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The Protestant Whore: Courtesan Narrative & Religious Controversy in England, 1680-1750 (Review)

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take up the lines of investigation pursued by Restoration polemicists: On what foundations should a national Protestant identity be built in the wake of civil war? What constitutes legitimate authority? Who has the right to speak? What is the right relation between public and private personae? How should literature engage with politics?

The Protestant Whore adds nuance to the usual history of Whiggish Protestantism that has long been understood to be at the origins of the British novel. For example, Ms. Conway reminds us that in the 1680s there was a rivalry between two public Protestant icons: Nell Gwyn and James Scott, Duke of Monmouth (illegitimate son of Charles II). Pamphlet literature of the time, Ms. Conway observes, contrasts Gwyn to Monmouth to exemplify Protestantism and loyalty: “Nell Gwyn comes to represent the courtesan whose sexuality renders her impervious to political corruption, a court agent whose integrity the nation might trust because of, not despite, her sexual character.” I would add that if Gwyn’s apparently open and honest relations with Charles II appear apolitical, then her image becomes fundamental to emergent Whig ideology, which presented itself as, if not apolitical, then at least non-partisan.

Rather than rebutting recent histories of the novel’s development with a new grand narrative of her own, Ms. Conway explores the Protestant whore’s influence on the novel’s development by an “intricate tapestry of allusion and association” (a phrase she uses to describe Behn’s prose fiction, and that also describes her own scholarship).

Focusing on Behn’s literary dedications to Gwyn and other royal mistresses, Ms. Conway richly reads Behn’s *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*. This

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Nell Gwyn, who famously identified herself as “the protestant whore” in order to defuse the anger of an anti-Catholic mob during the height of the Exclusion Crisis in 1681, functions as an emblem of the anxieties about religion and politics responsible for the Exclusion crises and the Revolution of 1688–1689, anxieties that Ms. Conway argues continued unresolved into the middle of the eighteenth century and shaped the development of the early British novel through its depiction of “bad women.” For Ms. Conway, “Courtesan narrative uses the seventeenth century’s heterodox traditions to challenge the social and political imperatives that surfaced in the Restoration’s wake.” Novelists such as Behn, Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson

anti-Exclusionist novel, based on the real-life elopement of Henrietta Berkeley with her brother-in-law, Ford, Lord Grey (a supporter of Monmouth), rhetorically depicts the heroine as becoming a courtesan. Ms. Conway observes that the authority Behn invested in Gwyn and Hortense Mancini enabled her to use the novel as a means of uniting her interest in sexual relations and political crises in the 1680s.

In *The Secret History of Queen Zarah and the Zarazians*, a Tory political secret history from 1705 (once attributed to Delarivier Manley, but now to Joseph Browne), the Whig Sarah Churchill, duchess of Marlborough (known to be a loyal and loving wife), is rendered as a courtesan. The courtesan did not provide a point of reference any more stable than the term Protestant in popular culture's continuous reimagining. The courtesan's regular appearance in novels through the middle of the eighteenth century marked the nation's unresolved anxieties about religion and politics. Here it would have been useful if Ms. Conway had developed further the connection between the political secret history and the developing novel. She appropriately refutes Robert Mayer's distinction between histories understood as fact and those as fiction during this period; however, it nevertheless would have been helpful to identify at least a porous border distinguishing the secret history from the novel. For example, although twentieth-century critics viewed the secret histories of Delarivier Manley as novels, Manley, like Browne, was working in the genre that Lionel Gossman has identified as the "little history" (*la petite histoire*), a gossipy account that contradicted the dominant histories of the day. Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding clearly incorporate such little histories into their novels, but their texts function in a way that many secret histories of the period do not.

In *Roxana*, Defoe "evokes Nell Gwyn's legacy and the Restoration's struggle to sustain the dream of Protestant community" in order to demonstrate that this dream will not be achieved through theological abstraction, but "the embodied status of the individual." Ms. Conway points to Clarissa's dealings with the prostitutes and to references to Mme. de Maintenon, mistress to Louis XIV. In Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Sophia Western, mistaken for the Jacobite Jenny Cameron, is aligned rhetorically with an apolitical Gwyn. Richardson and Fielding thus both "realized that the political divisions that haunted England in the wake of the '45 remained unresolved." Moreover, "*Clarissa* and *Tom Jones* gain their power from an awareness that the answers to the questions raised by the Restoration and its aftermath could only ever be partial and incomplete." Ms. Conway persuasively demonstrates that "Courtesan narrative opens a window onto a continent of religious controversy and sexual politics that offers no safe harbours for those travelling its coastlines." The achievements of her text are manifold.

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