

Nelly or Ellen? Revamping the first English actresses in contemporary popular culture

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ABSTRACT

The first British actresses have been the focus of extensive scholarly study, transposing the boundaries of academic life and irrupting in popular culture and becoming a part of the public imagination and folklore. This paper studies the perception we have inherited of “Pretty, Witty Nell,” probably the best-known actress of the Restoration, through the analysis of two novels—Priya Parmar’s *Exit the Actress* and Gillian Bagwell’s *The Darling Strumpet*—that reconstruct Gwyn’s life turning the “Protestant Whore” into a learned lady and a devoted mother. This revamping of her figure not only entails the erasure of the subversive potential of actresses’ break with the public-masculine/private-feminine dichotomy, but it also works as an attempt at neutralizing the threat that these “public” women pose to the gender roles that became normative in the seventeenth century and that are still seen as such nowadays.

KEYWORDS: Restoration; actress; identity; sexuality; fiction; Foucault; popular culture.

¿Nelly o Ellen? Reescrituras de las primeras actrices inglesas en la cultura popular contemporánea

RESUMEN: Las primeras actrices británicas han sido objeto de innumerables estudios, llegando a traspasar las barreras del mundo académico e irrumpir en la cultura popular, hasta convertirse en parte del imaginario y folklore popular. Este artículo estudia la percepción que hemos heredado de la que probablemente sea la actriz más conocida de la Restauración, Nell Gwyn, mediante el análisis de dos novelas—*Exit the Actress*, de Priya Parmar, y *The Darling Strumpet* de Gillian Bagwell—en las que se reconstruye su vida para hacer de la “prostituta protestante” una dama respetable y madre amatísima. Esta reconstrucción

Nelly ou Ellen? Reconfigurando as primeiras atrizes inglesas na cultura popular contemporânea

RESUMO: As primeiras atrizes británicas têm sido objeto de inúmeros estudos, transpondo as barreiras do mundo acadêmico e irrompendo na cultura popular, passando a fazer parte do imaginário público e do folclore. Este artigo estuda a percepção que herdamos sobre Nell Gwyn, provavelmente a mais conhecida atriz da Restauração, por via da análise de dois romances—*Exit the Actress*, de Priya Parmar, e *The Darling Strumpet*, de Gillian Bagwell—que reconstruem a vida de Gwyn, tornando a “prostituta protestante” numa senhora cultivada e numa mãe dedicada. Esta reconfiguração da figura de Nell Gwyn não só apaga o

* Translation into Portuguese by Miguel Ramalhete.

de la actriz no sólo supone una eliminación del potencial subversivo de su ruptura con la división público-masculino/privado-femenino, sino que es además un intento de neutralizar la amenaza que lo público de sus personas suponen para los roles de género instaurados en el siglo XVII y que aún perviven hoy en día.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Restauración; actriz; identidad; sexualidad; ficción; Foucault; cultura popular.

potencial subversivo do corte das atrizes com a dicotomía masculino-público / feminino-privado, mas funciona também como uma tentativa de neutralizar a ameaça que estas mulheres “públicas” colocam aos papéis de género que se tornaram normativos no século XVII e que ainda são assim entendidos atualmente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Restauração; atriz; identidade; sexualidade; ficção; Foucault; cultura popular.

In 2010, Jerome de Groot declared that “the historical novel [was] in robust health, critically, formally and economically” (2009, 1) as evidenced by the sales figures of the genre and the size of the section in any given bookshop; more interestingly, in his revised monograph *Consuming History* (2016) de Groot points towards the intersections of this genre with other categories which have resulted in the creation of fascinating hybrids like the literary subgenre of historical romance, of which Philippa Gregory has become the undisputable queen, thanks to her Tudor and Plantagenet series.

This paper analyses examples of these hybrids in the shape of two relatively recent historical romances that revamp the figure of the acclaimed Restoration actress, Nell Gwyn, Priya Parmar’s *Exit the Actress* (2011) and Gillian Bagwell’s *The Darling Strumpet* (2011), to study how these historical romantic novels rewrite Gwyn’s life, transforming her into a romantic heroine that fits normative and canonical gender roles.

Although it is true that Nell Gwyn is one of the best-known characters of the Restoration and that she has been hailed as the embodiment of the age, her life still remains a mystery and most of the anecdotes connected with her cannot be verified. Take, for example, one of the classic “Gwyn” moments,

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 dutchess 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)

The veracity of this “known fact” has been put into question very recently by historians and scholars (Conway 2006, 209) who have argued that “Restoration history is written primarily through the circulation of well-known anecdotes” rather than historical data (Pullen 2005, 25), a fact that contributed to the emergence of a “celebrity” culture which heavily relied on gossip and the mystery surrounding the new divas of Drury Lane: actresses.

Taking into account the lack of verifiable historical data on Gwyn’s life and understanding that “the spaces scholars have no idea about—the gaps between verifiable fact—are the territory for the writer of fictional history” (de Groot 2016, 264), Gwyn’s whole “life” becomes the writer’s territory, susceptible of being rewritten and reimagined in any way the author chooses. This may justify the variety of Nells that have cropped up through history: in the last hundred years, Gwyn has been the face of orange marmalade, a tourist attraction in Drury Lane, the runner of a brothel in Kate Baker’s steampunk series *The Women of Nell Gwynne* (2009) and a shrewd manipulator in Richard Eyre’s *Stage Beauty* (2005). Furthermore, accounts of her life are not just suspiciously divergent from each other, but sometimes contradictory: while Grumley-Grennan (2010) and Hopkins (2000) insist on the mystery surrounding her childhood and Cunningham skates over the issue (2009), Ditmore’s entry for her in the *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work* (2006, 192) openly paints her as a child-prostitute.

These myriad representations of Nell, as well as the two novels that occupy this study, have one common feature: they take Gwyn’s sexuality as their defining characteristic, resulting in a reimagining of Nell as either a whore or an angel, continuing with the practice explained by Straub,

the “ambiguity” of the actress—was she or wasn’t she a whore?—is often the focus of representations that seek to “resolve” the problem through an array of strategies dependent upon the actresses’ personal biography, her recuperability into existent class structures, and the historical moment in the changing field of eighteenth-century sexual ideology. (1992, 16)

This study argues that the subversive female performer of the Restoration is domesticated and stripped of her power, not through seventeenth-century slut-shaming, but rather through her “redemption” as the prostitute with a heart of gold (Cunningham

2009, 2) or a reimagining as a learned, dignified lady. Although Wallace argues that the historical novel has been seen as a tool which “allowed them [women writers] to invent or re-imagine [...] the unrecorded lives of marginalized and subordinated people, especially women” (2004, 2), in the case of these two novels, the lack of verifiable data is used to strip her off the subversive potential associated with early female performers by shifting the focus to the Cinderella quality of her Royal affair, thus contributing to the fashioning of Gwyn as the heroine of a romantic novel and to the perpetuation of the “darling strumpet” image.

The Restoration, an “age of the actor rather than the play” (Nussbaum 2005, 149), is the moment in history when the “celebrity” movement we now take for granted was born in England thanks to the incorporation of women to the theatrical world; the 1660s were the ante-room of the epistemological revolution of the eighteenth century, when, as Michel Foucault argued, the medieval feudal system was replaced with an early-modern deployment that classified individuals in binary opposites (sane/insane, healthy/sick, man/woman) derived from scientific discovery and research (1990, 83). It was under the rule of the Merry Monarch that the first glimpses of a new regime in which “biology [...] assures marital order” (Laqueur 1990, 193) could be perceived in Britain and “the long period between the reign of King Charles I and the death of Queen Anne, is a transitional moment for the British Nation” (Martínez-García 2014, 400), an in-betweenness or state of constant flux, straddling two opposing forces: a medieval conception of the world (or deployment of alliance) and an Enlightened scientific discourse which based gender order on the biological differences between the sexes and their ability to inhabit either the public or private spheres of life (Fletcher 1999) or the deployment of sexuality (Foucault 1990, 106).

More importantly, this “construction of femininity within the private sphere, coincides with the licensed appearance of the actress on the British public stage” (Bush-Bailey in Stokes 2007, 16) an event which sparked serious social conflict. Actresses, as women who were supposed to stay in the house but did not, violated the gender order and became “curiosities in the same aberrant category as the exotics [...] exhibited in public places for commercial return” (Nussbaum 2005, 149). As Gwyn’s anecdote proves, sexuality became a central

feature in the characterization of actresses, who were “caught in crosscurrents that defined their sexuality as public by profession and private by gender” (Straub 1992, 90), a dichotomy that was both the cause for their success and their downfall: on the “positive” side, the promised availability of their bodies became successful publicity for theaters and companies which soon started selling “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” (Nussbaum 2005, 149).

Still, actresses’ public exposure of their private bodies threatened to dilute the distinction public/private, male/female which formed the basis of social order, and, consequently, became symbols of transgression as they not only abandoned the private sphere, but also robbed men of their role as breadwinners: they were the ultimate gender-benders, who openly and publicly questioned gender roles and the ordering of society. Hence, the system attempted to neutralize the threat by 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, 12–13) and which is reflected in the survival of Gwyn’s carriage anecdote. In fact, and in an attempt at neutralizing the possible threat that the publicness of the actress may pose, “the lower-class background of the most promiscuous actresses is stressed, even exaggerated” (Straub 1992, 90) through the circulation of stories, like that of the carriage, that focus “on their sexual relationships” thus creating “a discursive link between first generation and prostitution” (Pullen 2005, 26).

No actress embodies the double dimension of Restoration fame like Gwyn: none other is more familiar than the orange seller turned Royal lover whose name has become a synonym for the Restoration at large. She was, without a doubt, the first “It girl” (Roach 2007, 63), pioneer of modern celebrity, of “the star-system that is very much part of our culture today” (Payne Fisk and Canfield 1995, 16). And although her status as a whore was a central part of her identity during her lifetime and in her after-life as a cultural icon, the potential for “recuperability” that lies in Gwyn’s Cinderella-like story makes for fertile ground upon which to build the

transformation of the subversive gender-bender into a romantic heroine that fits into the canonical gender roles still at work today.

This practice started when Gwyn's defenders claimed she had risen to the top in spite of her obscure past, in an attempt at making us root for the heroine. Wilson is quite clear in his account, when he declares that "one of the greatest triumphs of Nell's life was her ability to survive infancy and childhood" (1952, 11). Dryden, her contemporary, writes an epilogue especially for her in what would be her last role onstage and has her declare she has "liv'd a Slatern | Yet dy'd a Princess" (in Zwicker 2004, 139), a reminder not just of her uncertain and debauched origins, but a reference to her status as Royal Concubine that immediately activates connections to her long-standing affair with King Charles and reaffirms her as the first "People's Princess," thus making her social climbing a success story and turning the "whore" of the pamphlets into a member of the Royal family.

These rumors and stories about Gwyn's family and connections, turned into "fact" and "history" through repetition and reiteration (Pullen 2005, 27), are the basis for Bagwell's novel *The Darling Strumpet*, which presents us with a precocious ten-year-old girl and her first incursion into the world of prostitution,

Nell's stomach heaved with nervous excitement, but remembering Barbara Palmer's easy confidence, she managed an inviting smile as she looked up at him. She thought of what Deb and Molly had said—was it only this morning?—about the riches to be made this night. (2011, 18)

The girl will sell her virginity to a teenager who cheats her of her money, passes her on to his friends and leaves her to fend for herself once the deed is done (Bagwell 2011, 8–20). The portrait Bagwell paints of Nell seems to confirm the views of seventeenth-century moralists who claimed that, from an early age, the lower classes showed a tendency to depravity and a precocious sexual drive that, in the case of Nell, soon drives her to a whorehouse, where she will be used and abused by a multitude of men. Bagwell includes detailed descriptions of Nell's sexual activities at the whorehouse and the minutiae of the depravation of the men who demand Nell's services, not only emphasizes the relationship between the lower classes and unbridled sexual desire which seemed apparent during the Restoration (Straub 1992, 90–91), but also offers a glimpse into

Nell's future with the appearance of a young man who will whisk her away from the brothel to a comfortable life Gwyn abhors: "before long, she found the sameness of her days grew tedious" (Bagwell 2011, 68).

Gwyn's lack of interest in domesticity justifies her entrance to "the playhouse—anything might happen there" (Bagwell 2011, 88); soon Nell becomes the most celebrated orange-seller with desirability and fame increasing at the same pace. Nell is soon tempted by the luxurious life the Court Wits offer her: passing from the hands of Rochester (her instructor in all matters sexual) to those of Charles Sackville and his friend, Nell will be transferred from one bed to the other, an object intended for the fulfilment of male pleasure, reveling in the supposed admiration of these men and in the luxury they provide her with. It is not until the affair is over, that Bagwell, in an intrusion of twenty-first-century morals upon seventeenth-century society, has Nell reflect on these men's abuse of her person and body (Bagwell 2011, 165–66).

This reification of the actress's body was commonplace during the Restoration when all performers were seen as trade goods. In the case of actresses, this was even more so: once these women broke out from the relative safety of the home (as Nell does when she abandons Robbie's house), they came under public scrutiny and gossip, losing their right to privacy and becoming "public" women in the widest sense of the term. They moved from the private ownership of a father/husband to become commodities any theater-goer could buy or rent provided he had the money to pay the fee (Nussbaum 2005, 149). Bagwell's equating of Nell and her body with property, or "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 ultimately serves as a way to limit her subversiveness. When Bagwell has Nell claim that "she felt dirty, and foolish to have thought that they regarded her as anything but a whore, bought and paid for" (2011, 168), she is continuing in the tradition of identifying actresses with their bodies and sexuality, a representation that "does little to establish (their) actresses' respectability as a group" (Straub 1992, 92) specially if we take into account Nell's passive reaction to the leaking of her sexual adventures with the trio, a move that certainly limits, if not completely erases, the subversive power of her realization.

In her novel *Exit the Actress*, Parmar confesses that while she “invented much of Nell’s daily life” the historical facts that frame Gwyn’s biography “are rooted in fact” (2011, 443) creating thus a narrative that concentrates “on the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived” (de Groot 2016, 263–64) and that seems to reject most of the inherited wisdom about Gwyn’s life. She is now the daughter of a soldier fallen on hard times, educated and boasting a set of morals closer to eighteenth-century precepts which completely erase any possibility of her being the prostitute “history” has painted her to be. Young Nell’s experience in the brothel is transferred to her sister Rose and in relation to Charles Hart, Nell’s grandfather states “I know that you could not give your body without your affection” (Parmar 2011, 101). With this characterization, Parmar severs all connections with the innate depravity and the unscrupulous social climbing of the lower classes and creates a different woman, not Nell but Ellen, a sensible and respectable woman who is capable of showing all the qualities of a lady in spite of an unfortunate upbringing.

Although Parmar’s protagonist allows the public to call her Nell, she refers to herself as Ellen,¹ thus highlighting the distance between the real person and the public performance of “pretty, witty Nelly.” By strengthening this difference between public and private, between “real” and “performed,” Parmar tries to buttress her hypothesis that the inherited wisdom which paints Nell as good-natured, rude and ignorant may be a façade to hide the “real” woman, an intelligent, sensitive and nurturing girl, ready for love, features that make Ellen a temptingly “recuperable” figure that fits snugly into the canon of femininity preached from the eighteenth century onwards.

In spite of taking opposite starting points to their reimagining of Gwyn (whore and lady), both Bagwell and Parmar use the second part of their novels to build a “romantic” fairy-tale story in which Ellen becomes Charles’s spiritual companion, leaving the theater to devote her life to the Royal children as the role of the actress and “wife” are truly incompatible (Straub 1992, 94) in a society which saw the *visibility* of the actress and her public staging of her private

¹ “They call me Nell. But I am Ellen, I think” (Parmar 2011, 135).

sexuality as a loss of prescriptive femininity, linked to domesticity, motherhood and public *invisibility*.

In spite of the unmarriageability of actresses and despite the different approaches that Bagwell and Parmar take to Gwyn's entrance into the King's favor, both authors take great pains to portray the affair as that of a happily married couple: a comfortable relationship, which naturally moves from a passionate coupling to easy companionship and understanding with the passing of years. The domesticity of some of Gwyn's and Charles's exchanges is a feature that both novels have in common and one which seems to try and atone for the fact that both Nell and Charles were, in fact, unmarriageable: not only was he the King and her superior in class and rank, but he was already married and she was, as an actress and a concubine, twice a whore.

Parmar and Bagwell seem to try to create the illusion of marriage in the scenes where we can find the lovers together: Bagwell, who had shown Nell bored with domesticity in the first half of the book, offers now descriptions that emphasize the snugness and comfort of their exchanges, such as the opening lines of chapter seventeen: "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" (2011, 218), thus creating a quotidian scene that many readers can identify with, an image which turns their illicit affair into something not just admissible and normative (from concubine to almost-wife), but completely justified and, to a certain extent, desirable.

Exit the Actress also portrays Ellen as resisting domesticity when offered by the "wrong" man: Parmar's heroine rejects Harts' advances and offers arguing "I want truer love than what we shared" (2011, 212), an unlikely reflection for a Restoration woman, but one which appeals not just to the reconstruction of Gwyn as a romantic heroine, but to twenty-first-century's sensibilities and ideas on love. Parmar's novel, which seems to be deeply invested in the recreation of Gwyn as a respectable woman, gives us scenes in which not only do readers discover the fondness of both characters for each other, but which allow us into their private lives, to discover the similarities they bear to our own. While walking around the streets of Oxford, King Charles point out the architecture of the place to this eager pupil (2011, 270), while he talks fondly about his family, taking

an interest in Ellen's background and friends (2011, 271–73); Parmar's portrayal of the relationship includes walks, confidences, tender words, a wealth of letters between the lovers full of endearments and pet names (2011, 291–92), passionate if quotidian quarrels (2011, 295–96), weekend getaways with friends (2011, 299) and what Ellen calls their "private time at the end of the public day" (2011, 303), pillow-talk intended to reinforce their closeness; thus, through these domestic tableaux Parmar turns this relationship into a mock-marriage, elevating Ellen from concubine to wife.

Furthermore, the descriptions of the easy intimacy, the pictures of domesticity and the many instances in which the two lovers console each other on their misfortunes, are all devised to give their relationship the appearance of what Stone calls a "companionate marriage" (1990, 325), the archetypal image of the ideal marriage that was gaining force in the seventeenth century and which has been seen as the embodiment of the normative gender roles that emerged then and which have survived well into our days: the woman stays at home, waiting for her husband's return so she can alleviate his troubles and keep him comfortable in his own home. Thus, Nell/Ellen is domesticated, into abandoning theatrical life for a domestic one, a choice that turns her into a "wife," neutralizing the threat she posed as a public figure.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, normative femininity became linked to domesticity and nurture, two features seen as biologically inherent to females; thus, the system encouraged "women [...] to embrace motherhood as both a spiritual and practical calling" (Heller 2011, 19). All throughout history, defenders of Gwyn have highlighted these two features in their reconstruction of Nell/Ellen, emphasizing her role as mother and nurturing soul attending to the needs of her family, friends and of those less privileged, a strategy designed to accentuate her kindness in an attempt at clearing her name and separating her from the whore/actress binary. Aphra Behn, icon of proto-feminism, uses her dedication to *The Feign'd Courtesans* to emphasize that Nell's goodness made her renounce any titles (something the rest of Charles's mistresses had not done) in favor of her children, highlighting Gwyn's generous nature and disregard for social elevation, while portraying her as a loving mother to Charles's progeny:

whom [her children] you have permitted to wear those glorious
Titles which you yourself generously neglected, well knowing with
the Noble Poet; 'tis far better to merit Titles than to wear them.
(1996, 87)

This praise of Gwyn reminds readers of Behn's own Angellica Bianca in *The Rover*, whose "self-construction as Petrarchan mistress charts the attempt of a woman excluded from the marital marketplace to turn her beauty into an alternative form of power" (Pacheco 1998, 323). Behn's praise elevates Gwyn as a selfless mother and unambitious lover, implying that Nell's happy acceptance of her roles as the Royal Concubine and whore/actress are a public performance that, in actual fact, hides her true identity as a lady of quality (Rosenthal 1993, 18). Peter Cunningham, one of Gwyn's most celebrated biographers, opens his account of Gwyn's life arguing that she is a favorite of Britain because

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)

Following in the footsteps of these two authors, Parmar presents us with an episode which reinforces this image of Ellen as a devoted mother: after abandoning Hart for Saville, Ellen learns she is pregnant with Hart's child and goes back to him. She then has a miscarriage after an accident and takes to her bed, desolate about the loss of her child; once she is deemed fit enough to return to the theater, she indignantly refuses, "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" (2011, 118). Miscarriages were seen common in the sixteenth century, to bore with discretion (Gelis 1996, 217) and a suspected punishment for Eve's disobedience (Anselment 1995, 52–53). Still, with the deployment of sexuality, attitudes to the loss of a child changed, with parents now publicly grieving the loss; thus, Nell's reaction to the news and the portrayal of her desolation add to her image as the ideal woman of the new social order, the nurturing mother, and bear witness not only to the shift in gender roles, but to the "changing parent-child relationship traced by Phillippe Aries and Lawrence Stone" (Anselment 1995, 55).

Although Bagwell does not portray such an event, she does concentrate a great part of her book on Nell's close relationship with her children, including her insistence on nursing them herself, to the desolation she feels after her second son by Charles dies; Bagwell insists on the tenderness both Charles and Nell feel for their children, portraying them as "the emerging [...] new family type" (Stone 1990, 683) of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In fact, the arrival of her first child works in the book to signal the change in the relationship between Charles and Nell, for the exciting life of parties and plays turns into the familiarity already discussed. Scenes of domesticity and companionship are as present in this second part of the book as the detailed descriptions of sexual encounters were in the first half and they are designed to change the reader's perception of Nell, from a loose and frivolous young girl, to a protective mother and "wife."

Bagwell's book devotes a great time and effort to the description of Nell's later years, and of her relationship with her less fortunate friends and with King Charles himself. Readers witness Nell's decision to abandon not just the theatrical world, but the public world of the Court as well, retiring to her house, happy to receive her friends, family and lover, to listen to their woes and to help them and offer solace whenever possible, turning Nell into the epitome of normative femininity and transforming the public woman into a domestic goddess.

To further emphasize this, Bagwell imagines a conversation between Nell and her confessor (the man who would actually officiate her funeral): here not only does the priest excuse Nell's questionable past, but she openly declares her desire to become Charles's wife, turning this former whore-actress into an honorable woman redeemed from sin by the purity of her love, her loyalty to the King and selflessness,

"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." (2011, 310–11)

Thus, Bagwell's Nell undergoes a transformation from whore, to actress-whore, to Royal mistress and to devoted mother and wife, redeemed of her wild and questionable past by love and charity, two of the central characteristics that the new order of things believed women possessed innately. It seems that Bagwell's novel is a tale of redemption and sin in the fashion of eighteenth-century moral novels: the whore is transformed into a loving wife, thus buttressing the gender roles preached by the new system. Parmar's protagonist, a young woman who already possesses all the "innate" qualities of an honorable lady is elevated to the category of romantic heroine and her affair with the King comes as a reward for her staying true to her normative femininity instead of giving in to a life of lewdness: hers is a tale of good deeds rewarded.

This paper has shown that attitudes towards early actresses, towards the women who first broke the boundaries between the public/private were, and continue to be, mixed. The seventeenth century saw the emergence of a society characterized by its insistence on the ordering of the universe and the organization of life in clearly differentiated binaries: actresses, with their blurring of the lines that had been so painstakingly drawn to separate public from private, male from female, normal from abnormal, were, and still are, a threat to the established gender order.

The general attitude towards these women who publicly performed their private selves alternated between fascination and revulsion, between acceptance and celebration, rejection and criticism. The two historical novels studied are revisionist in their attempt at painting Gwyn's character and bear witness to the struggle of reconstructing early-modern women and their lives. As the subject of historical romantic novels, Gwyn's biography is invoked or rewritten to create two different romantic heroines that will appeal to twenty-first-century audiences: whether it be to tell the tale of the good-hearted prostitute or the story of the middle-class prodigy fallen into hard times, Parmar and Bagwell offer tales

of redemption through femininity, "true love," motherhood and charity.

Thus, in the hands of these authors, Gwyn loses all of her subversive powers, all of her significance as a symbol of transgression, as the epitome of the "gender-bender," moving from the "whore" side of the spectrum to join the ranks of subjects that do not question, but buttress the rigid and limiting gender roles imposed by the established gender order. This portrait of Gwyn, coupled with the fact that "any historical novel always has as much, or perhaps more, to say about the time in which it is written" (Wallace 2004, 4) rather than the time it is set in, leads me to conclude that these novels are an example of a sub-genre that "seems to sustain the dominant models of social ordering: family, heteronormative relationships and strictly defined gender roles" (de Groot 2009, 52).

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