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On the move: Glancing Backwards To Build a Future in English Studies



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To Build a Future in English Studies**

**Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz and
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Editors**

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Nell Gwyn as the Epitome of Englishness: The Case of Anna Neagle, the True English Rose

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Abstract

As one of the precursors of the celebrity movement, Nell Gwyn's rags-to-riches Cinderella story has made her the focus of media attention. In the 1930s, Herbert Wilcox included her story amongst his repertoire of historical films, choosing Anna Neagle, the modest, resilient and resourceful English rose, to play her. Although he argued that the apparent contradiction in the casting was intended to shock audiences, this paper explores the intertextuality between Neagle and the title character of the film, arguing that far from being a detour in Neagle's career, *Nell Gwyn* serves as way to buttress her image as the English Rose and that the piece, fiercely patriotic and melodramatic, also contributed to the cause of clearing Nell's name by re-imagining her as a true English Rose.

Keywords: Gwyn, Neagle, English Rose, public intimacy

As one of the precursors of the celebrity movement that we now take for granted, Nell Gwyn was, undoubtedly, the focus of attention during the Restoration both for her acting skills and her outrageous sexual adventures. Although she is best-known nowadays as Charles II's longest-lasting mistress, theatre goers of the 1660s, playwrights and fellow performers, all hailed her as a master of comedy and witty banter. Her affairs with powerful men and her talent as an actress would, nevertheless, not justify her having become the first It-Girl: the mystery surrounding her origins and her rags-to-riches Cinderella story have ultimately carried throughout the centuries, becoming part of the public imaginary and turning her into a creature of legend.

Nell Gwyn's fame has led to her being alternatively celebrated as a performer or vilified as a gold-digger; friends and supporters not only compared her to a princess (Dryden 1958, 119), perhaps even the first "People's Princess" (Perry and Roach 2011, 67), but they also hailed her beauty and wit, her modesty and affection for her children (Behn 1996, 87). Her detractors, on the other hand, painted her as ignorant and rude, from dubious parentage (Betterton 1741, 111) and precociously wanton (Straub 1992, 90).

Centuries later, Gwyn's story of triumph has continued to fascinate us with innumerable cultural products inspired by her story. Most of these cultural products have drawn their inspiration for their re-fashioning of Nell from the fairy-tale quality of her royal affair, allowing for an admiration of a success story of the working classes. This paper focuses on a film directed by Herbert Wilcox in 1934, in an attempt at analysing not just the version of Gwyn it presents us with, but the close relationship between the character and the actress playing the "Protestant whore" (Conway 2013).

In the 1930s Wilcox, one of the most successful British filmmakers, created a series of historical films following the lives of extraordinary women. Two examples are *Victoria the*

Great (1937) and *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), representing “a reverent depiction of monarchy. . . a nationalistic notion of Britishness which is articulated by reference to Victorianism and the Empire” (Street 1997, 41-2). Wilcox used his historical films for clear political ends in times of turmoil and austerity: 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) represented in the figure of Victoria, who withstands trials and tribulations, perseveres and takes her country to glory.

The woman chosen to play such a role was Anna Neagle, Wilcox’s wife. She was the star of films which “are a celebration of tradition and history” (Landy 2014, 313) as well as the films in the ‘Mayfair cycle,’ productions that became hugely successful due to “Wilcox’s style . . . helped by the fact that his wife was something of a national icon because of her portrayals of Queen Victoria and Nell Gwyn” (Butler 2004, 95).

After such box-office hits, Neagle went on to play roles carefully chosen to buttress and add to her image as a more powerful symbol of England than the white cliffs of Dover (Thumim in Street 1997, 124). The analogy was to accompany her throughout a career which revolved around her becoming an expert at one role, just like Gwyn had done: while Nell was the madcap, the quintessential Restoration heroine, Neagle became a “national emblem . . . by her portrayal of Britannia-like women. . . ordinary women transformed into heroines by extraordinary wartime circumstances” (Street 1997, 127), roles that held a strong appeal for audiences living through the austerity of the interwar period.

Nell Gwyn (1934) is a musical comedy which follows the affair of the Restoration actress with Charles II, emphasizing her competition for the King’s favour with the French aristocrat Louise de K rouaille, Duchess of Portsmouth, a character born of a palimpsest of concubines (Gwyn, Barbara Palmer and K rouaille) whose rivalry with Gwyn did not take place in real life, for by the time K rouaille came about, Nell had been Charles’s lover for years. The film resembles none of the archetypal Neagle roles, for it presents us not with a dignified lady who triumphs against all the odds, but with a rude street urchin who delights in bawdy repartee and in the mischievous humiliation of the Duchess of Portsmouth. Such a character seems to be in contradiction with the image of Neagle that she and her husband strove to exploit until it became their most successful formula and an inextricable part of her public persona. So how does pretty, witty Nell fit into this canon, amongst Queen Victoria and Nurse Edith Cadwell? How does the Protestant whore, mother of royal bastards contribute to Neagle’s image as an English Rose? According to Street and Wilcox, it does not, for, in Street’s words, “on several occasions, she deviated from the norm to keep the public guessing” (1997, 121) and Wilcox declared that he wanted to “shock the critics into noticing the actress in her and also shock audiences out of the English Rose image” (1969, 97-8).

Critics have claimed that although *Nell Gwyn* was one of her best performances and major successes, it was films like *Victoria the Great* that established her public persona since this costume romp does not fit into her filmography. It is my contention that, far from being a departure point from her archetypal roles, Neagle’s Gwyn not only contributes to her image as the English Rose, but re-fashions the figure of Nell herself: instead of Neagle being polluted by Gwyn’s rudeness and base origins, Neagle’s “British, non-European and white identity” (Street 1997, 121) is transferred to the Restoration actress, turning her into a melodramatic heroine the public can root for.

The strength of this film lies in the intertextuality existing between the actress and the character; the identification between performer and character has been used since the Restoration as a device to create ‘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, 3) and which ensures the performer’s success and fame. This was a constant in Gwyn’s theatrical life and she would even comment on her roles onstage, which, in most cases, had been written specially for her to exploit both her abilities as a *comediienne* and physical attributes. Neagle also participated of this public intimacy which linked her private persona to her roles, to her public self, to the point when audiences could not distinguish one from the other.

Despite the contrast between Neagle, an actress whose fame as a respectable woman meant “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) and Gwyn, a woman whose identity is inextricably linked to her sexuality, the parallels between them are quite astonishing and help set the basis for Neagle’s public self and roles as an English heroine.

In this film, we are presented with a girl who, at first sight, could not be more different from all that Neagle represented: Gwyn is loud, rude, uneducated, a friend of drunks and an actress at a time when the name was equated with prostitution. But right after the opening credits, we start seeing the similarities between the urchin and the actress who would soon play Queen Victoria. Wilcox’s representation of Gwyn revolves around her generous and selfless nature, qualities which many of Gwyn’s contemporaries extolled in an attempt at redeeming her public cuckolding of the Queen and which Wilcox seems intent on highlighting. At the beginning of the film, we see Nell strolling towards the theatre with Meg, who will continue to accompany her at Court as friend and maid, only to find two maimed soldiers to whom Nell not only gives money, but with whom she promises to meet after the play (1934, 4:24-5:25). Once she is ‘a grand lady’ in her grand house, she invites them over and while drinking, they inform her of their dire economic situation: penniless and homeless since they cannot serve the army and navy again, they do not receive any pension from the State (1934, 53:30). Nell decides to ask the King for help in setting up a hospital for veterans to go to once they have done their duty for his country. The image then fades into a text (figure. 1) which reminds audiences of how important Chelsea Hospital has been in caring for the health of those who defended Britannia against its enemies, stressing that it was Gwyn’s idea, emphasising her generous and nurturing character.

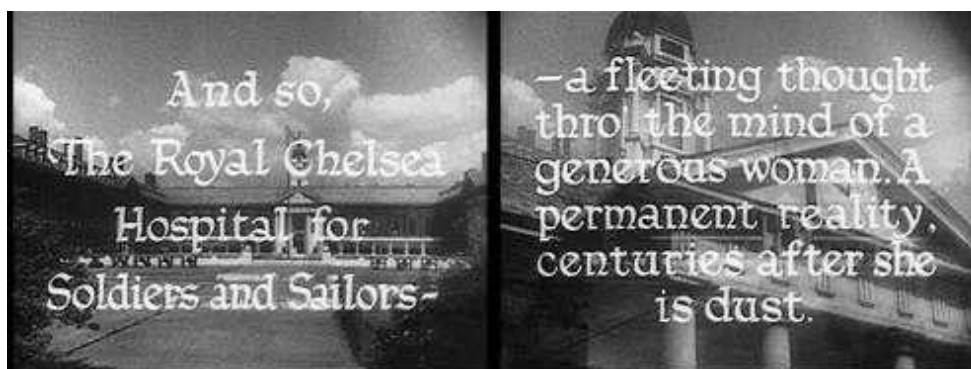


Figure 1

This generosity and patriotism is stressed even further when, accused of cheating on the King, Nell reproaches him lack of care towards his people “if you listened to your own people. . . instead of to a French trollop!” (1934, 58:00). This statement, that could easily be

taken as the irate response of a jealous woman, is a patriotic declaration, entreating government and Royalty to listen to the people they rule over, to be attentive to their needs, for they are indeed, the ones that, like all Neagle's characters, will defend Britain.

Scenes like this, if played by any other actress who had not acquired Neagle's fame, would not work in the same way; but since she was seen as a paragon of Englishness, audiences are more than willing to believe this version of Gwyn.

Furthermore, the actual story of Gwyn's elevation from orange seller to *comédienne* to Royal concubine mirrors Neagle's own path to stardom, which was recounted as an exemplary tale. This story, with Neagle as the epitome of all English values, was key in the marketing of her public and private persona, with one critic even commenting that "things are as they should be when a girl can by determination and hard work rise from the ranks of the chorus in a few years to international eminence in English films" (Street 1997, 121).

The identification between Nell and Neagle is then unavoidable, for both had raised from humble origins to become symbols of their age through acting and thanks to the help of powerful men: actor Charles Hart and the King's companion Charles Buckhurst had been pivotal figures in the life of Gwyn, while Wilcox had been Neagle's mentor, lover and the man who had discovered her talent. Truth be told, Neagle's story lacks the scandal of Gwyn's royal affair, but then again, 1930s Britain lacks the glamour and brilliance of the Restoration. Charles's opening scene, where he announces his intention to "restore to the country its old good nature, its old good manners and its old good humour" (1934, 3:44) is not only a political declaration drawing a parallel between Puritanism and the austere 1930s, but an equation of Gwyn with the merry, witty and resourceful nation of old times.

The film is a homage to the common people who brought back Britain to what Wilcox considers their "real character" both during the Restoration or after WWI, to those who brought back the happiness and wit native to the country, characteristics all embodied by Nell/Neagle in their comically patriotic fight against Kérouaille. This confrontation is a political statement hailing the superiority of the English and their resistance to foreign intervention, as seen in the juxtaposition of the two Royal lovers: to Kérouaille's smug haughty manner, we find Gwyn's humorous selflessness, to the French sense of superiority (figure 2), we have English salt-of-the-earth humility, to foreign manipulative plots, we have English plain dealing and honesty. From the first meeting between Nell and the King, Portsmouth seems to sense the threat the actress might become: Louise is dismissive of the actress, quick to criticise and badmouth her, something we do not actually see Nell doing, emphasising her as good-nature and justifying her fight with Portsmouth as response to these provocations and slights.



Figure 2

The fight between them reaches an all-time high when Portsmouth plans to appear in the theatre wearing a fantastic dress and hat, inspired by the clothes of one of the French mistresses, who then became as good as Queen (1934, 47:30). Gwyn steals the limelight coming onstage wearing an even more extravagant version of the costume (figure 3), ridiculing the French aristocrat and provoking the laughter of all present, including the King.

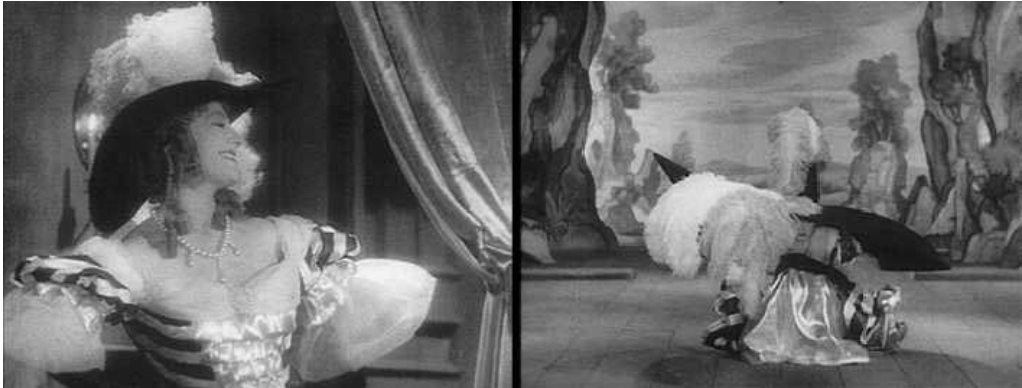


Figure 3

In his representation of this cat-fight, which never really took place, Wilcox is also proposing Neagle and Gwyn as the epitome of Englishness, possessing all the qualities that make her superior to any foreign power. This comic confrontation serves not just to emphasise the supremacy of English sense of humour and wit, but it also works to shape Gwyn and Neagle as the heroines of a tragicomedy: the triumph over Portsmouth is followed by a period of stability for Charles and Nell, which comes to legitimise their relationship depicting it as a “companionate marriage” (Stone 1990, 101) in which Gwyn’s loyalty and admirable qualities are highlighted (figure 4). This representation of the couple would echo the Neagle-Wilcox union: married in the late 1940s, their relationship transcended the realm of feeling becoming one of the most successful and profitable business associations of British cinema, “unusual in the sense that it did not appear to conflict with their marriage in 1943, implying that as a team they enjoyed a great degree of mutual respect” (Street 1997, 120) where Neagle was a muse, business partner, producer and co-writer.

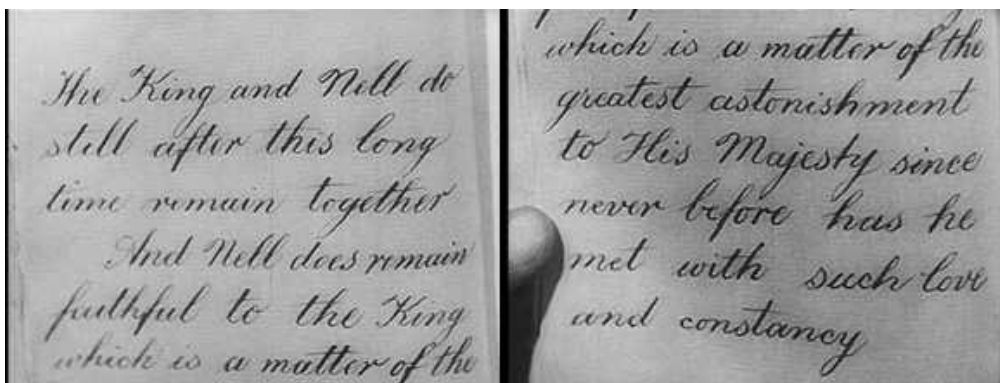


Figure 4

This intimacy and companionship of the second part of the film, serves a double purpose: first, it strengthens the Gwyn/Neagle identification through the representation of their intimacy with the King of Britain and Britain's king of cinema; and second, it transforms Gwyn into the heroine of a tragic love story. The last part of the film, where we see the death of King Charles and the consequences this has for Nell and K  rouaille, elevates Gwyn to new heights of respectability, degrading the French aristocrat and further emphasising the superiority of English working classes. While the King lies dying, the French Countess is seen gathering all her riches and fleeing court, without so much as a backward glance to the man who elevated her (figure 5).



Figure 5

Nell, meanwhile, runs towards the palace as soon as she hears the news, only to be banned from entering the King's chamber, as she is not of Royal or even noble blood. Although Gwyn has been faithful to the King, his constant companion, the Court does not fully accept her and leaves her waiting for news separated from him by wooden bars. Once she learns of his death, Wilcox offers us a close-up of her face, which is not smiling in this case (figure 6). It is this scene that elevates Gwyn to respectability through Neagle's acting skills and her rendition of the dignified grief and strength which, according to Wilcox, are native to England.



Figure 6

This brief analysis of the film *Nell Gwyn* and “the Neagle persona” (Street 1997, 120) proves that it is not a departure point in her cinematic career and that although it has been presented as a costume romp, a musical comedy and a “bawdy and controversial British historical drama” (H. Wilcox 1934), it is a piece of nationalistic propaganda in which history is manipulated to fit the director’s purpose: *Nell Gwyn*, intended to boost the morale of the country, is the perfect vehicle to exploit ‘public intimacy’ thus buttressing both Neagle’s stage persona and the nationalistic message of the work, through its reconstruction of Gwyn’s reputation.

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