

# THE REVOLUTIONARY WOMAN IN *HUMAN CANNON* BY EDWARD BOND: AGUSTINA DE ESTAROBON

From a feminist point of view, Bond has been considered misogynist and criticized by the portraits of repressed and isolated women in his plays. However, Agustina in *Human Cannon* embodies one of the most important female characters in Bond's theatre with other names such as Hecuba in *The Woman*, Rose in *Restoration*, the women in *The War Plays*, Marthe in *Summer* or Irene in *Tuesday*. These women become revolutionary since they assume all the political and social responsibilities trying to change the injustices of society. In *Human Cannon*, Agustina represents a woman who fights for the freedom of her country and defies the traditional female labours in war. Thus, this character denies the thesis that Bond is a playwright who only depicts the repression of women in a patriarchal society. Bond speaks about the same repression in men and women in a capitalist society and proposes "a genderless society so that we can be free psychologically and create our gender in freedom not repression or reaction" (Stuart 1995: 201). In fact, Agustina becomes a revolutionary heroine in favour of class struggle defending the human equality (men and women) against the oppression of capitalism.

In *Human Cannon*, scene I is located in Spain at the end of the twenties but without a specific geographical situation because Bond wants to emphasize this temporal context as a cause for the revolution. In order to understand the play, the author depicts in the first scene the desperate situation in which Agustina and Nando live, in a poor world where children die of starvation. However, the cause of Agustina's dead baby is not the economic conditions of his parents but an unjust system which allows the differences between poor and rich: "If you werent (sic) so poor the child would have a better chance of living" (Bond 1996: 37). According to the cause-effect method portrayed by Bond, this context justifies the revolt of the country against the tyranny: "We fight you for the sake of our children!" (Bond 1996: 113). Giving an example

of integrity against the corruption attempt of the priest, Agustina appears as a suffering mother who understands that children die but the poor must fight to survive and change the conditions of injustice in an inhuman world.

Scene II portrays the trial of the village against the priest who is accused of Manuel Barrio's death. This man was a neighbour who hanged himself after seeing the destruction of his harvest by the governor Don Roberto. In this exemplary trial of revolution as justice, Agustina is chosen to defend the priest and accuses the people of being indifferent to Manuel's injustice. In this speech, we can observe Agustina's collective fight consciousness against the interest of people in their individual problems:

AGUSTINA. No because some of you would have said what about my mortgage?

VILLAGER 1. We're worse off than Manuel! We've got children to feed.

VILLAGER 4. We need new tools. A new roof.

AGUSTINA. [...] – and finally realised how much you had to do! But you did nothing. A priest's power depends on persuasion but your power is your strength when you act...But you could have spoken on the streets ...But you did nothing. You're worse than the priest, you're as bad as the Marquis. (Bond 1996: 47).

With this invective, Agustina tries to create a consciousness of oppressed class and force the village to rise up against injustice. Agustina's attitude shows the courage and decision that other characters in the play do not possess. Actually, the posterior loot in the Marquis' house and the burning of the church illustrate the village indecisions in the first steps of the revolt. As an example, Catalina, Manuel's wife, is not representative of the revolutionary woman because she releases the priest answering to the demands of the almighty church: "Catalina god's sent you to save the village. They'll all suffer if they harm me. Open the door" (Bond 1996: 52). As Debusscher (1987: 617) has rightly pointed out, Catalina "is a prisoner of the dominant ideology" and is completely subjugated by years of repression.

Scene III, "The Surrender", leads us from the rural to the industrial landscape. Although Bond does not locate geographically the scenes of the play, the siege to the city of Madrid seems to be the historical background. Agustina and her daughter, Tina, work for a munitions factory with a long group of women whilst men fight in the line of fire. The factory turns into a city, a small microcosm in which the stories of many different women develop as real examples of the injustices of war: their cruel function consists of producing the bullets and bombs which will be used to kill their husbands and relatives. In this horrible setting, Bond opposes the decision of Agustina's family to act against the submission of the rest of the people who live in the factory: "Slaves have to make their own chains. [...] In the end all weapons are used against the working class. [...] In our society everything is a weapon [...] That's why we need a revolution. Then the weapons could become tools again, and we could build instead of destroy" (Bond 1996: 63).

Nando defends the need to fight even when the defeat of the city is near because surrender would mean to betray many people's deaths that die for this cause. In this desperate factory, Bond introduces an essential symbol of hope and fight in the image of a blind man pushing a crippled man's chair. The symbol of hope in the human cooperation is reinforced with the introduction of music (a violin and a flute in the invalid's lap) which gives the idea of a possible victory. Klein (1989: 87) mentions that Bond's intention in this scene is to reveal "how almost impossible tasks can be achieved if people cooperate to each other's benefit".

In this factory scene, Agustina becomes the audience's eyes during a metaphorical journey through the reality of war. Her interventions are less important than in the rest of the play because her role is learning the horror of war while leaving the main focus to the stories of anonymous characters. The interior learning that Agustina suffers personally in the factory leads to an evolution in her political consciousness and a development in her character from observation to action. In this industrial and violent microcosm, her concern for children is one of the main factors in this maturity: "The children have taken the chalk they use to mark up batches of shells and they're writing alphabets on the walls" (Bond 1996: 59). This parallelism criticizes the political responsibilities of war as school in children's learning: "Society is the trauma of childhood" (Bond 2000: 166).

Agustina reflects the last step in her evolution from awareness to action in the ending poem of the scene, analyzed by Debusscher (1987: 607) as "a lyric effusion in rhymed verse [...] musing about a time when there will be justice between nations". The struggle for justice becomes central from now on with the only possibility of communitarian action rather than appealing: "The poor dont ask the shopkeeper to give his food away /The prisoners dont ask the governor to set them free/ And the world will call for peace and the call will be in vain" (Bond 1996: 63-64).

Scenes IV and V, the central element in the heroine's development, make an important change in tone. After the learning process in the factory, as Debusscher (1987: 608) concludes, Agustina emerges now as the central character in the play in a power contest with the soldier Juan. In the advance of the two scenes, Agustina uses her intelligence, masked as sexual gift, to learn to fire a cannon. The soldier exemplifies the military world in which orders dominate and deaths depend on arbitrary colours: "[...] Soldiers shouldnt have opinions, they're just a liability in war. [...] Today its the reds, tomorrow it could be the blues. Its got nothing to do with me who we're fighting. Kill or be killed, that's all it is. Discipline, not bloody opinions" (Bond 1996: 66).

Agustina makes use of the soldier's solitude, his need of communication and self-satisfaction in her benefit. Juan becomes the comic example of masculine supremacy which regards the traditional female role far away from the world of war. Nevertheless, this female "lack of knowledge" turns into her best weapon of fight against the effortless sexual interests of the soldier. Comically portrayed by Bond, Juan embodies all the female stereotypes along

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 history, for instance, the bad reputation of women soldiers: “Well you’re a woman [...] You’ll get a reputation talking to soldiers” (Bond 1996: 67); kitchen or washing as the normal activities for women: “Just say to yourself its no harder than remembering what order you put in the ingredients when you are cooking” (Bond 1996: 69) / “Well you have to know a bit of theory. Suppose you hang your washing on the line...”. However, Agustina is only learning to fire the cannon while praising the soldier’s intelligence to distract his attention: “You could teach anyone anything” (Bond 1996: 70).

Agustina’s action radicalizes when her daughter Tina is used as a sexual claim to force Juan’s absence of his post near the cannon. Debusscher (1987: 608) deals with this scene of a mother prostituting her daughter as an important mixture of farce and horror, but Agustina explains the importance of this act within the historical invisible role of women: “A woman with a bucket and a mop is invisible” (Bond 1996: 75). Klein (1999: 312) analyzes Agustina’s significative ‘gestus’, jerking her right fist forward with the thumb raised, as an image of the historical figure of Agustina de Aragón<sup>1</sup>: “Bond dramatiza la decisión de Agustina del disparo del cañón para evitar males mayores, y se debe entender como parte de la lucha para salvar a la sociedad de la subyugación, del mismo modo que Agustina de Aragón disparó el cañón contra los enemigos, defendiendo a sus conciudadanos de la invasión napoleónica”.

With this ‘gestus’, the heroine professes a purely political intention but not a restricted gender struggle in opposition to the traditional role of women. Moreover, her position is clearly in favour of the revolution of the working classes against the fascist troops and their male and female repression. On the other hand, it is necessary to emphasize that this comic moment also transmits the tragic burden of Agustina’s action because the soldier, for his irresponsibility, “will be court-martialled and shot”. The heroine, like Hecuba in *The Woman*, “takes responsibility for her actions even (and specially) when she feels there is no choice” (Spencer 1992: 221). In Bond’s view, there is always a dilemma between moral and need in what Mangan (1998: 66) has called “immoral hero”:

Agustina is another one of Bond’s ‘immoral’ heroes, doing something apparently reprehensible in itself for the sake of a larger good. For a twentieth-century audience familiar with movies, novels and plays which extol the virtues of anti-Fascist resistance fighters in the Second World War, she is actually much less problematic in this respect than most of Bond’s heroes – almost a conventional romantic heroine, in fact.

Scene VII, “The Vendors”, depicts Bond’s disapproval for a consumer system in which killings become business. After being released from prison, Agustina’s presence in the scene constitutes a sphere of humanity which makes her different from the rest of irrational voices. Her profound social and political consciousness is clearly reflected in her acts, when she rejects

the vendor's food while the other characters are able to eat hearing the sound of bullets. Thus, Agustina strongly criticizes an irrational system in which human beings could eat hamburgers – a reference to the American system— while guerrilla partners are being exterminated. In this way, this act indicates a solidarity gesture and a moral conscience against the mercantilism of war. In "The Activists Papers", Bond (1992: 133) establishes the impossibility to reconcile food and suffering: "Between the two meals you've learned how many people suffer from malnutrition. This time you don't enjoy the food. [...] Cruelty tastes like this".

Agustina's attitude is compared to the artificiality and cruelty of English people, like Fawcett, who demonstrates emotion for his dog's death but not for the killing of human beings. Depicting this character, Bond hardly recriminates the English moral: "they don't seem to know the difference between humans and dogs— yet they are full of good manners— stuffed with them as a dummy might be with straw" (Stuart 1995: 75). In the play, English people represent spiritual emptiness as regards their actions of cruelty against the condemned: "They are so empty you could almost see the walls through them!" (75).

The moral of the *PORTLY MAN*'s wife is evidently confronted with Agustina because this consumer woman opposes the ideal feminine represented by the heroine: "This afternoon I shall take you shopping for gifts" (Bond 1996: 93). Presenting two different female attitudes towards suffering, the author tries to prove that not the female gender, as a whole, is socially committed and act consequently as *Human Cannon*'s heroine. At the other extreme, Margaret Thatcher exemplifies the militarist obsession and the wrong political influence that a woman can also cause: "But who has revived the military obsession of the English at the moment? – Thatcher. And there you see that women cannot retreat into a specific sanctuary (or ghetto) of sexual characteristics – they are as much at danger from their class roles as men. The problem isn't that we're different, but that we're the same" (Stuart 1995: 70).

Finally, this central scene of the play concludes with a choir in which Agustina "warns all profiteers and collaborators that the fascist 'normalization' is only a temporary respite" (Debusscher 1987: 612). This choir foreshadows the disasters of war that the country and the village will suffer during years, with final verses remembering Hemingway's novel about the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: "[...] Tolls like the notes of a funeral knell /And your cities will turn into hell" (Bond 1996: 96). Nevertheless, despite some connections, Debusscher (1987: 616) finds a very important difference between both authors in the treatment of history because "it cannot be the personal testimony of an eye-witness, the diary, however fictionalized, of an active participant. Bond's Spanish Civil War is an imaginative, emotional and intellectual reconstruction [...]".

Scene VIII, "A Discussion", draws the attention to the horrors of war and Agustina and Nando's determination to continue the fight. As an example of her option in favour of revolution, Agustina refuses the creation of a legend

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 for her actions because she does not believe in abstract ideals: “the civil war has brought her to her socio-political senses and sharpened her awareness of the dangers of abstract ideas and ideals” (Debusscher 1987: 612). These ideas are reflected in “The Activists Papers” when Bond (1992: 129) defends that the people who decide to act against injustice are not heroes but ordinary citizens developing a social consciousness: “we’d show the power of historical forces by showing the individuality, ordinariness and human vulnerability and strength of the characters who live it”.

Through his letters, there is a confirmation of the ordinariness in *Human Cannon*’s characters. In a real moment like the Spanish Civil War, everybody could be a hero but only some people, like Agustina, face their responsibilities in the course of history: “These people are ordinary victims of fascism, whether Spanish fascists, or German or English fascists. To those I have a responsibility that goes beyond any responsibility to literature or theatre” (Stuart 1995: 62). Therefore, Bond has not the intention of writing Agustina’s biography but turning her example as a historical spokeswoman. According to Mangan (1998: 66), Agustina, with a brechtian air, summarizes the need for a common force instead of useless legends:

AGUSTINA. What use is a legend? People hear them and say: they’re the big ones, we’re ordinary. What do I want? A dry roof over my head and a warm blanket. Isn’t that ordinary? And that no one blows up my world – that ought to be the most ordinary thing of all. [...] Now we have to make a revolution to stop them blowing the world to bits. We can’t live with ignorance any more. [...] I did it for the same reason I lay the table or sweep the floor. If I’m a legend my life is wasted. (Bond 1996: 99)

This scene concludes with the poem ‘My Spain’, recited by Agustina, which Debusscher (1987: 612) relates to “both the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, extolling the beauty of Spain, and that of Walt Whitman singing the New World”. The poem goes beyond the lyric path through the Spanish geography transcending the patriotism of one woman who “becomes the spokeswoman of the people at large”.

Scene XI closes the circular structure of the play with a new trial; in this case, Agustina who was the defender in the first trial becomes the accused. The failure of the revolution shows its effects and Agustina, arrested because of the explosion of a bomb in the village church, is sentenced to death. The character called *Investigator* tries to force Agustina’s confession adding other ten women from Estarobon to the death sentence; these women appear dressed in black as a symbol for their dead relatives in the war. Despite the fascist oppression of the trial, the strength of these women resists against injustice considering Agustina as guilty as the rest of them. The women make the whole village responsible of the bomb and one by one answer ‘Estarobon’ to the Investigator’s accusations – only one of them will yield to the pressure. In *Human Cannon*, Klein (1999: 317) observes the growth

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in the political consciousness of the village emphasizing the importance of community learning: “Las mujeres de Estarobon, con Agustina como líder, han alcanzado finalmente una madurez intelectual y la conciencia de una fuerza colectiva, cuando se oponen unidas al régimen de Franco representado por el *Investigator*”. In a surreal theatrical metaphor, Agustina, restrained by women, strains towards the *Investigator* with this antifascist speech:

AGUSTINA.

When you make us weak you teach us to be strong

When you rob us you teach us to sabotage

When you exploit us you teach us to strike

When you make laws you teach us to break them

When you use weapons against us you teach us to arm

When Fascists imprison a country they teach it to be free!

(Bond 1996: 114-115).

In a final act of solidarity, the village women raise Agustina above her enemies' head becoming a 'human' cannon that now represents a new example of force and unity among the Estarobon women. The connection between fiction and reality is shown at this very end with the identification between Estarobon and Spain:

AGUSTINA. Destroy them! Their world! Cruel! Pull it down! Lift me higher! His head! Point me at his head! [...] Our world! Our hands! Our feet! The day! Up! Up! Doors open! Hear streets! Our world! Aim me! Head! [...] The bomb— who put— the church? It speaks! Not Estarobon! Fool! It was Spain! Spain! (Bond 1996: 115).

The fascist regime seems unable to accept the value of this gesture rejecting Agustina's world as utopian and unreal: “Fascism is normality protected from change” (Bond 1996: 116), however this lineal prose is opposed to the explosion of poetic richness in the concluding choir. This final creed opens a possibility for change in the future due to the value legacy that these women have taught their children: “But the lives they lived have made us strong / And to our children we pass our strength” (Bond 1996: 117). The figure of Agustina's grandchild, raised above the fascist' heads, shows a powerful image of a better future and the opportunity to create a more human world free of misery. As conclusion, the relationship between this hopeful child and Agustina's dead baby at the beginning of the play stands alone as a meaningful proof of Man's capability of effecting change.

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1 Agustina de Aragón was a revolutionary woman who fought in the Spanish War of Independence (1808) against French invaders. As the character in the play, Agustina de Aragón fired a cannon against the enemies in an exemplary act of honour.

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## SUMMARY

### THE REVOLUTIONARY WOMAN IN *HUMAN CANNON* BY EDWARD BOND: AGUSTINA DE ESTAROBN

This article proposes a detailed analysis of the play *Human Cannon*, by the English author Edward Bond, with a special emphasis on the female figure who becomes a historical spokeswoman of the Spanish Civil War. As a consequence of the scenic methodology approached in this study, the development of the protagonist, Agustina de Estarobon, can be followed from the initial subjugation to the political maturity and freedom of thought at the end of the play. In this way, Edward Bond exemplifies a heroine brave enough to face the fascist repression and lead a rebellion against the injustices of absolute power.