall from virtue is irrecoverable or because of Victoria’s ambiguous position toward her own sex. The latter option is more telling: indeed, Victoria’s possible sexual “monstrosity” highlights Cowley’s performative critique of gender identity as it shows how differently cross-dressing signifies in Restoration and Georgian theater. D’Urfey’s cross-dressing wife neatly exemplifies Straub’s claim that “[d]esire between women was either constructed without a penis, in which case it was recuperable, or constructed with a ‘penis’ (or penis substitute) and brutally suppressed as a fraud” (144). D’Urfey’s Olivia successfully woos her husband’s mistress in his presence and, when challenged to a duel, successfully disarms her husband. Olivia’s performance of masculinity is unabashed, her abuse of her husband’s mistress unrepentant. In the unmasking scene, Olivia defines herself to her husband, Beverly, as

[o]ne that to farther her revenge, has so long worn these fortunate breeches, that she can hardly consent to return to quondam Pettitcoats again; one that has cur’d your jealousie by giving thee cause to be so, and, lastly, won your Mistriss in spight of your Sword, and Policy.

(64)

In short, Olivia is more manly than her husband—and proud to be so. Yet in relation to his mistress, Jenny Wheadle, Olivia is necessarily less manly than her husband. She cannot fulfill her promise to marry Jenny:

But for you Madam I vow to gad, ’tis an extream affliction to me, that I am utterly incapacitated of serving ye in that manner you, I know, expect, and passionately desire: ’tis alas a cheat Madam, that Nature has impos’d upon our Sex: you must needs think much against my own good liking. (64)

Olivia’s contrition seems sarcastic: she highlights Jenny’s sexual desires only to mock them; the promise of marriage was always a fraud, but here the fraud is licensed. In this Restoration comedy, female cross-dressing covers an absence: the punchline is the lack of a penis, and once the woman’s sexual identity is revealed, the joke and the story end together. Though Olivia protests her wish to satisfy Jenny sexually, Jenny knows she is merely the butt of a joke and laments her own stupidity in falling for it (64).
Otway’s cross-dressing Lucrece, by contrast, satirizes the paradoxes of male economic privilege; she spends more time describing her masquerade than performing it:

If I go into the War, I shall have the privilege, when I return home, to talk of Marches, Battels and Sieges, which I never was at, nor understand any more than the Fools I tell my story to. If I stay at home, with the privilege of good Cloathes, Pertness and much Simplicity, will I set up for a Spark, grow familiar at White-Hall, and impudent with some great Man there or another; run in Debt with a high Hand, be terrible in eating Houses, and noisy all over the Town. (55)

Lucrece defines the performance of masculinity as a privileged (that is, unearned) relation to credit in the diverse forms of reputation and debt. Lucrece’s demonstration of male speech underscores the connection:

When I and another Spark meet; Dam me, Jack, says I. What times are there stirring? What ready to be had? What Caravans have you met with or what Loose lately managed? You Rogue, you look very high upon the Huckle. (55)

Money and sex—“ready” cash and “loose” women—are a man’s major interests in this speech. When the maid demands, “[W]hat will all this Gibberish signify?” Lucrece’s translation underscores the economic bottom line:

Signifie, you Fool! Why what it signifies already; Wit, Courage, Martial Discipline, Interest at Court, Pretence to Preferment, Free Quarter in my Lodgings, and Free Booty in every Cuckold’s Shop, who shall trust me against his palpable knowledge, that I’m not worth a Groat; and never have the Impudence to hope to be Paid. (55)

The gratuitous insult of cuckold in the final item brings up the possibility of sexual transgression, but the conclusion shows this to be a red herring: the shopkeeper is cuckolded as the spark steals his goods rather than his wife’s virtue. For Otway, Restoration masculinity is inseparable from aristocratic economic exploitation, and his cross-dressing woman is a man’s man: a male playwright’s satire of empty masculine privilege through a performance that conflates sex and money.

Cowley’s use of the cross-dressing wife comes closer to Otway than to D’Urfey. Victoria, like Lucrece, spends as much time describing her performance of masculinity as she does enacting it, and her performance is largely excused by her husband’s abuse of his economic privilege: his gift to Laura of Victoria’s dowry. Whereas D’Urfey’s Olivia takes pride
in her masculine performance, Cowley's Victoria apologizes endlessly for her masquerade: "For myself, I wou'd not swerve from the nicest line of rectitude, nor wear the shadow of deceit — But for my children! — Is there a parental heart that will not pardon me?" (56). It is hard to imagine a Cowley heroine who would engage in a duel or resist a return to propriety — or be tempted to use her sword on her husband even after having disarmed him. Victoria as Florio does not duel or swagger; she merely dresses as a man and occasionally holds Laura's hand. Yet Cowley's cross-dressing woman represents far more than a joke about sexual absence: Victoria's performance may well be more muted than Olivia's and Lucrece's because it signifies more than its Restoration antecedents.

Indeed, if Otway's cross-dressing woman is a man's man, Cowley's cross-dressing woman is a woman's man or perhaps a woman's woman: she defines and discovers what women want, as shown in this exchange with her cousin Olivia:

Olivia. So suddenly to rob your husband of his charmer's heart! You must have us'd some witchery.

Victoria. Yes, powerful witchery — the knowledge of my sex. Oh! did the men but know us, as well as we do ourselves; — but thank fate they do not, 'twould be dangerous. . . . 'Tis in vain to attempt a description of what changed its nature with every moment. I was now attentive — now gay — then tender — then careless. I strove rather to convince her that I was charming, than that I myself was charm'd; and when I saw love's arrow quivering in her heart, instead of falling at her feet, sung a triumphant air, and remember'd a sudden engagement.

Olivia. [Archly.] Would you have done so, had you been a man?

Victoria. Assuredly — knowing what I now do as a woman. (20–21)

Victoria's performance as a man is strikingly feminine, not only in its individual elements, but also in its overall mutability. At the end of the eighteenth century, after all, femininity was equated with changeability. Cowley's Belle's Stratagem emphasized the plasticity of female character: stepping forth in propria persona to unite the characters of foreign charmer and English country bumpkin, Letitia Hardy insists to her lover Doricourt, "You see I can be any thing. . . . Shall I be an English Wife? — or, breaking from the bonds of Nature and Education, step forth to the world in all the captivating glare of Foreign Manners?" (81). William Hayley's mock-epic The Triumphs of Temper (1781) also tellingly underscored the shifting character of its heroine: "She's everything by starts and nothing long" (canto 1). Attentive, tender, gay, careless: Florio, like the heroines of the time, is everything by starts and nothing long.
But Victoria’s performance in *Bold Stroke* exceeds a simple replacement of masculinity by femininity. The cross-dressed wife does not begin her deception knowing what women want: Olivia’s closing question and Victoria’s answer underscore a transformation in Victoria. What Victoria knows after her performance seems to encompass insights available neither to men nor to women who have not experienced the role of cross-dressed seducer. This passage asserts that it takes a woman to seduce a woman: femininity (attentiveness, gaiety, tenderness, carelessness—above all, mutability) in masculine garb is what women want. Or, at least, it is what a seductress like Laura wants. Even in this more limited formulation, such a suggestion is monstrous and too extraordinary to leave unchallenged.

Cowley’s unmasking scene works to distract the audience from Victoria’s performance and Laura’s charge of monstrosity as soon as it is made. The villain promptly shifts from her injuries to her own malevolence: “Revenge is sweeter to my heart than love; and if there is a law in Spain to gratify that passion, your virtue shall have another field for exercise” (72). Gasper, the aged councillor, cancels that threat even as Laura exits (“No, no; you’ll find no help in the law, charmer”). The mention of revenge serves primarily to blacken Laura’s character and thus undercut her accusation against Victoria. Next, Carlos’s sudden transformation back to loving husband distracts from the legal issue:

Come, my Victoria—Oh, there is a painful pleasure in my bosom—To gaze on thee, to listen to, and love thee, seems like the bliss of angels cheering whispers to repentant sinners! (72)

This speech is clichéd and incoherent but well within the register of Beverley in D’Urfey’s *Virtuous Wife*:

Come to my bosom, thou art mine again—all—all my own, and shalt be so for ever—for from this moment, all base drossy thoughts, that soil’d the life and lustre of my Judgement, shall vanish. (64)

In both plays, hyperbolic male speech compensates for infidelity: words are asked to erase deeds and bring the cross-dressing woman back into the marital fold.

Ironically, the difference between the two plays lies in the sentimental drama’s greater cynicism in its handling of this conversion. In D’Urfey’s intrigue play, Olivia merely caps her husband’s proclamation:

This now is like a Husband’s love; free as it should be; Which mine shall equal, and now I’ll boldly say, Whensoe’er yours was, this is my Wedding day. (64)
The play then moves on to resolve its other romantic relationships. In Cowley’s sentimental drama, by contrast, the scene of reconciliation ends by calling attention back to the original problem such hyperbolic nonsense works to dispel. Don Gasper’s concluding remarks point out how unsatisfying this sentimental resolution is at heart:

Lord help ’em! how easily the women are taken in! —Here’s a wild rogue has plag’ed her heart these two years, and a whip syllabub about angels and whispers clears scores. (73)

As with Laura’s rejection of Victoria’s preaching, Gasper’s summary of the scene is unexpectedly pointed. He goes so far as to begin a suggestion that women should be a little more stern with their men (“—’Tis pity but they were a little—”) but brings himself up short with a claim that recapitulates the scandal inherent in cross-dressing: “tho’, now I think on’t, the number of these gentle fair ones is so very small, that if it was lessen’d, the two sexes might be confounded together, and the whole world be suppos’d of the masculine gender” (73). If Victoria were not a gentle dupe, then she’d be a man—or perhaps a monster—and there would be no way to distinguish women from men.

Monstrosity seems more likely than masculinity in this speculation, since Gasper’s suggestion that a confounding of the two sexes would leave only “the masculine gender” runs counter to Cowley’s handling of gender issues throughout the play. In their first appearance together, Laura informs her lover Carlos that “the vainest female, in the hour of her exultation and power, is still out-done by man in vanity.—’Tis more your ruling passion, than ’tis ours; and ’tis wounded vanity that makes you thus tremble with rage at being deserted” (18). “Stamping” and inarticulate, Carlos implicitly supports Laura’s reading of his character. In addition, while Laura is not technically a cross-dressing figure, her description of romantic infidelity highlights the extent to which she acts a man’s part in relation to Carlos:

This rage would have been all cool insolence, had I waited for your change—the crime which now appears so black in me. Then, whilst, with all my sex’s weakness, I had knelt at your feet, and reproached you only with my tears; how composed would have been your feelings.—Scarcely would you have deigned to form a phrase of pity for me; perhaps have bid me forget a man no longer worthy my attachment, and recommended me to hartshorn and my women. (18)

Laura offers Carlos only that “cool insolence” she knows to expect from a male lover who has moved on; her feelings are indeed composed, and the
closest she comes to pity is her analysis of his wounded vanity. Part of what enrages Carlos, then, is the fact that Laura, by preempting the male role of unfaithful lover, leaves him only the feminine role of wounded vanity to perform. Straub suggests that the cross-dressed actress “is a divining rod for detecting the failure of men to live up to the demands of dominant masculinity” (137); Cowley intensifies this kind of critique by extending it to her unusually masculine femme fatale.

Here and elsewhere in _Bold Stroke_, masculinity as a distinctive quality becomes remarkably elusive, pointing back toward a confounding of the two sexes that replaces masculinity with the hybridity of cross-dressing or sexual counterperformance. Gasper, moments before his assertion that ungentle women would become men, identifies himself as a cross-dressing male, something at once more and less than masculine. Explaining to Carlos how she tricked Laura into destroying the deed to the family property, Victoria, dressed as Florio, notes Gasper’s resemblance to her uncle Caesar, the basis for the liveried councillor’s performance as that wealthy don. To this account Gasper adds a bit of bragging: “Yes, Sir, I was always apt at resemblances—In our plays at home, I am always Queen Cleopatra—You know she was but a gypsy Queen, and I hits her off to a nicety” (74). The danger in _Bold Stroke_ lies in a confounding of sexes that might make the whole world not masculine but feminine—and this transformation threatens to remake femininity. What characters know as cross-dressing women (or feminized men) differs from what they might have known, as men or as women, in their previous, more conventional forms.

An oddity of _A Bold Stroke for a Husband_, then, is that the sentimental plot carries this radical critique of gender identity while the comic plot relies on a conservative model of fixed gender roles. The sentimental plot, normally a vehicle for conservative gender politics, ends with a double negation of gender: ungentle women may be indistinguishable from men, but men, vain and disempowered, are indistinguishable from women. More strikingly still, the marriage trouble in the sentimental plot of _A Bold Stroke for a Husband_ has been resolved by a cross-dressed woman seducing her female rival with the aid of a man who would be queen. The heterosexual marriage is preserved only by figures who exceed or invert its sexual assumptions and constraints. For Cowley, even more than for her characters, this is a bold stroke indeed.

By contrast, the comic subplot of _Bold Stroke_, while it advances through an extended series of masquerades and performances, finally resolves by asserting an essential, conservatively gendered identity underlying the mul-
tiplicity of performance. Like D'Urfey’s Olivia, Cowley’s comic heroine
Olivia talks a good game, but her many masquerades and performances
dissolve in the closing scene. Throughout Bold Stroke, Olivia is something
of a gypsy queen, dressed in fragments of other heroines. Claiming Xanthippe,
the shrewish wife of Socrates, as an ancestor, Olivia professes her-
self unimpressed with the performance of Shakespeare’s shrew:

Catherine! Why she had not the spirit of a roasted chesnut—a few big
words, an empty oath, and a scanty dinner, made her as submissive as
a spaniel. My fire will not be so soon extingushed—it shall resist big
words, oaths, and starving. (12–13)

Sure enough, when her father locks her up in her apartment, Olivia sees
a possibility to escape (the garden door left open) but decides instead to
outlast him, resisting his big words, oaths, and attempts to starve her:
“I’ll stay here two days, without once asking for my liberty, and you’ll
come the third, with tears in your eyes, to take me out” (77). Julio’s
presence in her apartment brings the comedy to an immediate resolution,
however, so Olivia’s resolution is never seriously tested. And Olivia’s
heroic antecedents include not only shrews but also a mythological figure
of constant devotion: Penelope, with her “never-ending web” (33). As
Penelope’s weaving saves her from her suitors until her husband’s return,
so Olivia’s false personae fend off her suitors until her chosen husband can
be brought to propose.

But as Penelope reveals the trick of her (un)weaving once Odysseus
returns, so Olivia’s performances are unraveled by Julio to reveal her
identity. As Minette and Caesar blacken Olivia’s character to Julio, he
protests:

Julio. Oh, do not prophane her.—Where is that spirit which you tell me of?
Is it that which speaks in modest, conscious blushes on her cheeks? Is
it that which bends her lovely eyes to earth?
Caesar. Ay, she’s only bending ‘em to earth, considering how to afflict me
with some new obstinacy—she’ll break out like a tygress in a moment.
Julio. It cannot be—are you, charming woman! such a creature?
Olivia. Yes, to all mankind—but one. [Looking down.] (82)

Olivia’s traditional performance of sensibility—“modest, conscious blushes”
and a modest downward gaze—is here taken to represent her true person-
ality, even though her father sees it as merely a temporary intermission in
the ongoing performance of the shrew. Julio, at once Olivia’s chosen man
and the man who can see through her vixen performance, becomes the perfect husband, Odysseus to her Penelope.

Yet this happy resolution necessarily ignores the duplicity of all performance, a problem first ironically established during Garcia's courtship of Olivia. Pretending not to have known Garcia's identity, Olivia shrewdly recants her performance as a shrew, speaking a truth she knows will not be believed:

*Olivia.* Oh, Sir! All that is past was in sport; a contrivance between my maid and me: I have no spirit at all— I am as patient as poverty.

*Garcia.* This mask fits too ill on your features, fair lady: I have seen you without disguise.

At its most serious, Cowley's *Bold Stroke* wonders whether an existence "without disguise" is possible: the villain Laura proudly proclaims herself "above disguise" and avows her undisguised love for Florio—yet this admission only highlights the seductiveness of Florio's disguise (18). Furthermore, in the comedy's concluding scene, the ubiquity of disguise is utterly disavowed. Olivia's suitors now claim to recognize the constant character underlying her previous performance: "'tis pretty clear now, *why* she was a vixen" (83). Bodies speak for hearts: Julio sees the real Olivia through her modest conscious blushes just as Olivia reads her cousin's fortunes on her face: "My friend, you are happy—'tis in your eyes, I need not ask the event" (84). Cowley is canny enough to present her heroines virtuously "above disguise" as she reaches her closing appeal to the audience. As Olivia remarks to Victoria, without the "approbation" of the audience "our labours have been vain; / Pointless my jests, and doubly keen your pain" (84). For Cowley's double-edged critique of gender to stand, it must pass muster with an audience unsympathetic to this kind of social vision.

Indeed, *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* is at once a more radical and less popular play than either Susanna Centlivre's *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* (from which Cowley adapted her title) or Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem*. *The Belle's Stratagem* was performed 118 times in the 1780s and 1790s; *A Bold Stroke for a Husband* received a far more modest 27 performances between 1783 and 1800 (Hogan clxxi, 593–612). Setting the younger generation against the older, Centlivre's play produces laughter through a focus on whimsical extravagance, improbable plotting, and contemporary allusion instead of engaging any battle of the sexes or any possible transformation of sex and gender. Similarly, while Cowley's *Belle's Stratagem* and
Bold Stroke both use masks and performance to win or retrieve a beloved’s affections, Belle’s Stratagem contains its potentially transgressive energies strictly within conventional boundaries. Cowley’s belle, Letitia Hardy, may flirt with (French) impropriety in her masquerade persona, but the monstrosity of cross-dressing remains unthought and effectively unthinkable. In Cowley’s Bold Stroke, however, Victoria and Laura rebel against social convention implicitly but more thoroughly than Letitia Hardy needs or can imagine. In their willingness and ability to take on masculine personae and positions, Victoria and Laura are complicated women, perhaps too complicated for the comedy (or sentiment) of their time. Yet for teachers and students today, Cowley’s Bold Stroke may sketch more suggestively how far the complexities of gender identity exceed the acceptable norms of comic structure, both then and now.

Notes

1. All quotations from A Bold Stroke for a Husband and The Belle’s Stratagem are from Link’s edition of Cowley’s plays.

2. For histories of female cross-dressing and its relation to modern lesbian identity, see Straub; Trumbach, “London’s Sapphists”; Dekker and Pol; Vicinus.