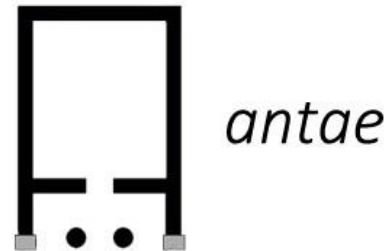


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Nell Gwyn's many after-lives: Taming 'the Protestant Whore' in 21st century popular fiction

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Ever since her supposed self-fashioning as 'the Protestant Whore' in the 1660s, Nell Gwyn has become a figure of fascination, revamped and reinterpreted in a multitude of ways: from the black and white films of the 1930s, to her cameos in historical drama, the story of this Restoration Orange Seller turned Royal concubine continues to excite the imagination not just of film makers, but of novelists, artists and even jam makers nowadays, as much as it inflamed Restoration audiences.¹ The aim of this paper is to analyse the discourse that lays at the basis of three modern-day reconstructions of Nell Gwyn's figure in an attempt at drawing a connection between celebrity, pop culture and historical fiction so as to explain the reimagining of this actress turned Royal concubine as an innocent strumpet,² a scheming shrew,³ a dignified lady⁴ and all things in between; this paper takes ideas on celebrity and historical fiction as the theoretical basis upon which to build the criticism of these revampings of Nell Gwyn, in order to better understand the survival of her figure three centuries after her death and the myriad of after-lives authors have imagined for her.

The arrival of the female performer to the British stage provoked mixed feelings in an audience living through one of the most radical ideological shifts in the history of humanity. As Michel Foucault points out, this is the moment when a new system (deployment of sexuality) obsessed with the ordering of society and the classification of individuals in binary opposites (sane/insane, healthy/sick, man/woman) comes to replace the violently hierarchical feudal system (deployment of alliance) that had dominated society until then.⁵ The new ideology of gender drew clear boundaries between the sexes, justified by the findings of scientific research, which emphasised the biological differences between male and female as its basis for gender order and its clear-cut division between private and public.⁶

The new social system not only insisted on highlighting the biological differences between men and women, rather than pointing towards the superiority of one over the other, but, and much more interestingly, outlined the proper behaviour expected from both sexes, behaviour that supposedly stemmed from each gender's "inherent" and "natural" tendencies, inclinations, dispositions and abilities. Thus, as Butler explains, gender becomes a social construct, a

¹ Alison Conway, *The Protestant Whore: Courtesan Narrative and Religious Controversy in England, 1680-1750* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 4.

² Gillian Bagwell, *The Darling Strumpet* (London: Avon, 2011).

³ Richard Eyre, *Stage Beauty* (Lions Gate, 2005).

⁴ Priya Parmar, *Exit the Actress* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2011).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (London: Random House, 1990), p. 106.

⁶ See Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

performance and a set of highly coded behavioural practices that hide behind the mask of nature and biological imperatives.⁷ This is evidenced in the proliferation of books and documents that encode gendered behaviour and give lessons on proper deportment and social practices.

These discourses that try to naturalise certain gendered behaviours preach and buttress the model of the two-spheres: the domestic sphere, where women could better develop their sensitive, nurturing and discreet selves and the public sphere, where manly rationality and strength could be displayed to advantage. Thus, the deployment of sexuality insisted on the need to observe certain normal behaviours stemming from the supposed “innate” qualities that made men and women better equipped for a public or private life respectively; using scientific discovery and Nature as a means to preach a set of allowed/forbidden social practices ensured the subjection of the vast majority of individuals to the power of a select group of individuals.

In this sense, the “behaviour” of the actress fell into the category of the aberrant, as a rebellious creature whose conduct and insistence on publicly displaying her private body went against the “rules of Nature”. For 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. As professional players and women, actresses ‘were caught in crosscurrents that defined their sexuality as public by profession and private by gender’⁸ and they soon became the locus of contradiction, figures that both fascinated and repelled men and women in their violation of established gender roles, ‘afford[ing] unprecedented models of public display as they confronted the social and theatrical strictures that traditional femininity imposed’.⁹

Furthermore, the Restoration, ‘an age of the actor rather than the play’, meant that actresses specialised in certain roles which the public came to identify with their real and private selves.¹⁰ Hence, Bracegirdle, the romantic heroine, was seen by the public as virtuous and chaste like the heroines she played onstage,¹¹ while Nell Gwyn, who excelled at portraying madcaps,¹² was seen as lewd and sexually available, thus confirming Wilson’s idea that ‘sexual behaviour could contaminate an actress’s performance and determine her success’.¹³ This identification between the actor and his/her roles onstage was encouraged by theatre managers and the performers themselves, who saw the opportunity to capitalise on what is known as “public intimacy”, ‘a kind of public performance produced expressly for the purpose of stimulating

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 33.

⁸ Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 90.

⁹ Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 9.

¹⁰ Felicity Nussbaum, ‘Actresses and the Economics of Celebrity, 1700-1800’, in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 148–68, p. 149.

¹¹ Raquel Serrano González and Laura Martínez-García, ‘How to Represent Female Identity on the Restoration Stage: Actresses (Self) Fashioning’, *International Studies. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, 16.1 (2015), 97–110 (p. 104). <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2478/ipcj-2014-0007>> [accessed 22 August, 2016].

¹² Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 72.

¹³ Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, p. 9.

theatrical consumption [an] illusion [which] makes possible the creation of desire, familiarity and identification.¹⁴ The selling of intimacy and the deliberate confusion of the on/off-stage persona of the performer was not an exclusively feminine practice, since many were the male performers who came to inhabit the same roles on and off stage, but the effect in audiences was all the more powerful in the case of women, since 'the spectators' fantasies of intimacy with actresses' theatrical and social being were more intensely eroticized'.¹⁵

Thus, although many critics have argued that male and female performers became, after the Restoration, the object of public interest and gossip, it is undeniable that the "celebrity" phenomenon came as a consequence of the irruption of female performers onto the British stage and the fascinating game of appearances and reality that their display of the private body in a public arena entailed: with the reopening of theatres and the interest King Charles and his entourage took in them, Restoration actresses soon became an object of fascination for the general public, who avidly consumed any information relating to the lives of these performers outside the theatre. This kick-started the celebrity movement which has become one of the most lucrative industries of all-time, thanks to 'its claim to represent a "private" and therefore more authentic life presumed to reside behind the glittering surface of celebrity lifestyle.'¹⁶

The "democratisation" of printed works in the 17th-century also contributed to the development of the celebrity culture, since it allowed for the continued presence of actresses outside the theatre, thanks to the printing of 'visual and written portraits [which] helped to shape the identity of [...] [these] women as "goddesses", tragic and comic heroines, models of feminine virtue, objects of erotic fantasy, shrewd self-publicists and even agents of transgression'.¹⁷ Thus, in the absence of the celebrity, substitute images of the woman and real or imaged stories about her life were circulated, to the point which some of these stories have transcended the realm of legend or anecdote to become "historical" facts and unequivocal data upon which to build the life-stories of the first English actresses.¹⁸

Nell Gwyn's fame during her lifetime can be thus explained by the birth of the celebrity phenomenon, but the question is why does she, five centuries later, still continue to fascinate audiences and the creators of popular fictions like the ones studied here? The reason for the resilience of Nell's popularity is the idea of "difference" that underlies all manifestations of historical fiction; as de Groot explains, 'the figures that we meet in historical fiction are identifiable to us, on the one hand [...] in that they speak the same language, and their concerns

¹⁴ Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody, *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁵ Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, 2nd edition (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 214.

¹⁷ Gillian Perry, Joseph R Roach and Shearer West, *The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 13.

¹⁸ Joseph Roach, 'Celebrity Erotics: Pepys, Performance, and Painted Ladies', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16.1 (2003), 211–30 (p. 223).

are often similar to ours, but their situations and their surroundings are immensely different' which makes it easier for us to become interested and invested in their life-stories.¹⁹

Nell's love story with King Charles does not offer anything new, but her circumstances and historical background make her interesting: not only are Gwyn's family origins obscure, but Restoration history itself is sketchy at best, since 'it is written primarily through the articulation of well-known anecdotes' such as Pepys's diary entries.²⁰ Still, as de Groot explains, these gaps between the hard evidence and fact are precisely the stuff historical fiction is made of,²¹ and the less verifiable the event the more fruitful it proves to be for the creators of historical fictions, who can then create their own version of the events in an attempt at either confirming the dominant discourses or questioning of such truths thus giving voice to marginalised groups,²² since historical fiction has the potential to 'report from places made marginal and present a dissident or dissenting account of the past'.²³

Before the 17th century, remembrance after death through portraiture or biography was a privilege of the Royal family and the aristocracy, and it seems that afterlives were meant only for the social elites. With the democratisation of the printed media, and the appearance of the celebrity movement of the 18th century, came the popularisation of these practises, of these remembrance devices that, in the case of celebrities like Nell Gwyn, were not meant just for her family and friends, but for the public at large, so that the whole of London could remember and rewrite her again and again through the circulation of her image and her story. The appearance of a mass print market thus dramatically changed collective memory, which no longer was a social privilege but within the reach of all, and women like Gwyn now 'appear in imagination and memory [...] living on a mental mélange of half-remembered public appearances, painted or graphic portraits and bits of anecdotal gossip', which result in a wealth of reinterpretations and revampings of her life, in a myriad of afterlives that allow her memory to live on.²⁴

Both Gwyn's life, with its great gaps and conjectures, and her times, with their political uncertainty, their shift of gender roles and the appearance of actresses in public life, makes for an extremely fertile ground upon which to create novel and interesting retellings of Nell's story, to reimagine her life after her death. Our focus will be on two novels (*The Darling Strumpet* by Gillian Bagwell and *Exit the Actress* by Priya Parmar) and one film (*Stage Beauty* directed by Richard Eyre) which not only offer interesting insights into historical fiction and the

¹⁹ *The Historical Novel, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 3.

²⁰ Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 25.

²¹ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 264.

²² D. Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 2.

²³ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, p. 139.

²⁴ Perry, Roach and West, p. 63.

celebrity phenomenon but into our interpretation of times past, the reconstruction of lives after death and into the changing face of collective memory.

1. From the Protestant Whore to the romantic heroine: *The Darling Strumpet*

Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet* (2011) takes the traditional stories of Nell's wild childhood as a base and portrays her as a sexually precocious child; although the idea is not new, for the rumours she uses as base for her story have been featured in the majority of Nell's biographical accounts since the 17th century, this novel takes a coarser approach to Nell's figure. Gwyn's trip into prostitution starts at the age of ten, coinciding with the King's triumphant entrance into London; during the celebrations, a young Nell covets the fineries of the Royal entourage.²⁵ She finally manages to buy herself a ribbon after selling her virginity to an eager youth²⁶ to then join a group of apprentices who offer her a vast quantity of money in exchange for her favours, but actually end up gang-raping her, to then steal her money leaving her in the streets.²⁷ With these opening scenes, Bagwell sets the tone for the whole novel, which will feature multiple scenes of more or less consensual and explicit sex with a myriad of men.

After her experience, Nell starts working in a brothel, where the author treats us again to a tale of violence and rape;²⁸ Nell is still described as an air-head who, in spite of leading a harsh life, still revels on the fine clothes she now wears,²⁹ blossoming under male attention.³⁰ Bagwell paints Nell as easily distracted by luxury, frivolous and thoughtless, but still likeable because, although she is surrounded by vice and squalor, she manages to retain her exuberant and childish innocence.

Her experience in the brothel is cut short when a young apprentice "saves" her and whisks her away to his house;³¹ she then becomes a stay-at-home wife, a role she cannot settle into or like, for the domestic life she now leads lack all the brilliance, excitement and luxury Nell craves, and 'before long, she found that the sameness of her days grew tedious.'³² In a clear contradiction of the gender notion that women's natural habitat is the home, and instead of painting Nell as the ideal woman of the deployment of sexuality, Bagwell shows us the unnatural behaviour books advised against, the unwomanly behaviour of those females on the opposite side of the angel/whore dichotomy at work during the Restoration.³³

²⁵ 'She looked carefully, memorising every detail, and longed to be like her—gorgeously dressed, elegant, and at ease before the adoring crowds.' Bagwell, pp. 11–13.

²⁶ 'Nell looked down and stroked the streamers. Even hanging on the rough brown wool, the gleaming ribbons were beautiful, and she wished that she could see herself.' *ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 16–18.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁹ 'Its fabric was finer by far than any she had ever worn.' *ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 31–35.

³¹ "'Come and live with me. He cannot come to you there. I will take care of you.'" *ibid.*, p. 64.

³² *ibid.*, p. 66.

³³ Gilli Bush-Bailey, 'Revolution, Legislation and Autonomy', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 15–32 (pp. 12–13).

Nell, who displays her irresponsibility and lack of feminine virtue in her disinterest in all domestic matters and chores and in her love of the merry company of the theatre people, leaves Robbie to become an Orange-Seller, a job she excels at due to her air-headedness, knack for sexual banter, and love of male admiration and which gives her a sense of independence and freedom.³⁴

From orange selling, Nell soon moves to acting, guided by Charles Hart; Bagwell continues to portray Nell as thoughtless when she narrates an event that is based in one of the best-known anecdotes surrounding Nell's life: as Pritchard explains, 'Lord Buckhurst had taken a little actress, Nell Gwyn; Charles Sackville got her from the actor Charles Hart, before in turn passing her on in 1668 to the king, who became, as she cheerfully remarked, her Charles III'.³⁵ Thus, Sackville takes Nell away from the theatre to become his (and his friend's) mistress and Bagwell continues her detailed descriptions of their sexual encounters with the two men and with their weekend guest, Rochester, who is to be her instructor in all matters sexual.³⁶ In this instance, the narrative is far less lurid and more sensual instead, either because Nell has willingly accepted the relationship or due to the influence of Restoration ideas preaching that lower classes had a more wicked and savage sexual drive, while their 'betters' were able to restrain such urges.³⁷

Although Nell feels powerful in the allure she has over the two men³⁸, Bagwell portrays her as an object, lacking all agency for she is passed from one man to the other and remains obedient and subservient in all these sexual encounters.³⁹ Furthermore, she is dismissed and sent away in disgrace once her two lovers learn that she has had relations with Rochester.⁴⁰ This characterisation of Nell as an object which is discarded after she has served her purpose paints a picture that completely cancels out the subversive potential her social climbing might have carried. As Straub points out, 'the paradigm of the lower-class woman as commodity of the upper-class male contains the troublingly public sexuality of many actresses' and ultimately serves as a way to limit her transgression of gender and class boundaries.⁴¹

Nell is painted as lost and lacking focus or direction, unable to repair her relationship with Hart until she finds the anchor she seems to need in her relationship with King Charles; at this point in the novel, Bagwell abruptly stops the flow of detailed descriptions of sexual intercourse and substitutes these scenes with tableaux of domestic bliss in which the two lovers behave like a happily married couple.⁴² This is the moment when the narration turns towards the blissful part

³⁴ 'This felt much different from her interactions with men at Madam Ross's. There, she had had no choice.' Bagwell, p. 81.

³⁵ *Passion For Living: John Wilmot Earl of Rochester* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2012), p. 39.

³⁶ Bagwell, p. 162.

³⁷ Straub, p. 90.

³⁸ 'He wanted her to show herself, she saw. To let Sedley see his new toy. She felt a surge of power at their rapt attention'. Bagwell, p. 165.

³⁹ 'Dorset had taken possession of his new property the previous night after supper, after laying out a down payment of ten pounds.' *ibid.*, p. 162.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴¹ Straub, p. 91.

⁴² 'The king's bedchamber was cosy, the blazing fire and dancing candlelight driving the shadows into the corners. Nell and Charles were propped against the pillows in the big bed.' Bagwell, p. 218.

of the fairy-tale: the same way Cinderella had to endure the mockery and vexations of her stepmother and sisters, Nell has had to experience violence, shame and rejection, so as to lose her childish vanity and thoughtlessness, while still maintaining her charm, innocence and good nature. It is at this point in the story that Nell is ready for the domesticity she previously found boring and it is at this point that she is ready to embrace her "womanhood".

The turning point in Nell's transformation is the arrival of children: not only do they turn the unthinking frivolous flirt into a devoted mother and "wife" but they also serve to buttress the traditional idea that women were inherently prone to nurture and care. Nell abandons public life to devote herself to her "husband" children and to those friends who have fallen into hard times, turning her house into the proverbial safe haven to which they can all retire in search of warmth, nurture and care, very much like the domestic tableaux that Coventry Patmore described.⁴³

Bagwell's novel is, without a doubt, a tale of sin and redemption, a Cinderella story in which the uneducated but innately feminine girl is saved by "Prince Charming", pulled out of her misery and taken away to become his "wife." As it happened with Wilcox's Nell, Bagwell's actress sees all her past misdemeanours forgiven because she proves she has all the ideal feminine qualities, which help her atone for those less attractive feminine traits of vanity and lust. In fact, towards the end of the book, we find Nell talking to her confessor, who explicitly tells her that the 'purity' of her love for Charles and her loyalty to him, and her charity and kindness, innately feminine qualities, cancel out any sin she may have committed in her youth:

'I have lived a wicked life and for this, God has punished me'. . . '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'.⁴⁴

2. Creating the child-prodigy: *Exit the Actress*

Parmar's *Enter the Actress* (2011) presents us with a completely different Nell: a true romantic heroine from the start, who embodies all the qualities women inherently possessed from beginning to end. The author turns Nell's father into a gentleman soldier, thus raising her family to a more respectable position, trying to "clean" Ellen's history by separating her from the lewd

⁴³ Coventry Kersey Dighton Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: Macmillan, 1863).

⁴⁴ Bagwell, pp. 390–91.

behaviour of the poorer inhabitants of London, and thus offering an explanation for the radical transformation of the protagonist.⁴⁵ While legend had portrayed Nell as illiterate, having ‘never even learnt to sign her name’,⁴⁶ Parmar paints her as studious under the guidance of her grandfather first⁴⁷ and Charles Hart next,⁴⁸ a perfect example of the potential to re-imagine the past that historical fiction offers.

This portrayal of Ellen as candid, intelligent and cultivated, allows Parmar the opportunity to create a new story and character: as an innocent and educated woman, Ellen walks through the debauchery and squalor that surround her, without it ever touching her. While Bagwell’s Nell and most of the legends about her agree that Gwyn did spend part of her childhood in the brothel, such experience is absent from Parmar’s story, but seem to horrify her heroine,⁴⁹ who cannot understand her sister Rose, who rejects a young and devoted suitor for the finery and ‘excitement’ of the whore-house.⁵⁰ Instead of spending her time with prostitutes, sailors and drunks, Ellen attends conferences⁵¹ with her grandfather and worries about her education: ‘these are not very auspicious opening lines, nothing of the elegant, eloquent young woman I hope to be.’⁵²

Parmar takes advantage of the fact that the rumours about Nell’s early incursion into prostitution cannot be verified beyond the shadow of a doubt and, because she eliminates all traces of immorality, inferiority and ignorance from Ellen’s upbringing, her story does not need cleansing, nor does Ellen need to learn a harsh lesson as Bagwell’s strumpet. Still, no fairy-tale would be complete without a struggle or trauma and, in pure sentimental-fiction fashion, Ellen’s suffering vindicates her and proves that hers is the gender performance that can be expected from a good woman; in fact, her dignified femininity is highlighted by her distress at the loss of her child by Charles Hart:

Dr. Bangs has proclaimed me healed. How can I be healed when I feel so unwhole? I am in such small pieces I cannot imagine how to fit them together again. . . I can get up, move about, and return to the theatre, if I choose. If I choose? I choose to hide away in my little blue study in this great grey house.⁵³

After her accidental miscarriage, Ellen sinks into the deepest of depressions, showing that she has the natural tendency to nurture that real and proper women supposedly had and bearing witness to the changing attitudes: while miscarriages had been seen as God’s punishment,⁵⁴ the

⁴⁵ Parmar, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Charles Beauclerk, *Nell Gwyn: Mistress to a King* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2005), p. 14.

⁴⁷ ‘Grandfather agreed to a walk instead, on the condition that we conjugate French verbs as we go.’ Parmar, p. 21.

⁴⁸ ‘I will train with Mr. Lacy and Mr. Hart, the more intimidating of the two, in dancing, singing, speech, deportment, French’. *ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴⁹ ‘*French underclothes?* You give up your whole life for French underclothes? That is a bad bargain no matter how white they are, I thought, looking angrily at my frivolous sister’. *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵⁴ Jacques Gelis, *History of Childbirth: Fertility, Pregnancy and Birth in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), p. 217.

new social order saw them as no fault of the woman and it saw the grief that accompanied them as a natural consequence of the loss and women's nurturing nature.⁵⁵

Once Ellen catches the attention of King Charles, her life in the theatre becomes secondary for her and the novel focuses on their love story of wooing at midnight, strolls in the deserted cities and declarations of love that remind readers of romantic novels intended for a young adult public. As the novelty of the romance wears off, Nell finds it increasingly difficult to be kept a secret: for more than half the novel Parmar portrays Ellen resisting the advances of the King and playing a sort of cat and mouse game which reminds avid readers of romantic historical fiction of the story of Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII; while Anne has traditionally been portrayed as a skilled manipulator who entranced the King for her own ambition, Ellen is seen as the innocent girl who only wants to get the love of the man she adores and who feels the difference in their stations acutely.⁵⁶

“You will never be on equal footing,” Teddy says in answer to my unspoken thoughts. . . I want to love and be loved in return. But love requires honesty, and that is not where this path seems to lead.⁵⁷

Her attempts at emulating Henry's mistress fail not because Ellen is not intelligent enough, but because Ellen is not cruel enough and it is precisely this lack of cruelty and cunning that endear her not just to the readers but to the King himself, who will eventually grant Ellen the title of “exclusive mistress”. In the circumstances this title is as good as that of wife and Ellen resignedly accepts: ‘It is decided: I will be public. I will keep my independent life of the theatre. I will be treasured. I will never be abandoned. I will act as if this is all my choice instead of a compulsive love beyond my control.’⁵⁸ Parmar's novel presents us not with a charming urchin who wins the love of the hero, but with a true lady born to the wrong family, but who will win her rightful place again, as the King himself tells her:

“Hush now. I am not ashamed of you.” He tilted my face up to his. “With your pure spirit, how could I ever be? It does not matter who your father was. You have a nobility all your own. Unpolluted, untainted, and marvelously whole. I am so happy when I am with you.”⁵⁹

Both Bagwell and Parmar focus on Gwyn's romance with the King, commenting only briefly on the actual reaction of society at large at one of the most scandalous stories of the Restoration: although King Charles had numerous mistresses from varied backgrounds, Gwyn was his longest-lasting one—a fact that has captured the imagination of audiences who have seen in this long-lasting affair a story of romantic love. The two novels mix true historical events and characters with conjecture and anachronistic notions like that of romantic love, a term that came into existence almost a century after the death of Nell and which, therefore and unlike these two fictional Ellens, she most definitely never uttered in real life.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Raymond A. Anselment, *The Realms of Apollo: Literature and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1995), pp. 52–55.

⁵⁶ Philippa Gregory, *The Other Boleyn Girl* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2003).

⁵⁷ Parmar, p. 311.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 327.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 305.

⁶⁰ Parmar, p. 22; Bagwell, p. 208.

In fact, Parmar and Bagwell are more concerned with ‘the myth that most fully captures her story [...] that of Cinderella, the “ashes girl” who finds her prince by remaining true to herself’.⁶¹ While Nussbaum explains that star-actresses achieved a degree of economic and personal independence never seen before,⁶² the two novels studied in this instance present us instead with two women whose independence is completely illusory, women who can only be safe under the protection of a ‘King [who] comes down from his mountain top to love the orange girl’⁶³ and who happily renounce their jobs and public lives to become ‘an unmarried mother and devoted wife’, thus fulfilling the ultimate feminine goal.⁶⁴

3. From fairy-tale princess to fairy-godmother: *Stage Beauty*

In the case of Eyre’s *Stage Beauty* (2005) we find that Nell, although not a main character, is instrumental to the development of the story. In this historical drama, Eyre narrates the story of Kynaston, one of the last actors to play female roles on stage, focusing on his identity crisis and his love story with his dresser and aspiring actress Maria. The piece, like many other historical fictions, manipulates chronology, sometimes to help viewers who might not be familiar with the period and other times to introduce certain anachronisms or artistic licenses.

One of such inaccuracies affects Nell Gwyn, who is presented ‘first as a royal mistress and only later as aspiring actress’;⁶⁵ Eyre presents Nell as a rude, uneducated woman who not only, and much to the dismay of Samuel Pepys, slurps her soup at the table,⁶⁶ but whose diction is sometimes incomprehensible.⁶⁷ Although Eyre completely ignores the fact that Gwyn was one of the most celebrated actresses of the Restoration, he does maintain some of the features that appear in most of the reimaginings of Gwyn, like her having been an Orange-Seller or her obscure and deficient upbringing.⁶⁸ In fact, when asked about her parentage, she clearly states: ‘Me mum was a whore, my father in the navy. That’s why I never don’t do sailors’, admitting not just her dubious origins, but her past as a prostitute and thus taking us back to the legends and stories circulating since the seventeenth century.⁶⁹ Nell’s base origins are exploited in this film and used as an excuse not just for her complete disregard for convention, but also to explain her unabashed use of her body as a means of obtaining what she desires. For instance, when Charles is doubting whether to pass a law to forbid males from playing female roles, she convinces him using sex.⁷⁰ Thus, this film once again strips Gwyn and all actresses of their subversive potential using two strategies: first, by suggesting that it is only thanks to the direct intervention of the King, who bans men from playing female roles that women are finally allowed to enter the world of theatre as performers, thus dispossessing them of all agency,

⁶¹ Beauclerk, p. xv.

⁶² *Rival Queens*, p. 90.

⁶³ Parmar, p. 11.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶⁵ Maria José Mora Sena, ‘Review/Reseña: Richard Eyre. *Stage Beauty* (2004)’, *SEDERI: Yearbook of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies*, 15 (2005), 151–56 (pp. 153–54).

⁶⁶ Eyre, 31:30.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 29:35.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 29:30.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 31:09-31:14.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 47:45-49:03.

hailing the King as the maker of their success and cancelling out their defiance of gender roles.⁷¹

Secondly, *Eyre* further undermines the role of women in society and in the decision-making process, since 'this proclamation is coaxed out of the king after his mistress. . . gives him a private performance in bed that sends both the monarch and his whole pack of spaniels howling'.⁷² This scene not only robs actresses of their merit even further, but serves to perpetuate the image of Gwyn as a whore and of women using sex to get their way. Not only is Gwyn painted as a spoiled pouting child, but *Eyre* goes further and portrays her as a manipulator who hides behind a mask of blissful ignorance, innocence and lack of culture. This portrayal of Gwyn seems to be in clear opposition to the general intelligence we have of her, in fact, many of her contemporaries claimed she was a woman with no ambition. Aphra Behn, for example, claims that Nell was the only one amongst Charles's mistress to renounce any titles in favour of her own children, and for centuries, critics have argued Nell never demanded titles or riches as Lady Castlemaine did. Still, as the film advances, we discover that *Eyre's* Nell is not a villain either, but rather the fairy godmother, since favours she asks of Charles are not aimed at improving her station in life, but at helping out the aspiring actresses.⁷³ Once again, Nell is redeemed of her status as a whore by the innate goodness that characterises "women" and she is painted as the good-hearted strumpet, an image that severely damages the feminist message implied in her desire to advance the cause of the female performers and which once again, robs her of all subversiveness.

4. Conclusion: re-writing the first English actresses

These reimaginings of Nell Gwyn's life are just three examples amongst the numerous reconstructions of Nell's figure we can find in historical fiction and they certainly seem to offer extremely interesting versions of an actress who, in her choice of profession and lover, threatened to destabilise the gender order. 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. Still, the case of these three retelling's of Gwyn's life is quite surprising, since although they do revise the life and person of the Restoration actress, supposedly giving her a voice, these retellings completely erase the transgressive nature of a group of individuals who 'took up the slack to challenge and complicate conventional assumptions about women.'⁷⁴

These three works re-write Nell in such ways that she is dispossessed of all her subversive potential and her story rather than a revision and questioning of Restoration gender roles, is a confirmation of the emergent ideology of gender. Whether these three authors choose the innocent whore, a learned lady or an opportunistic plebeian as a starting point, they reimagine Nell as a romantic heroine, thus, transforming a dangerous social climber, gender bender and

⁷¹ Mora Sena, p. 155; *Eyre*, 49:05.

⁷² Mora Sena, p. 155.

⁷³ *Eyre*, 1:24:00.

⁷⁴ Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, p. 11.

bread-winner into a romantic heroine, whose behaviour comes to confirm the established gender roles. In fact, and as the analysis of these three works has proved, these 21st-century visions of Nell converge to create a narrative of the triumph of Cinderella who, in spite of her deficient upbringing, displays of the “innate” good qualities of women (loyalty, humility, nurture), features that will encumber her above her station and which will reward her with the ultimate prize in romantic fiction: true love.

It seems quite surprising that in spite of counting with a wealth of possible interpretations and revampings of her figure, the general tendency is to transform Nell into a romantic heroine in an attempt at making her an example of ideal femininity. But it is precisely through these extremely different starting points and converging endings that we find the key to the attraction that Nell still exerts in audiences; as Maus explains, ‘the account of celebrity inwardness is endlessly revisable, and thus marketable, because few of the consumers of such truths have any way of verifying them’.⁷⁵ The ambiguity of Gwyn’s biography thus explains the myriad of re-writings of her life-story that allow her to fit into a wide variety of roles or identities.

Furthermore, Nell’s rags-to-riches story of triumph of a working-class girl with its Cinderella undertones adds to the appeal she has on 21st century audiences; this comes from the already-mentioned dichotomy difference/similarity at work in historical fiction, a distancing mechanism that allows audiences to identify with the working girl who captures the heart of the King and to root for her in her struggle against both her underprivileged background and against those who oppose her. What is more, the survival of Nell’s image up until our day seems to stem as much from the adaptability of her obscure origins and the universal appeal of her Cinderella-story as from the fascination with her “public” sexuality and her body, which continue to be sold as commodities and ‘as the source of pleasure.’⁷⁶

In fact, and as these pieces of historical fiction show, we continue to derive pleasure from knowing the particulars of the private/sexual life of this alluring and sexually available creature for, as Roach explains, ‘sexual celebrity endures by turning an image into an idea.’⁷⁷ Consequently, we are more interested in her private life than in her theatrical one, in a continuation of the desire for public intimacy⁷⁸ that catapulted her to the forefront of celebrity during the 1660s. Furthermore, the romantic historical fiction tradition upon which the reimaginings of Gwyn analysed here can be inscribed, not only ‘prioritises loving and sexual relationships’⁷⁹ but also dramatises ‘a particular power relationship and an escapist fantasy’⁸⁰ characterised by a ‘desire for class mobility. . . presented as the romantic ideal: to escape into the arms of the better sort’, characteristics that can be found in Nell’s Royal affair and which are central in the three re-imaginings studied here.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Nussbaum, *Rival Queens*, p. 214.

⁷⁶ Cynthia Lowenthal, *Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2003), p. 118.

⁷⁷ Roach, p. 227.

⁷⁸ Lowenthal, p. 118.

⁷⁹ de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, p. 52.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 57.

From her own self-fashioning as the Protestant Whore, Pepys's label of 'pretty, witty Nell,'⁸² Behn's praise of her virtues and the audience's identification of Nell with the theatrical madcaps she excelled at portraying, the truth is that the real Nell has been buried under layers of reinterpretation, which have allowed for the transformation of a potentially subversive character into a sentimental heroine/Cinderella, which fits more snugly into the dominant discourses of gender which originated in the 17th century and which are still at work in our society.⁸³

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⁸² Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (London: Random House Publishing Group, 2012), p. 147.

⁸³ Aphra Behn, *The Works of Aphra Behn: The Plays 1678-1682*, ed. by Janet Todd (London: W. Pickering, 1996), p. 87.

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