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# Restoration Celebrity Culture: Twenty-First-Century Regenderings and Rewritings of Charles II, the Merry Monarch, and his Mistress “Pretty, witty” Nell Gwyn

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**Abstract:** Charles II was a figure of controversy during his reign and continues to be one of the most iconic and well-known British monarchs; the portrayals of this King vary significantly from one author to the other and from one period to the next, but they invariably focus on his penchant for frivolity and his sexual liaisons. One of his favourite royal mistresses is Nell Gwyn, the oyster girl, turned orange seller, turned actress, turned mother of Dukes. The figure of ‘pretty, witty’ Nelly has fascinated biographers, filmmakers and novelists for centuries due to its Cinderella-like undertones and the natural fascination that the first female performers have exerted on the public imagination. This paper studies modern rewritings of Charles’s and Nell’s affair and of the two lovers themselves, to trace the attitudes towards the King’s illicit affair and towards the actress’s social climbing. The aim of this paper is to question the motivations for these re-imaginings and to help discover the reasons why the monarch and his “Protestant Whore”<sup>1</sup> have become the focus of such varied re-writings and two of the most prominent characters of the British public imagination, surpassing the boundaries of their professions, to become part of popular culture.

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**1** The name comes, legend has it, from Nell Gwyn herself and is an anecdote that has been recounted innumerable times. Granger explains that “the story [...] is a known fact; as is also that of her being insulted in her coach at Oxford, by the mob, who mistook her for the duchess of Portsmouth. Upon which she looked out of the window, and said, with her usual good humour, Pray, good people, be civil: I am the protestant whore. This laconic speech drew upon her the blessings of the populace, who suffered her to proceed without further molestation” (Granger 2010: 429).

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Charles II was a figure of controversy during his reign and continues to be one of the most iconic British monarchs; the portrayals of this King may vary from one author to the other and from one period to the next, but they usually focus on his penchant for frivolity and his sexual liaisons. One example of the popularity of the legends about his levity is his inclusion in the TV series *Horrible Histories* (2013), a CBBC program for children based on the popular book series by Terry Deary (2010). The rap song “The King of Bling” aired as part of the second episode in the second season of this award-winning TV series; the song features Matthew Benton as the Merry Monarch and is a parody of rap-star Eminem’s hit song, “My Name Is”. The song includes lines such as “I’m part Scottish, French, Italian//A little bit Dane//But one hundred percent party animal//Champagne?”, a chorus that repeats “I’m the king who brought back partying!” (*Horrible Histories* 2013, Season 2, Episode 2: 18’:15”–18’:17”) and, more interestingly, a succinct summary of the actual Restoration of the Monarchy,

When Olly died, the people said  
 ‘Charlie, me hearty!  
 Get rid of his dull laws  
 Come back, we’d rather party!  
 This action’s what they called  
 The monarchy restoration  
 Which naturally was followed  
 By a huge celebration! (*Horrible Histories* 2013, Season 2, Episode 2: 18’:52”–19’:02”).

After this first appearance in 2010, King Charles became a recurrent character in the series, a testament to his popularity among the audience. This is just one of many examples of the myriad representations of Charles II, commonly known as the Merry Monarch,<sup>2</sup> that have transcended the pages of history to become part of popular culture: the figure of Charles II has survived well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a moment in history where we can find a renewed interest in the 1660s, as evidenced by the materialisation of a variety of cultural products (books, films and dolls) that claim to show the true story of one of the most fascinating periods of English history: the Restoration. Whether these products and representations paint

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<sup>2</sup> In this article, both King Charles II and his mistress the actress Eleanor Gwyn, may be referred to either by their full names and titles or by their nicknames (the Merry Monarch, pretty witty Nelly, Nell, Nelly, the Orange Seller, and the Protestant Whore). This has been a deliberate choice based on the actual aim of this paper, which is to acknowledge the fact that these two historical figures have transcended the era in which they lived, to become part of popular culture as beloved and familiar characters. This familiarity and fondness is shown in the use of nicknames to refer to both King Charles and Nell Gwyn.

an accurate picture of the actual man on the throne is not the focus of this study, but instead, the present paper is more concerned with the representations themselves, their discourses and their interactions with the reigning ideas about gender that inform their reimagining of Charles II, the Merry Monarch.

Most of these modern rewritings of the King's life and times delight in his private life and his affairs with actresses, ladies of the Court and other society women: the fascination of the intimate details of the lives of monarchs is certainly not new and we can trace the circulation of written gossip about the illicit affairs of royalty as far back as the Tudors, in the form of pamphlets (Raymond 2006: 8–10). “The Monarch’s song” included in series three of *Horrible Histories* summarises the accomplishments of all kings and Queens of England and while William the Conqueror is hailed as a warrior, Henry VIII is remembered for having married 6 times and Charles II sums his reign up saying “No monarchy until came me / Charles two, I liked to party” (*Horrible Histories* 2013, Season 3, Episode 2: 25:33”–25:37”). It seems that, 400 years after the reign of the Merry Monarch, he is best remembered for his fourteen mistresses and life of dissipation, rather than for his politics.

One of Charles’s favourite mistresses and the one most of these reimaginings focus on is Nell Gwyn, the oyster girl, turned orange seller, actress, and mother of Dukes. For centuries, the figure of “pretty, witty” Nelly has enchanted biographers, filmmakers and novelists due to its Cinderella undertones and to the fascination that the first female performers have exerted on the public imagination: from her being the face of orange marmalade, to giving her name to a brothel / spy agency in the steampunk series “The Women of Nell Gwynne” by Kage Baker (Baker and Potter 2009; Baker 2012), Nell Gwyn has become part of the public imagination and folklore.

She is believed to be the harbinger of “the star-system that is very much part of our culture today” (Payne Fisk and Canfield 1995: 16) and which was equally present in the lives of seventeenth-century theatre audiences: celebrity is unlike fame in that the former, unlike the latter, does not focus on the extraordinary lives of extraordinary individuals, but rather on the relationship between individuals and markets (Luckhurst and Moody 2005: 1). Celebrity is a far more complex concept than fame, for it is not based on the ability of the performer, but on the elusive qualities that transformed women like Marilyn Monroe or Clara Bow into legendary ‘It-Girls’. The idea of the ‘It-Girl’ has been commonly associated with the film stars and models of the 1990s such as Winona Ryder or Kate Moss, celebrities belonging to the X Generation and who represent a new kind of woman “intelligent, non-conformist, cool” (McManus 2008) the “Can-Do Girls” (Harris 2003: 13) who not only adhered to the doctrine of girl power, but who also had “It”, a factor that “is made up of elusive qualities related to sex appeal, glamour, beauty, acting technique and aspects of what we call performer’s lifestyle” (Luckhurst and Moody 2005: 5).

Experts on the field of celebrity studies like Mary Luckhurst and Joseph Roach, as well as Chris Rojek, one of the pioneers of academic celebrity studies, point out that the origin of this celebrity movement can be traced back as far as the Restoration, the moment when women were allowed on stage in Britain (Luckhurst and Moody 2005: 2–3). In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of drama is its immediacy, which adds even more power to the concept of celebrity, or as Luckhurst and Moody explain, “the celebrity of performers is about the experience of seeing an actor in the flesh” (2005: 3). Although many critics believe celebrity to be a concept that can only be applied to the twentieth century, scholarship has proved that its roots lie in the arrival of women to the British stage, an innovation that not only brought endless possibilities, but which also disrupted the status-quo (Nussbaum 2005, 2008; Howe 1992; Bush-Bailey 2007, 2009; Keating 2013; Maus 1979).

Furthermore, and although the idea of the It-Girl was not articulated until the early twentieth century in reference to Clara Bow (Felando 2004: 8–9; Orgeron 2003: 76; Stenn 2000: 2–3), the fascination the first female performers exerted on the public imagination has brought many scholars to think about them as the first It-Girls, and Nell Gwyn is, undeniably, the biggest ‘influencer’ of her time: the conjunction of her flamboyant personality, her lively performances and her scandalous affair with the King conspired to make her into a proto-celebrity (Roach 2003, 2005; Rojek 2004; Nussbaum 2005; Popple 2011; MacLeod 2001).

The aim of this paper is to study three modern rewritings of this royal affair to trace the evolution in the attitudes towards the King’s illicit liaison and towards Nell’s social climbing. This paper seeks to analyse the different versions these rewritings offer of the ‘Merry Monarch’ and his ‘Protestant Whore’ and the underlying gender discourses upon which these reimaginings have been built.

## The Man and Woman Behind the Myth: The Problem of Historical Sources

The Restoration of the monarchy after a period of Puritan rule was seen as heralding a new era and a time for new hopes and ideas. Still, Charles’s return to the throne, albeit much anticipated, was not without problems: his tolerance towards Catholicism, his foreign policy and his relationship with Parliament were a sore subject for many. Furthermore, his personal life, hedonism and his enthusiasm for women have, for a very long time, been the focus of most of the stories of his life and times, rather than the ideological shift that took place in the late seventeenth century across Europe: the change from a medieval world to a pre-modern society, from a deployment of alliance towards a deployment of sexuality, from a

gender order based on inferiority to a difference-based system, from a society sustained by religious beliefs and the Bible to a society which ordered and classified individuals according to (un)natural behaviours and science (Martínez-García 2014: 79–142).

This ideological shift of the seventeenth century meant a redefinition of the gender roles that had sustained patriarchal power for centuries and inferiority was no longer a valid justification for the ruling of men over women. Science and the biological differences between men and women were now the basis of social order and the ruling principles that organised society into two spheres: public (masculine) and private (feminine) (Fletcher 1999: 99–125). This shift in the episteme was gradual, spanning several centuries: in the case of Britain, this ideological revolution coincided with the Restoration, making it a time of transition from one system to the other, a moment when the deployment of alliance and the deployment of sexuality coexisted and fought for permanence. The spaces between both systems were spaces of resistance and experimentation with alternative ways of being, and it is within these spaces that Charles's libertinism and the hedonism of the court wits found its place.

For centuries now, "history has traditionally portrayed the Restoration focusing only in the sexual aspect" (Pullen 2005: 24), and it is this view of the Restoration and its King that needs to be addressed first; the history of the 1660s is written mainly through the circulation for a series of anecdotes which, after continuous repetition, are put into writing and, thus, become historical sources, trustworthy sources of information on the era. Furthermore, any surviving written documents from the period have been given an even higher degree of trustworthiness, for, as Kirsten Pullen explains, "the shift from orality signals a shift in authenticity and validity [...] the existence of documents seems to logically lead to the existence of the event" (2005: 26).

Among the written sources that have served as basis to construct the history of the Restoration of the monarchy, two have been consistently used throughout the years. On the one hand, Restoration comedy of manners which, with its array of libertines, rakes, cuckolds and sexual innuendos, is one of the very few written testimonies of the lives of the ruling classes of the 1660s. Critics and historians have taken these works of fiction as faithful reflections of a time in which the monarch was trying "to free its society from the shackles of Puritanism" (Pullen 2005: 24) ignoring the fact that, although these works do reflect aspects of the society of the time, they were also portraying a lifestyle and mode of being far more philosophical and deeper than they were given credit for (Martínez-García 2014: 72–74). In fact, Restoration comedy of manners was vilified by critics for centuries, as a vacuous and uninteresting genre which only portrayed the dissipated and dissolute lives of the King and his companions, the Court Wits.

This mistaken understanding of Restoration comedy as simply a frivolous period of masquerade, carnival and sexual frenzy after the repression and restraint of the Republic was not just taken from Restoration comedies of manners, but it was buttressed by the reproduction and repetition of the whispered gossip that circulated around the city and the Court: the King's inability to produce a legitimate heir and his public affairs with women of all stations were the other basis upon which traditional stories of Restoration debauchery were constructed. This gossip and the whispered conversations about the King's disinterest in politics was taken as historical fact thanks to the survival of one of the few contemporary sources of the period, Samuel Pepys's diaries.

Samuel Pepys, a public servant in the His Majesty's Navy, kept a diary for almost ten years (1660–1669), a document of incalculable value which allows us to peer into the life and politics of the Restoration. In his diary Pepys writes about his daily life, his health, his affairs and, more interestingly, about the Court gossip: although Pepys was eager and enthusiastic about Charles's return to the throne, he soon seems to feel disappointment at his monarch's attitude, extravagance and expenditure (Pepys 1870: 433–434). Pepys's diary is peppered with his conversation with peers of the realm and other important actors in the political arena and he alternated between admiration for the young King and criticism of his poor decisions. For example, in his entry for 26<sup>th</sup> April, Pepys records his conversation with Mr Evelyn about “the badness of the Government, where nothing but wickedness, and wicked men and women govern the King” (Pepys 1870: 434), a passage that not only reveals the gossip surrounding the King, but which seems to confirm the idea that the King was easily influenced by unscrupulous and ambitious mistresses.

Several are the instances in Pepys's diary in which he harshly criticises the King and his government (or lack thereof), as well as his escapades and antics with the Court Wits (Pepys 1870: 135–136). Pepys also points out Charles's lack of ability or charm when it came to public speaking<sup>3</sup> and, in several occasions, he comments on the King's general inadequacy and lack of enthusiasm for the ruling of the realm (Pepys 1870: 459). Although Pepys's diary offers a wealth of details on the events of Charles's reign, many of which can be contrasted with other historical sources such as war dispatches, official letters and bills, the diary also delights in gossip and scandal. While it is undeniable that Pepys is an astute and shrewd political commentator and although his writings are invaluable sources of information on the general affairs of the kingdom, he is also an inveterate gossip

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3 “His speech was very plain, nothing at all of spirit in it, nor spoke with any; but rather on the contrary imperfectly, repeating many times his words though he read all which I was sorry to see, it having not been hard for him to have got all the speech without book” (Pepys 1870: 202, 239).

who alternates his worries for the future of the realm with comments on the quarrels between the King, the Queen and the Royal Mistresses, as well as the gifts, whimsies and bastard progeny of these women. One of the most telling examples of Pepys's perception of politics and sentimental royal affairs as inextricably linked is his diary entry for 26<sup>th</sup> April 1667,

Mr. Evelyn tells me several of the menial servants of the Court lacking bread, that have not received a farthing wages sincew the King's coming in. He tells me the King of France hath his mistresses, but laughs at the foolery of our King, that makes his bastards princes, and loses his revenue upon them, and makes his mistresses his masters and the King of France did never grant Lavalliere anything to bestow on others, and gives a little subsistence, but no more, to his bastards (Pepys 1870: 434).

This passage is one of the best examples of Pepys's dual nature: on the one hand, we see his worry and preoccupation with the affairs of state reflected in his commentary on the King's disinterest in the welfare of his servants. Still, the passage continues with a lengthy account of the affairs of one Mrs. Stewart, with details of all of her admirers (including the King) and the gifts and attentions that all these men had poured on her, a description which confirms Pepys's love of gossip and scandal.

One of the most interesting relationships portrayed in his diary is that with Lady Castlemaine, one of Charles's long-standing mistresses and one of the women who most of the Court hated, envied and admired. While Pepys declares his admiration for the lady and her finery (Pepys 1870: 105, 124) at first, he soon starts worrying that she is the cause of the King's disinterest in state affairs (Pepys 1870: 153, 203) and passages in which Pepys delights in recounting occasions in which she has been publicly humiliated, vexed or overshadowed by other women seem to appear more often (Pepys 1870: 124, 166, 183, 199, 226, 336).

Pepys portrays Castlemaine as a shrewd manipulator who uses her 'feminine' charms and children to get her wishes from a King whom Pepys paints as weak-willed, inclined to extravagance and easily led astray by vile counsellors and mistresses, as he recounts in the entry for 13<sup>th</sup> May 1663,

the King do mind nothing but pleasures and hates the very sight or thoughts of business; that my Lady Castlemaine rules him, who, he says, hath all the tricks of Aretin that are to be practised to give pleasure. In which he is too able ..., but what is the unhappiness in that, as the Italian proverb says, "lazzo dritto non vuolt consiglio." If any of the sober counsellors give him good advice, and move him in anything that is to his good and honour, the other part, which are his counsellors of pleasure, take him when he is with my Lady Castlemaine, and in a humour of delight, and then persuade him that he ought not to hear nor listen to the advice of those old dotards or counsellors that were heretofore his enemies (Pepys 1870: 183).

Pepys also includes a description of a salacious episode starring Lady Castlemaine and Mrs Stuart, a virtuous young woman who had previously and quite famously refused the attentions of the King. Pepys recounts the story of a mock marriage between the two women, with vows, ceremony and of course, the act of consummation for which the two ladies were joined by the King himself (Pepys 1870: 170). This anecdote, which according to Pepys “is said to be very true” (Pepys 1870: 170), has been repeated throughout history regardless of its accuracy since the fact that it is written down gives it an aura of credibility that spoken stories lack. In fact, and as Margaret Ezell explains, “true or not, this episode has entered many subsequent accounts of Charles and his court” (Ezell 2017: 162) and has not just worked to paint the picture of a debauched King, but of an unscrupulous and ambitious mistress who would use her body and sexuality to obtain and maintain her position of power and privilege in court, a trope that will be repeated throughout history and which will be later on analysed in detail.

Pepys’s very personal vision of Charles as an incapable ruler, an inveterate libertine and a pusillanimous monarch has been taken as the basis for many of the historical biographies and the general vision that we have inherited of Charles and his period. Some historians have criticised the Merry Monarch, pointing out his inability or unwillingness to take part in politics: Maurice Ashley portrays him as “more absorbed in outdoor sports than in his books, and learning the politeness of court life without being [...] bothered about their social significance” (1971: i). Kenyon, probably one of his harshest critics, describes the Merry Monarch as “cynical and dissolute; he wasted money on women, just like his father had wasted it on paintings and his grandfather on boys” (1990: 14) and Molloy, with a great deal more of sympathy towards the King, laments the King’s lack of interest in politics for, in his opinion, “Charles II might have made his reign illustrious, had not his love of ease and detestation of business rendered him indifferent to all things so long as he was free to follow his desires” (Molloy 1885: 50).

Other historians have accepted Charles’s dissolute lifestyle, which seems quite undeniable on the face of the passages recorded in Pepys’s diary, and have tried to justify it, either by arguing that the trauma of his father’s execution and his own exile was to blame for his libertinism (Pearse 1969: 5–10) or simply painting a most favourable picture of the King and arguing that he was, in reality, a capable and responsible King, admired by the undisputedly competent and beloved Queen Victoria, a woman who would not be suspect of sharing Charles’s penchant for frivolity (Fraser 2004: xiii). In short, Charles’s figure has been a point of contention for historians who have alternatively, vilified and praised him as an incompetent libertine or a charming ruler, concluding that, “while the political analyst will admire Charles’s governing skills, the historian will criticise the human cost of his innuendo” (Carvalho 2014: 21).



Despite the later disappointment that his reign might have caused, Charles's arrival to the British Isles in 1660 was a cause of happiness for many: his rule was expected to be a new opportunity for Britain to return to its former glory. Indeed the first few years of his reign were quite successful, but soon, the Merry Monarch and his subjects realized that ruling the three kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland would prove to be a challenge; one of the main problems King Charles had to face during his rule over the Isles was how to fulfil the hopes and expectations of all the groups that wanted justice and their petitions heard, especially because most of these petitions meant that one of the other groups would be excluded from power. Thus, Charles was expected to find a system of government which gave both more and less power to Parliament, which would allow liberty of conscience to the separatists, but which would also give privileges and power to the Presbyterians who raged against this same liberty. He was expected to calm the religious unrest in Scotland, where Protestants, Anglicans and Catholics quarrelled over power and accused each other of persecuting the rest. He also had to placate the religious conflicts in Ireland that had Catholics, Protestants and non-conformists fighting over laws, economy, religion and land distribution. If the problems within the kingdoms were not enough, the conflicts transcended the borders and the three territories complained of the King's favouring one over the rest. Furthermore, any measure he took in England would have repercussions both in Ireland and Scotland (Hanrahan 2006; Harris 1990, 2006; Tapsell 2007). In England, the Whig rebellious opposition to his reign and the widespread fear of a Catholic reign after the Popish plot made Charles's first years in power a struggle. Still, as critics point out, the problems that assailed the kingdoms in the first decades of the Restoration, were resolved towards the 1670s and 80s once the King abandoned his youthful escapades and took an interest in affairs of the kingdom managing to find a solution to the difficulties that had threatened his realm at the beginning of his reign (Harris 2006).

Through all his difficulties, Charles was accompanied by his mother and sister, the two people who, according to biographers, would be his confidantes for all his life; Derek Wilson points out that not only did Charles rely heavily on his female relatives, but that he could be usually found in the company of women whom he took into his confidence and from whom he gladly received advice (2004: 371). His close relationship with women was harshly criticised at the time, for many saw this as a sign of weakness. In fact, this worry about his obsession with women and its perceived connection with his inability to rule is an underlying worry in Pepys's diary, albeit never openly expressed: whether women were still seen as inferior to men (deployment of alliance) (Foucault 1998: 106) or as inherently different and, thus, less naturally inclined to public life (deployment of sexuality) (Foucault 1998: 106), critics looked upon these female companions with suspicion and Charles's reliance on them and his preferring their company to that of his male friends was

seen as unmanly by his enemies. As Pullen explains, “Charles’s obsession with his mistresses suggested an effeminate interest in romance, luxury and pleasure, calling into question his ability to rule” (2005: 24). Thus, the King, head of the State, of the family and realm, was seen by many as unmanly and his early difficulties in managing the kingdom were attributed to the feminine company that he kept and to his penchant for frivolity, a quality traditionally associated with women (Foucault 1998: 104; Fletcher 1999: 69, 370; Martínez-García 2014: 66).

Although it is true that the origin of the public’s interest in the affairs of royalty might be difficult to trace back to a specific time period, the Restoration was a time of unprecedented familiarity between King and subjects. In fact, the 1660s saw such an overflow of pamphlets, songs and ballads circulating seditious ideas, irreligious stories and tales of Charles’s affairs and private life, that the King soon convinced Parliament to enact a Licensing Press Act which would censor this type of publication (Nipps 2014: 494).

Naturally, the King’s and Nell Gwyn’s amorous adventures also made it into the public eye and many authors tried to trace the actress’s genealogy and origin; still, the data is fragmented, subjective and clearly influenced by the desire to mark the King’s mistress as a woman of ill-repute: pamphlets circulated all the salacious news of her (real and imagined) sexual adventures, endeavouring to reduce the impact of her transgression of class protocol, hoping “that the focus remained on (her) sexuality, not on (her) professional status or possible influence on stagecraft” (Pullen 2005: 25) and consequently trying to minimise her public impact. This strategy, coupled with the fact that “few of the anecdotes by which Gwyn is best remembered can be verified beyond the shadow of a doubt” (Perry, Roach and West 2011: 64) explains why most of Gwyn’s biography is heavily contradictory and fragmented and why most source materials chiefly concentrated on her carnal adventures leading us to think of her primarily as a sexual being. Furthermore, and as Kirsten Pullen points out, the authenticity of the inherited wisdom about her has not been questioned until very recently, allowing these anecdotes to become trustworthy sources of information (2005: 25).

Nell Gwyn was a doubly controversial figure: “in a society that compulsively insisted on the public *invisibility* of women, the *visibility* of the actress posed not just a serious dialectical problem, but a clear threat to the discourses of power which strove to place men at the centre of public life” (Martínez-García 2016b: 182). All female performers “were caught in crosscurrents that defined their sexuality as public by profession and private by gender” (Straub 1992: 90) becoming thus aberrant creatures, unnatural women who violated the laws of Nature which dictated that women, due to their more delicate constitutions, were better suited for a quiet and private life within the home. Since actresses not only ventured outside the home but displayed themselves in a public arena, they were seen as

betraying their own biology and threatening the established gender order: if these unruly women were not contained somehow, they could inspire other women to do the same and this would pose a serious threat to patriarchal power.

Since actresses had the support of the King himself (the highest authority in the realm), they needed to be neutralised in a subtler way, and so soon critics started drawing “parallels with prostitution, a link that has endured for generations in a patriarchal society employing the binaries of private/public, virgin/whore as its constructs of femininity” (Bush-Bailey 2009: 3). The fact that the origins and family of most of these women was untraceable and that most of the anecdotes that make up their life-stories could never be confirmed (Conway 2006: 209; Martínez-García 2017: 215) contributed both to the creation of their mythical celebrity and to the buttressing of those discourses that sought to neutralize the threat these women had become through slander, insult and speculation (Pullen 2005: 8).

The comparing of women to either whores or angels can be clearly seen in the types of roles early actresses specialised in: Anne Bracegirdle always played the romantic heroine, while Nell Gwyn was cast as in madcap roles. Soon audiences started transferring the qualities of these fictional characters to the actual women playing them, and so, Bracegirdle’s name has become synonym to virtue and chastity, while Gwyn’s has been traditionally associated with sexual availability and promiscuity (Martínez-García and González 2015: 102). This identification of an actress with her role has come to be known as ‘public intimacy’, “a kind of public performance produced expressly for the purpose of stimulating theatrical consumption[,] [an] illusion [which] makes possible the creation of desire, familiarity and identification” (Luckhurst and Moody 2005: 5). Although the concept has only been articulated very recently, Restoration actresses and theatre managers were conscious of this connection and used it to their own advantage: the playwrights of the Restoration, “an age of the actor rather than the play” (Nussbaum 2005: 149), usually had one very specific actress in mind when creating certain characters, a practice that not only exploited ‘public intimacy’ but which also resulted in the creation of modern celebrity. Thus, although this “strategic elision of public and intimate knowledge and the deliberate exposure of supposedly private information for the purpose of cultivating an alluring image” (Luckhurst and Moody 2005: 6) explains her status as one of the earliest celebrities and explains her success as a public figure, it also buries the real historical and biographical facts of Gwyn’s life, making it increasingly difficult for historians and literary critics to discern between the truth and the legend, between the real woman and the created persona.

Despite these attempts at capitalising on their celebrity status, female actresses, and specially Nell as a public adulteress, were perceived as threats to the established gender order that dictated the rule of men over women. Nell not only escaped the authority of men in her invasion of the public sphere, but she also

defied the established gender notions of the deployment of sexuality which portrayed women as naturally shy, virtuous and domestic. As an actress, Nell Gwyn defied these strict gender divisions and publicly displayed what was supposed to be a private sexuality. Thus, once the disruptive potential of the actress was perceived and in an attempt to reduce the power that these women had, “the lower-class background of the most promiscuous actresses is stressed, even exaggerated” (Straub 1992: 90), as is the case of the story claiming that not only was Gwyn’s mother a brothel keeper, but that she was uncertain which of the many soldiers she had been intimate with was Nell’s father. This strategy of identifying female performers with prostitutes and the insistence on referencing their sexuality as public became one of the most common weapons used against them in a battle to control and restrain the agency and power of these public performers and it continues to be the defining characteristic of early actresses, becoming the central axis of several attempts at reconstructing women like Nell Gwyn.

The Restoration can then be seen as the moment when modern ‘celebrity’ appeared, since this phenomenon was the result of the intersection of Charles’s permissiveness and willingness to allow women a higher degree of freedom and movement as well as a transitional period in the understanding and articulation of gender roles. In fact, many critics have argued that the Restoration is an in-betweenness, a moment of reformulation and questioning of the gender roles of feudalism and the modern era, a point in history when notions of gender were contested, interrogated and disrupted. This was the context in which actresses became the first ‘It-Girls’, the first ‘influencers’, because they were, at once, fascinating and repulsive in their visibility and in their betrayal of gender roles. Public intimacy ensured that the private lives of these women became as public as their bodies, a characteristic of modern celebrity, where the lines between private – public / real – imagined become blurred. Furthermore, Gwyn’s affair with the King has become the stuff of legend and speculation due to the marketing of the affair as a rags-to-riches tale of triumph of a working-class girl, a Cinderella story that can be easily transferred from one historical period to the other without losing any of its strength or appeal (Martínez-García 2017: 217).

## The Early Rewritings: The Merry Urchin Turned English Rose

Despite the less-than-flattering portrait that the early sources paint of Gwyn, she broke the geographical and temporal boundaries and became a part of the public imagination, as her appearance in the American classic *Huckleberry Finn* shows.

The work, published in 1884, is considered one of the Great American novels and it is certainly one of the best-known works written by Mark Twain. It narrates the adventures of Huckleberry Finn an escaped teenager who sails down the Mississippi river with the slave Jim. The novel is a satire which criticises racism, classism and other social attitudes that the author considered harmful and reproachable. At a certain point in the novel, Huckleberry Finn tries to show Jim what he has learned in his history lessons and summarises British history thus, “My, you ought to have seen old Henry the Eighth when he was in bloom. He used to marry a new wife every day and chop off her head next morning ‘Fetch up Nell Gwyn,’ he says. They fetch her up. Next morning, ‘Chop off her head!’ And they chop it off” (Twain 1994: 116). Although the runaway’s grasp of history is tenuous, the fact that the King’s mistress’s name found its way into a conversation between a runaway and a slave in a North American town two hundred years after her death seems to confirm her status as one of the first celebrities and a character that was at once both admired and revered as part of the pantheon of fame and still close to the common people thanks to her rags-to-riches story and her supposed humble origins and ordinariness; in short, she was “the first people’s princess” (Beauclerk 2005: xiii).

This expression, which entered the public vocabulary in 1997 when Prime Minister Tony Blair used it to describe Diana, Princess of Wales, after her death in a car accident, continues to be used to refer to her even in academic articles, although it has also been used in reference to other women, like Nell Gwyn herself. The implication of such a name is that “despite her personal moral failures, psychological struggles, and clashes with the house of Windsor, Diana was seen as one who reached out to help those less fortunate. These actions made her a heroine to many admirers who sought to protect her reputation” (Brown, Basil and Bacornea 2003: 588). Thus, the term ‘people’s princess’ immediately activates connections to the ‘feminine’ qualities of charity and goodness, while it also puts these positive traits in the public eye as a means to atone for or disguise any possible shortcomings, ‘misbehaviours’ or deviations from the norm. Consequently, referring to Nell Gwyn as ‘the first people’s princess’ would not only emphasise her positive ‘feminine’ traits while hiding more reprehensible actions, but it would also place the Restoration actress in the same category of celebrity as one of the world’s most beloved historical figures (Kear and Steinberg 1999: 68; McGuigan 2000: 1).

The fascination with her character continued in to the twentieth century when her story was revived for the big screen. After a first attempt at adapting the novel written by Marjorie Bowen starring Dorothy Gish (1926), Herbert Wilcox, one of Britain’s best-known directors, shot a new version of the royal affair in 1934. His feature film is reported to have been a box-office hit at the time (Wilcox 1969: 101–102), a “rollicking good costume romp which maintains a very good sense of the period” (Wilcox 1934). In the early twentieth century Restoration comedies of manners were

seen as a minor genre, a let-down after the golden age of Shakespeare. The critics of the time, following the fashion of eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century commentators, saw no literary worth in these pieces (or the period for that matter) regarding them as worthless save for the information they provided on mundane matters such as costumes, customs and fashion. This tendency to disregard Restoration comedy as a frivolous and empty genre can be clearly seen in Wilcox's film, which sometimes moves towards the vaudeville and the farce (Martínez-García 2016a: 134) delighting in the detailed reproduction of the clothes of the Restoration, on what they perceived to be an exaggerated and bombastic period of British history.

The film opens with the King surrounded by his council, claiming his intention of using his government to "restore [Britain's] good nature, good manners and good humour" (Wilcox 1934: 3:44) all of which (except for the manners) are qualities Wilcox's Nell Gwyn seems to possess. This scene introduces the King to the audience and already hints at his characterisation: Wilcox, whose historical films were usually pieces of propaganda used to defend national pride and the importance of the Crown (Martínez-García 2016a: 139), presents Charles as a serious man rather than the 'Merry Monarch'. In fact, the film portrays the King as a man burdened by the difficult task of ruling the country and displaying a gravity that contrasts with the lightness of his paramour. His relationship with women, which has been traditionally associated with an effeminate behaviour and lack of ability to control the realm, is totally glossed over in this film which was intended as a piece of propaganda which would help English subjects recover faith in its Monarchy during the interwar periods. Thus, the King's masculinity and all the qualities traditionally associated with it (seriousness, temperance, control over one's emotions, civility and reason) are emphasised in the film, while the traditional view of Charles as emasculated by his desire and frivolity is completely ignored.

In this film Nell is presented as a merry urchin, always ready to laugh and jest and more than willing to show her physical assets. She is always the centre of attention with her jokes and sharp wit, reminding us of the madcap roles she played onstage; in fact, we often see Nell winking at us viewers or confiding in us, as she would have done with audiences in the theatre, in a move that seems to be designed to encourage public intimacy. Charles feels attracted to Nell's childish enjoyment of life and exhibits a paternalistic delight towards all her antics.

The film revolves around the rivalry between Nell and The Duchess of Portsmouth who engage in a war for the attention of the King, who, busy ruling the country, never really intervenes. Although Nell's base origins are insisted on several times to justify her lack of regard for etiquette, her actions in this battle are rather innocuous. It is rather an infantile and childish behaviour intended to endear Nell to both the King and the viewers. This is reflected in two of Nell's most common

gestures: turning to the camera, looking straight into it and frowning after she has been insulted or sticking her tongue at people who interfere with her wishes.

After a comical confrontation with Portsmouth in which the King discovers her to be a scheming shrew, the tone of the film and the relationship between the couple becomes more serious and settled: as an introduction, we read Samuel Pepys's fictional diary entry detailing that Nell and the King stayed together for many years and he was surprised to find such love and constancy, a passage that highlights Nell's traditionally feminine attributes. This shift mirrors the structure of traditional reform or romantic comedies, where the last act restores order through marriage, an institution that normalises any abnormal behaviour erasing all immorality from the lives and memories of characters and audiences. This goodness and tenderness is emphasised both within the film and outside: not only does Wilcox include Nell helping maimed soldiers both before and after becoming the King's mistress (1934: 4:24–5:35; 53:30), but the actress chosen to play the role of the orange seller, Anna Neagle, also serves to buttress the refashioning of the 'Protestant Whore' into a nurturing and innocent woman.

Anna Neagle, Wilcox's wife, was one of the most successful British actresses of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; she starred in Wilcox's historical films, playing such emblematic parts as Queen Victoria in *Victoria The Great* (1937) and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), two of Wilcox's most successful historical films which presented audiences with "a reverent depiction of monarchy [...] a nationalistic notion of Britishness which is articulated by reference to Victorianism and the Empire" (Street 1997: 41–42). The director's political agenda with these films is clear: to "assert the need for national unity [...] in response to different circumstances" (Chapman 2005: 64) and paint "Britain as a collective community" (Street 1997: 40) that not only confronts the problems head on, but who prevails and flourishes even in dark times.

Neagle soon became known to the British public as the emblematic Queen Victoria and her dramatic performances, coupled with the strength of the message of the films and a shrewd marketing campaign, earned her the favour of the British public, who came to view her, through careful selection of her roles and of the information about her life that was leaked to the press, as "national emblem [...] by her portrayal of Britannia-like women [...] ordinary women transformed into heroines by extraordinary wartime circumstances" (Street 1997: 127). During her lifetime, Neagle cultivated an image of respectability and purity which meant that "gossip columns rarely mentioned [her] or discussed her in sexual terms, reassuring the public that good British girls were not 'like that'" (Street 1997: 120), painting her as the epitome of purity and morality and equating these qualities with the English national identity of the characters that she was best remembered for. Consequently, her good nature, her purity and modesty became synonyms of Englishness as much as Neagle herself, who was described at the time as a more powerful sym-



bol of England than the white cliffs of Dover (Martínez-García 2016a: 134). Thus, the public intimacy that had ensured Nell's characterization as a madcap character, also meant that all characters played by Neagle suddenly acquired a sheen of respectability, innocence and morality, qualities that the actress herself embodied and which seemed to be transferred to her characters (Martínez-García 2016a: 139).

The film closes with the death of the King, which completes Nell's transformation into a romantic heroine. Informed of the sickness of the King, Nell rushes to him in her nightgown, while Portsmouth saves her jewels and riches and flees for France (*Nell* 1934: 80:01) confirming her ruthless and selfish character and buttressing Pepys's perceptions of Charles's mistresses as self-serving and ambitious (Pepys 1870: 434), two characteristics that made them unfeminine by the standards of the deployment of sexuality which claimed women were naturally inclined to nurture and care of others (Fletcher 1999: 136). Nell is not allowed entrance to the King's bedchamber and cannot say goodbye to him. In an attempt at emphasising the solitude both lovers feel, the film closes with an image of the dead Charles alone in his bed while his court is hailing the new King, while Nell walks in the corridors of Whitehall, desolate after the death of her true love.

This comedy takes two potentially dangerous and subversive elements (the 'Merry Monarch' and the actress) as starting points and tames them into conformity to disseminate and spread the director's own political and ideological agenda: while the image of a hedonistic King would have been subversive in its negation of the typically masculine attributes of seriousness and gravity, Wilcox's representation of Charles buttresses the established gender roles and appeals to a nationalistic feeling of admiration for the monarchy, at a time (the interwar period) when the national identity of the country was suffering a deep crisis (Martínez-García 2016a: 136). Nell, by virtue of her profession and due to her affair with the King, bends class and gender boundaries threatening the established gender order. To neutralise this threat, Wilcox turns her into a docile archetype of ideal femininity tamed into normativity by love: she is turned into the true English Rose (Martínez-García 2016a: 139), a stereotype associated with a set of patriarchal notions of national identity and femininity which not only refer to the appearance of the woman (fair, long hair, peaches and cream complexion) (Gundle 2008: 137), but which also refers to her behaviour and attitude of submission and obedience, of containment and restraint, what Stephen Gundle calls "performative stillness" (2008: 137) and general passivity.



## The Twenty-First Century and The Romantic Myth: Cinderella and Prince Charming

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen an explosion in the genre of historical novels and films (Johnson 2005: 1; de Groot 2009), a genre that is by no means new (Shaw 1983: 19–50) but which is being repurposed by contemporary society: Professor Diana Wallace, in her book on the origins and development of historical fiction written by women argues that the historical novel is now seen as a tool which “allow[s] them [women writers] to invent or re-imagine [...] the unrecorded lives of marginalised and subordinated people, especially women” (2004: 2). We find many instances of these in the twenty-first century, such as Philippa Gregory’s successful *Tudor and Plantagenet* book series, which tells the forgotten stories of the women who married into these powerful families. Her novels focus on the lives of the English Queens from Elizabeth Woodville to Queen Elizabeth I; with her works, Gregory tries to give voice to a group of women who, up to this moment, had been silent. Although the historical rigour of her works has been put into question by critics (Davies 2013), the fifteen novels bear witness to the strength of this new literary (and filmic subgenre): the historical romance.

The first case study is Richard Eyre’s *Stage Beauty* (2005), a film which focuses on the disruptive consequences that the irruption of female performers had for the identity and mental stability of the male actors who had traditionally played female roles on the Restoration stage. King Charles and Nell Gwyn are secondary characters in a story that centres its attention on Ned Kynaston (Billy Cudrup) and Maria (Claire Danes), his dresser and the first English actress (according to the film). Still, the Merry Monarch and his mistress prove instrumental to the development of the story. Although the director changes chronologies and presents Nell not as an actress but simply as Charles’s mistress during a time when men were still allowed to play female roles, the former Orange Seller is portrayed as ultimately responsible for the passing of the bill which prevented men from playing female roles.

Nell, whose first appearance in the film is onstage, naked, singing about men not being able to resist “such mighty, mighty charms” (Eyre 2005: 27:55), is portrayed following the legends that talked about her as a rough, unschooled and common woman whose table manners and lack of regard for etiquette amuse the King and astonish his courtiers (Eyre 2005: 29:27–29:41; 31:14–31:35). Eyre seems to have taken the most salacious anecdotes as the basis for his construction of the Orange Seller, for he has her declaring she is ignorant of her own origins and admitting to her past as a prostitute, in one single breath, “Me mum was a whore, my father in the navy. That’s why I never don’t do sailors” (Eyre 2005: 31:07–31:17). This admis-

sion is not just reminiscent of the accusations of Restoration pamphlets, but it also seems to justify Nell's confident use of her body to achieve her goals and the King's weak resolve when confronted with the prospect of sex. In fact, when Nell learns of the King's hesitation about passing a law to forbid men from playing female roles she convinces him using her 'feminine' weapons: pouting, using pet names for the King and, ultimately, providing oral sex in exchange for his agreement (Eyre 2005: 47:44–49:15). This scene seems to follow traditional histories about Charles's mistresses, such as the already mentioned passage in Pepys's diary in which he claims that Castlemaine "hath all the tricks of Aretin that are to be practised to give pleasure" (Pepys 1870: 183), where Aretin refers to Pietro Aretino, an Italian author traditionally associated with the pornographic and erotic literature of the Renaissance and which implies that Castlemaine, albeit a woman of the nobility, was not above using sex to obtain what she wanted.

In the film, Gwyn is painted as a master manipulator who puts on a mask of ignorance and uncouthness to hide her true nature following the tradition that follows Pepys' stories of the plots and quarrels between Charles and his mistresses; this portrayal seems to contradict much of the information from sources which painted Nell as a generous woman who had no personal ambition at all: Peter Cunningham argues that Gwyn is much beloved in Britain, the original people's princess, because there is "the popular impression that, with all her failings, she had a generous as well as a tender heart; that, when raised from poverty, she reserved her wealth for others rather than herself; and that the influence she possessed was often exercised for good objects, and never abused" (2009: 2). Even Aphra Behn highlights that her generosity meant she rejected all attempts at elevating her in favour of her own children, an action that buttresses her image not only as a selfless person, but as a devoted mother.<sup>4</sup> These positive qualities were also an essential part of Wilcox's portrayal of Nell as a merry urchin, for they redeemed her of her many sins. While Eyre first seems to paint Nell as ambitious, we soon learn that all her efforts are not selfish, but a way to help aspiring and

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4 "And who can doubt the Power of that Illustrious Beauty, the Charms of that tongue, and the greatness of that minde, who has subdu'd the most powerfull and Glorious Monarch of the world: And so well you bear the honours your were born for, with a greatness so unaffected, an affability so easie, an Humor so soft, so far from Pride or Vanity, that the most Envious & most disaffected can finde no cause or reason to wish you less, Nor can Heaven give you more, who has exprest a particular care of you every way, and above all in bestowing on the world and you, two noble Branches, who have all the greatness and sweetness of their Royal and beautiful stock; and who give us too a hopeful Prospect of what their future Braveries will perform, when they shall shoot up and spread themselves to that degree, that all the lesser world may finde repose beneath their shades; and whom you have permitted to wear those glorious Titles which you your self Generously neglected, well knowing with the noble Poet; 'tis better far to merit Titles then to wear 'em" (Behn 1996: 87).

struggling actresses, like Maria; she even defends Maria when she is insulted after attempting to audition for a play “I had myself intended to audition today. But if this is how you treat women, well, mark me, sir, women shall lay blame. [...] This shall be remembered, Betterton” (Eyre 2005: 46:20–47:10). After this show of sorority, Nell ‘convinces’ Charles to pass a law to forbid men from playing female roles again. Thus, she is seen not as a calculating shrew, but as an intelligent and generous woman who uses her privileged position to help those that need it.

In this case Eyre portrays Charles II as the ‘Merry Monarch’, a drinker with a penchant for parties and cross-dressing; he is cynical and witty in his remarks as he shows when discussing homosexuality and acting with Kynaston, accusing priests of lewd sexual practices and eliciting the laughter of the courtiers.<sup>5</sup> Still, he also has a more serious side to his personality that usually comes out when talking about his past and his family.<sup>6</sup>

Still, in all the scenes in which he shows this serious side of his personality, the King soon seems to snap out of his reverie to then continue with the merry-making. It seems as if, having shown his more caring and loving side, the King feels the need to raise his façade of frivolity to avoid being labelled ‘unmanly’. Both Nell Gwyn and King Charles seem to be well-rounded characters, albeit secondary, in Eyre’s production; the lovers hide a deeper self that does not come out often and which appeals to twenty-first century audiences who can identify these two characters with the archetypal nurturing mother and the silent but sensitive man.

In 2011, two authors published novels with Nell Gwyn as the main character in rapid succession. Gillian Bagwell’s *The Darling Strumpet* and Priya Parmar’s *Exit the Actress*.

*The Darling Strumpet* seems to take a traditional approach to the characterisation of Gwyn, taking as its sources the pamphlets and anecdotes that portrayed Nell as promiscuous, of dubious origin and as a child-prostitute in search of a rich man. Although this approach is not innovative, in fact it is the same source that Wilcox took for his own reimagining of Nell, the immortal Orange seller, this work makes much of these stories, delighting in the most graphic and sometimes crude details of her sexual relations with a myriad of men. Bagwell insists on the de-

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<sup>5</sup> “Priests always preach about boys playing women. They say it leads to effeminacy and sodomy. Well, they’d know, they’re priests” (Eyre 2005: 1:05:10).

<sup>6</sup> The King usually falls into mournful reveries about his past when exile is mentioned: “When my father was alive, it had long been illegal for a woman to perform in public. In the Palace, of course, it was women galore. Private musicales, masques... No-one gave a damn. [...] And so, off with my father-s head. And I to Holland for 20 years” (Eyre 2005: 34:15) and “My astronomers tell me the star’s light shines on long after it has died. Even though it doesn’t know it. Exile is a dreadful thing for one who knows his rightful place” (Eyre 2005: 34:15).

pravity and cruelty of the men that surround the actress and she portrays her as a frivolous woman whose only aspiration is to wear fine clothes, even if it means turning to prostitution as a profession.<sup>7</sup>

The first chapter of the book sets the tone for the whole volume, as it follows Nell who is desperate to get enough money to buy herself some food and ribbons, even if it means selling her virginity at ten years old.<sup>8</sup> Although Bagwell's London seems to be a hostile place towards young women (Nell is gang raped by a group of youngsters right after her first sexual encounter), the author insists on Gwyn's *naïveté* and innocent frivolousness. She is presented as a harmless flirt whose innocent and immature desire for luxury are what ultimately lead her into the wrong path: first prostitution and then the stage and the beds of a multitude of men who, regardless of their social status, will use and abuse her body.

Bagwell's Nell is reified, turned into a plaything that powerful men can use and abuse, thus erasing all the subversiveness implicit in her being an actress. This objectification of a potentially dangerous woman is a way to rob her of her agency and individuality, as Straub explains: "the paradigm of the lower-class woman as commodity of the upper-class male contains the troublingly public sexuality of many actresses" (Straub 1992: 91) and tames them into normativity. This reification of the female body denies the actress any independence and assumes the traditional view of most Restoration histories that "actresses embarked on stage careers primarily to entice audience members into liaisons and even marriage, ignoring their theatrical skills and professional status as well as economic conditions that might drive some women to seek paid labour of all kinds" (Pullen 2005: 23). It seems that histories of the period imply that all actresses aspired to becoming the mistress of a wealthy man, an assumption that neutralises any agency she may exhibit when taking on the stage and exposing her body in public and Bagwell's Nell Gwyn is no exception.

Nell's life seems to consist of a succession of men who mistreat and abuse her until she meets the King, who not only treats her with respect, but with love. King Charles is presented as a livelier man than Wilcox's monarch, although he is still burdened by the weight of administering matters of state. Bagwell presents Nell as a

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7 "And that left only the choice that Rose had made, and their mother, too. Whoredom. [...] It was not so bad, Rose said. [...] Rose earned enough to get an occasional treat for Nell, and good clothes for herself. [...] What awe and craving Nell had felt upon seeing the first clothes Rose had bought [...] She had wanted them so desperately. But you couldn't wear shoes like that carting ashes or oysters through the mud of London's streets" (Bagwell 2011: 1).

8 "'I'll let you fuck me for sixpence,' she whispered. He gaped at her and for a moment she thought he was going to run away. But then, striving to look self-possessed, he nodded. 'I know where', she said. 'Follow me.'" (Bagwell 2011: 7).

safe haven for the King, a wife who patiently waits for him in his lodgings and who silently listens to his worries (Bagwell 2011: 388). In the second part of the novel, and after the first few months of their affair, the relationship between the King and Nell shifts from passionate coupling to a companionate marriage of sorts, and instead of the meticulous descriptions of their sexual encounters, Bagwell now paints vivid portrayals of domestic bliss and harmony. Once the children come, the King is portrayed as a devoted father and worried statesman, an idealised version of a man whose actions are more consistent with twenty-first-century ideas of manhood than with the reality of seventeenth-century Britain and the histories and testimonies of the life of King Charles that we have received. In Bagwell's novel, King Charles is not the dissolute and incapable ruler that Pepys presented in his diary, but an ideal version of the man of the deployment of sexuality, a fair ruler of his realm, a doting father and a loving husband (Fletcher 1999: 136).

The same way Wilcox manipulated the story and characters to serve his own propagandistic ends, Bagwell's novel is intended to be a fairy-tale story where the rough but good girl is pulled out of her miserable existence by a Prince Charming who spirits her away from a life of squalor and into a life of luxury and love. The characters of both Nell and Charles are idealised: the King is portrayed as a caring husband and father, a loyal lover and faithful, and Nell's past misdemeanours are forgiven as she proves she has all the ideal feminine qualities: nurture, motherhood, generosity and tenderness of heart. These character traits make up the ideal woman of the deployment of sexuality, the new social order that came to substitute medieval thinking and its ideas about the inferiority of women, and that will redeem Nell from her sins, as her confessor explains,

'I have led a wicked life and God has punished me' she said.

'How have you been wicked?' His voice was gentle, almost curious.

'Why, I have been whore to the king and born him two bastards. And whore to many men before that.' . . .

'Tell me,' Dr. Tenison asked, 'would you have married the king had you been able?'

'Of course,' Nell said.

'And were you true to him?'

'I was'

'Your relations with him were grievous sin. But you have shown that you have a Christian heart, by many deeds in the time that I have known you. And I have no doubt that there were many more in your life before that. You have shown charity for the poor, the sick, those who could not of their own accord make their lives better or more comfortable. And I know that you have done it out of concern for them, admonishing me frequently that no one should know the source of their help' (Bagwell 2011: 390).

Parmar's *Exit the Actress* presents us with a completely different couple: while Nell is transformed into a lady, the King does exhibit some of the exuberance sources attri-

buted to him and is often described as laughing and boyish. The novel includes correspondence between the King, his sister and even his mother who seem to be his closest confidantes, as explained by Wilson (2004); this is a detail that makes Parmar's King much more humane. The letters to his sister are full of endearments and expressions of love, making this version of the monarch quite different from the grave man portrayed by Wilcox and Bagwell. Not only do his mother and sister address the letters to him with endearments such as "Chérie" or sign as "Minnette" and "Maman" names that Royalty at the time were quite unlikely to use, but he addresses them as "my darling" and includes in his letters questions about health, family or advice on remedies for colds and other domestic issues (Parmar 2011: 50; 64:102; 165).

From the outset of the novel, Gwyn is a romantic heroine embodying the supposedly inherent feminine qualities that saved Bagwell's Nell from sin. Ellen, not Nell, is a brilliant child prodigy well-versed in languages and with a set of strict morals: "an innocent and educated woman who walks through the debauchery and squalor that surround her without it ever touching her" (Martínez-García 2016b: 188). Thus, Parmar's story is not a tale of redemption, but of a woman who claims her rightful place.

Parmar's novel closes with Ellen abandoning the theatre to become Charles's mistress with a self-possession and assurance that proves she has found her rightful place. This is not the charming urchin who wins the love of the hero, but a true Queen who has been born into the wrong family, but who will win her true place next to a man whose loving nature is demonstrated in his letters to his sister and in his tender messages to Gwyn. Such an ending seems to be an adaptation and domestication of the public personas of two transgressive figures, the King and his mistress, who are now presented as the hero and heroine of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century romantic novel which seems designed to cater to the gender roles of the society in which it was produced, but which also ignores and erases the subversive nature of the actual historical characters, to make them fit more comfortably into contemporary canonical gender roles.

## Conclusion

Although these four works present us with divergent versions of Gwyn, it is in the feminine qualities of motherhood, charity and love that they all converge to create a heroine that perfectly fits the Cinderella myth of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. All of them are inherently feminine and good and are ultimately rewarded with true love in a discourse that buttresses the traditional gender roles that tied women to the sensitive side of human beings. These four reimaginations of two characters with an enormous potential to destabilise the gender order, actually buttress

it. In the eyes of the Restoration, “the actress is an abnormality in her invasion of the public sphere, a woman who lacks natural modesty and who displays her body and self in a public arena” (Martínez-García 2016b: 191). These modern reimaginings of Gwyn transform her and move her towards the ‘angel/virgin’ side of the binary transforming her into a twenty-first-century romantic heroine. The Merry Monarch’s hedonism and libertinism would also be transgressive in his deconstruction of the image of the rational and contained man and the responsible, regal and grave monarch.

All the rewritings of Nell and Charles’s relationship analysed in this paper seem to be based on the widely popular courtesan plays of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century popularised by Mae West. Pullen explains that “the prostitute was generally a young, beautiful woman full of love and life. In many cases she was the centrepiece of the drama and except for her sexual taint, was the kind of carefree, lovely creature many women supposedly aspired to be” (2005: 11). In the rewritings explored in this paper we see those qualities in the actress turned mistress: her gaiety, good humour and wit help audiences identify with her and root for her success. Furthermore, Pullen continues explaining that in these plays, the prostitute “is initially shallow and greedy, but true love brings out her best instincts” (2005: 11) in a narrative twist which is present in all of the re-tellings of the Royal affair studied in this paper. Although Pullen explains that, traditionally, these courtesan narratives would end with the death of the prostitute in a selfless sacrifice that would ensure the good name of her family (2005: 11), the stories analysed in this paper require no such sacrifice, as the female protagonist is redeemed from her moral flaws through the positive feminine qualities that she innately possesses, a different, but equally successful, strategy used to neutralise the subversive potential of Nell Gwyn’s contradictory nature: “she is simultaneously dangerous and pathetic [...] she is free from moral constraints but is always a criminal [...] she has the accoutrements of wealth and luxury, but is always lower class” (Pullen 2005: 5), she is fascinatingly enticing but also disgustingly amoral, she is powerful, yet at the mercy of her lovers, she is a woman yet she betrays her ‘natural’ preference for discretion and a private life.

Despite their extremely different starting points and somewhat varying endings these works all bear witness to the fascination that the binary Charles / Nell exerted and still exerts in audiences and the attraction of ‘public intimacy’. Still, and despite many possible interpretations and revampings of these historical figures, most authors choose to reimagine and transform them into a romantic couple that embodies the archetypal roles of caring female and protective male, a technique that has buried their real selves under layers of reinterpretation and which has transformed two potentially subversive characters into a sentimental couple, a Prince Charming and his Cinderella, so that they fit more comfortably into the dominant discourses of gender at work in our society.



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