

**“My life, my soul, my all is fixed upon enjoyment”:
The Unabashed Expression of Female Desire in
*The Royal Mischief***

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The *Royal Mischief*, a tragedy in verse forgotten nowadays, enjoyed a successful six days' run (including two author benefits) at Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre in April 1696. It is not surprising, however, that at a time when the immorality of the English stage was the target of increased censure, a play so sensual and outspoken on sexual issues should also have provoked controversy. The author, Delarivier Manley, a woman of some notoriety because of her unconventional life style, in fact withdrew from the theatre for some time, due to the outrage her tragedy had evidently created, and due to the vicious satire on herself it had occasioned.¹ She then turned to fiction, her true vocation, and in her *romans-à-clef* about the love lives of the Whig upper crust made such a commercial success of eroticism in literature that made Winston Churchill, still smarting from the scandal heaped on his Whig ancestor Marlborough two hundred and fifty years earlier, wish he could banish Mrs Manley “back to the cesspool from which she crawled” (Needham 256).

The Royal Mischief already attests to the author's skill at portraying sexual desire – and particularly female desire – with fervour and unusual candour. The play, purporting to take up the heroic conflict between love and honour, is, in fact, a horror tragedy in the Jacobean tradition, involving incest and unbridled lust. Locked up in a castle by her jealous old husband, the beautiful princess Homais falls in love with a picture of her husband's nephew, Levan Dadian, a war hero, who has just concluded a political marriage with the virtuous princess Bassima. Homais manages to lure Levan to the castle in order to seduce him. At the same time, the visier Osman vainly entreats Bassima to yield to his passion. Notwithstanding, Levan sentences his innocent wife and her supposed lover to death, while Homais, to make sure her enemies are eliminated, plans to have Bassima poisoned and her own husband murdered by her ex-lover Ismael. Her husband, the Prince of Libardian, also called the Protector,

however, arrests her, but allows her time to repent before executing her. She uses this reprieve to join forces with Levan and rid herself of the hated Bassima and Osman. In a preposterous scene, Osman, having failed to persuade his beloved to sleep with him at the very moment she is actually writhing in agony and the executioners are breaking down the door—"rather a necrophiliac touch" (Cotton 87)—is used as a human cannon-ball, and his wife lovingly gathers up the smoking remains. At Homais' moment of triumph her husband reappears and runs her through with a sword. Like the Jacobean villain, she dies glorying in the carnage she has caused, and Levan falls on his sword.

The Royal Mischief lends itself to ridicule for some of its excesses, plot absurdities and structural weaknesses, though, of course, exaggerated passions and rant are the bane of many tragedies of the time. For Morgan (*Woman of No Character* 77) it may be "awful verse, but it is wonderful theatre", and Cotton (87) is justified in calling the play "erotic" and "extravagant". Indeed, the play's eroticism is remarkable, even in an age renowned for its bawdy stage, and the "ladies" in the audience, Mrs Manley tells us in the preface to the printed edition, in fact, took issue with the "warmth" of its language. The star actress Mrs Barry, specialising in passionate heroines whose love lives might invite titillating comparison with her own scandalous reputation, hesitated to take the title role of the lascivious princess Homais, an indication that even by Mrs Barry's standards the play must have been more than everyday fare. The grateful author tells us in the preface that the famous actress, having overcome her scruples, "excell'd and made the part of an Ill-Woman not only entertaining, but admirable".

Like Aphra Behn before her,² Mrs Manley angrily put down the outcry against her play's bawdiness to the ubiquitous double moral standard, which allowed men to express what was considered immodest in women. The underlying reason for the protests by the moralists may well have been not the *risqué* descriptions of masturbation, orgasm and unbridled lust, nor the frenzied passion which seems to take possession of all the dramatis personae, but the mere fact that the play was written by a woman—and, one suspects, the fact that the most blatant expressions of erotic appetite are put into the mouth of the main female character. In her preface, Manley cites Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe* and *The Double Distress*, and Southerne's *Oroonoko* as evidence that descriptions of the joys of physical love were quite acceptable provided they were written by male authors.

It is indeed interesting to compare *Aureng-Zebe*—though not the other two plays—³ with *The Royal Mischief*, since the former also gives very explicit voice to a woman's incestuous love, though not so frequently, not in such prominent places and not *via* the central character. In Dryden's heroic play Nourmahal's attempt to seduce her step-son⁴ takes up only eighteen verse lines, and though the intention is transparent enough, female desire still veils itself in the fig leaf of a dream and a mythological tableau. The hero recoils from the

temptress in horror, and contemptuously rejects the incestuous proposition. Although Dryden gives Nourmahal convincing reasons for avenging herself on her faithless husband and in the course of the play makes her express more explicitly feminist sentiments than Homais is ever made to voice, his final condemnation of the villainess is unequivocal.

In *The Royal Mischief*, the protagonist talks of her illicit love at great length throughout the play and, unashamedly, admits to it without metaphoric circumlocution. Although such candour would usually inspire disgust in male characters, here it enhances Homais' desirability. At first glance it might seem that the unabated passion Homais evokes in Ismael and Levan is connected with ulterior motives concerning the social advancement and political power that might be derived from such a liaison with a queen. In addition, the lovers' inclination to yield to their *mistress* would be spurred by their fear of what might become of them if they were not to obey royal wishes. Although Homais' political power is somewhat restricted by her confinement, it is by no means curtailed, and she makes it blatantly clear that she will stamp out any sexual disloyalty towards her. Her ambitious lover Ismael, who ruins his own brother to usurp his political position, might be expected to hope mainly for promotion and material reward from Homais' hands.

Yet Manley chose to focus on Homais' erotic magnetism rather than on her hierarchical authority. Ismael had become Homais' lover even before she married the Prince of Libardian. He is sexually addicted to her and refuses to abandon his obsession in exchange for her explicit promise to "serve [his] fortunes" (IV/i/241); since she has grown tired of him, he even gives her "leave to fancy", during sexual intercourse, that he is her new lover Levan,

For while I press you close, and feel your charms,
No circumstance can make the joy uneasy. (IV/i/241)

This Levan Didian is a prince in his own right, and not her social inferior, hence he has no material benefits to gain from such an incestuous involvement, though one might contend that there may be some Oedipal complex involved in his lust for his uncle's wife. To be sure, a royal invitation to the castle would have been impossible to spurn even for a man of his rank; her social status thus greatly facilitates Homais' wooing. However, Manley seems to go out of her way to emphasise that Homais' desirability is due to her beauty and sensuality rather than to her social position. This argument, though, by no means invalidates the assumption that her imprisonment and apparent helplessness also arouse Levan.

It should also be remembered that, quite generally in Restoration drama, royal power might enable a licentious woman to indulge in her illicit passions, but would not, in itself, render her immune to sexual abuse and duping. Indeed, to be cheated and taken advantage of by her favourites would be a much more conventional fate for a passionate princess than wielding the sexual power Manley allows her heroine. Contrary to expectation, Homais' unabashed

sensuality does not render her prone to the usual exploitation and humiliation at the hands of her lovers—a fate which Behn, for instance, deals out to the adulterous queen in *Abdelazar*.⁵ Her irresistible erotic magnetism places her on a pinnacle of manipulative power, although, in the end, poetic justice, according to the male canon, requires that she be killed by her wronged husband, whom she has made a fool of throughout the play. What is so remarkable in the drama, then, is not only the fiery description of a woman's sexual desire itself, but the ambiguous attitude the author takes to her lustful queen. *The Female Wits* was indeed targeted at Manley's nonchalant treatment of incest and her harsh judgement of the old prince who had the temerity to marry a beautiful young wife (cf. *Female Wits* III/419). Such handling of character was hardly permissible in comedy at the turn of the century, when the cuckolding plots of Restoration sex comedy were coming under severe attack, and was evidently considered entirely inappropriate to tragedy. What was apparently even more disturbing, however, was Manley's liberal attitude towards her wicked heroine, whom the ridiculed authoress in the satire (supposed to represent Mrs Manley) fondly calls "a little mischievous" (*Female Wits* III/424f.).

Although female sexuality was rigorously circumscribed in the seventeenth century, and virtue, for women, was in fact synonymous with chastity, female desire was not a taboo *per se*, nor was its expression morally offensive, as long as it was directed towards a lawful mate and tended towards marriage—viz. the many plots in comedy in which women make their own choice of a handsome young man, contrary to their guardians' wishes. Aphra Behn's witty heroines, for instance, claim the same interest in promiscuity and sexual gratification as her men—but their libertinism is verbal only, for they hold back until they have trapped the object of their desire into marriage.⁶ Cuckolding plots in comedy present adulterous women as lewd hypocrites, hiding their lasciviousness behind a mask of prudery, or dodge the moral issue by figuring old and disgusting husbands who somehow *deserve* their horns. It seems to be one of the problems of *The Royal Mischief* that it transgresses the boundaries between the genres and, despite its murder plot, draws the old Protector as the comic stereotype of a senile husband with a lusty young wife—with all the attendant manipulation of sympathy in favour of the frustrated wife—before it unexpectedly shifts to reinstate him as the regal voice of authority in the end.

In tragedy as in comedy, a *legitimate* passion for one's husband would naturally be sanctioned, as, for instance, in Cibber's *Love's Last Shift* or in Mary Pix's *Queen Catherine*, but, of course, tragedies will more often focus on *illegitimate* passions. Setting aside pitiful female victims reduced to ruin by a man and made to suffer agonies in expiation, playwrights generally expend little sympathy on lusting women who nourish illicit, let alone incestuous, desire and take the initiative to proposition a man.

In contrast, Homais is a "sympathetically studied femme fatale" (Morgan, *Female Wits* 209), who is "exposed to surprisingly little explicit moral

comment" (Pearson 197). Surrounded by weak, passive and insipid characters, her intelligence, vitality and "devastating candour" (Morgan, *Female Wits* 210) must gain her the admiration of the audience, who will find her more attractive than the "effeminate troupe" (V/259) she has to deal with. She is conceived on an almost heroic scale "as a she-Alexander bent on making her passion prevail throughout the world as Alexander had his valor" (Anderson 116). Manley was indeed at pains to provide an excuse for her villainess' pent-up libido by her jealous confinement at the hands of her semi-impotent old husband, who thus hopes to prevent her from cuckolding him. He is, however, stupid enough to present her with a life-size portrait of his nephew and protégé, Levan Dadian, and she falls passionately in love with the handsome young man, whom she has never seen or met, but whose gallantry in battle is proclaimed by Fame. Desire is thus aroused in surrogate fashion, by visual and linguistic representation. Manley understands the erotic appeal of war and violence on women like Homais;⁷ yet the princess is also aroused by Levan's seeming unavailability, since his recent marriage to the noble Bassima, his renowned virtue (not that we see a lot of this in the course of the play!) and his known gratitude to her husband all make his seduction an arduous affair.

ACMAT: Your eyes in all their glorious course (and sure
They are omnipotent) could not have shone
Upon a soil so barren; no kindly hopes,
No prospect of return ...

First, here, your husband's nephew's
Just married to a young and beauteous Princess.
Time has scarce lent a hand to pluck the fruit,
Or say 'twere gathered, yet the flavour lasts.
Then, he's a Prince so much renowned for virtue,
So true a copy of the long-past heroes,
As will serve for an original to ages yet to come.
But, oh, that which concludes his character
Destroys us more, abundant gratitude,
And love to the Protector. (I/214)

The Prince thus becomes the object of her desire; his very superiority to other men will test her own superior powers of seduction—a situation reversing the gender roles of subject and object in narratives. The desire she will kindle in this prodigy's eyes is intended to be the mirror that will prove her *the fairest of them all*. The very difficulty of the seduction requires her to exert all her will-power. Like an impatient Restoration suitor, she will "push the bold adventure on, / and either die or conquer" (I/214).

In the drama of the time it is generally males who threaten to die if women refuse to gratify them—a pose Aphra Behn ridiculed in *The Rover*, where the witty heroine sarcastically replies "Why must we be either guilty of fornication or murder if we converse with you men—and is there no difference between

leave to love me, and leave to lie with me?" (I/2/170). The term *conquer*, too, is not a word generally used by women, since it implies activity and intention, whereas females were expected to be passive, their so-called *conquests* consisting in their ability to fix the wandering attention of a man and inspire him with a desire for possession, not in active marauding. Thus, even in this play it would be quite erroneous to believe that the words "my gracious conqueress" (II/223), applied to the mild Bassima, are anything but meaningless male flattery without any foundation in actual power. In Restoration plays, men conventionally claim to be women's slaves during courtship, but the drama of the period abounds in images of female bondage after the wedding ceremony. As opposed to the chaste and insipid Bassima, however, Homais really usurps the male privilege of singling out her quarry and pursuing him; she herself is the aggressor and rejects the traditional idea that the female body is a reward for the "long paid service" (I/214) of courtship. While she assumes the male role and male diction, Levan, in contrast, is presented in imagery traditionally reserved for women, as "a soil so barren". Indeed, Homais' flame can only

with possession be abased
My life, my soul, my all is fixed upon enjoyment,
Resistance but augments desire. (I/215)

Such is the language of the male hunter. The emperor in *Aureng-Zebe*, for instance, thus explains the sadistic male desire for dominance to the captive Indamora:

No; 'tis resistance that inflames desire
Sharpens the darts of love, and blows his fire. (II/i/225)

By choosing the term *possession* for the sexual act Homais again avails herself of a male concept implying a power relationship between active and passive, subject and object. Like a man, Homais refuses to suppress her desire for physical gratification; like a man, it is implied, she may also lose interest on possession, as suitors usually do.⁸

All this indicates that more is involved in her masculine stance than a mere emulation of the male love discourse. That she does not mindlessly imitate male diction is evinced by her sarcastic undercutting of her husband's pompous rhetoric: "My lord, you moralise too far" (I/218). To be sure, Homais assumes the role and language of the predatory male, but by doing so she stakes out a claim to equality which profoundly undermines the Puritan ideology of self-denial, the masculinising of desire, the creation of woman as other and object, and the belief in the indivisibility of chastity and feminine identity.⁹ Suppression of female desire is exposed as a patriarchal sexual strategy, not an innate feminine modesty. The contrast of Homais to her virtuous counterpart could not be greater. Bassima has internalised sexual discipline; chastity and an immaculate reputation are a second nature to her, indeed dearer than life itself,

so she refuses to yield to the man she loves illicitly:¹⁰

You like a lover entertain your fancy,
But I have still the fatal land in view,
Where death of honour waits on that of life.

...
I charge you then, by honour, glory, fame,
By love, the mighty god that now torments me,
You yield me not, a sinful slave, to death.
Torn in my conscience, mangled in my virtue (III/237)

Destroy me not, my lord, by these requests,
For I forbid not only hopes, but wishes.
The faithfulness I owe my royal lord,
That veneration all must pay to virtue,
And a fair conscience, peace, are more
Than force sufficient to your suit. (V/255)

Bassima, of course, is the embodiment of *virtue in distress*, so popular in the drama of the time. Manley, however, shows that a woman who happens to be in the extraordinary social position to command the absolute loyalty of her entourage, and has the fortune to have a witless husband, may also refuse to confine herself to the ordinary monogamous relationship regarded as appropriate to women by society as well as demand the same licence naturally afforded to men.

Homais' behaviour, values and language are all borrowed from the Restoration rake – which is all the more surprising because the libertine ideology normally posed insurmountable obstacles for women. The role of the libertine, Gallagher claims, could not simply be reversed to put the female into the position of the sexual predator. A woman had little to gain from this posture and much to lose. She could not have a sexual conquest, “for the doing of the deed would be the undoing of her power” (Gallagher 66). She must remain chaste since her power only consists in withholding sex. A woman who had yielded ceased to be desirable and was despised for her impurity, as the drama of the age frequently illustrates.¹¹

It is a gauge of the subversiveness of Manley's text that in *The Royal Mischief* Homais, far from losing her attraction after sexual intercourse, rivets her lovers all the more closely to her. Quite the contrary, rather than abandoning her after enjoyment, they seem intoxicated by her charms, and it is *she* who contemptuously sends them packing. To be sure, within the hierarchical structure of society, it would have been neither tactically correct nor prudent for a socially inferior man to take the initiative in discarding a queen, although reckless characters like Behn's Abdelazar do find means to rid themselves of royal mistresses by treachery or even murder. As I have already pointed out,

however, Manley is more interested in sexual bondage than social hierarchy. The text leaves little doubt as to the sincerity of either Ismael's or Levan's desire for Homais, even after consummation—an attitude which contrasts markedly with the jaded satiety or even disgust displayed by many rakes even the morning after.

Manley's feminist utopia of a woman prized not for her virginity but for her sensuality, who succeeds in remaining a desiring subject instead of becoming an object for male gratification and possession, is only possible because in the play Homais is presented in a social vacuum, isolated in a castle, in contact with only a few servants, where she can flaunt her unconventional morals without being exposed to social ostracism. Here is the remarkable scene in which she, with unruffled candour, tells her ex-lover Ismael, who reminds her of the ecstasies they shared, that his services are no longer in demand:

ISMAEL: But must your first adorer have no favours?

Will he not be allowed sometimes a taste,
Some small remains of former heavenly bounty?
Methinks you should not, sure, so far forget
Those moments, sacred to our love and me,
When close you grasped me—at your new found joys
An unbeliever till you proved the wonder,
And felt the mighty ecstasy approach—
Then swore, whatever royal lover should
Succeed, you never would forget the first
Discover.

HOMAIS: Nor do I, Ismael, for I'll serve your fortunes,
But for my heart, the Prince is there already,
Now in my arms should I receive another,
The load would be unpleasing.

....

Oh, did you know the difference
Between a new-born passion, and a former!
Nothing remains but memory and wonder,
Not the last warmth of kind desire or joy.
Nay, scarce can we believe, or make that faith
A miracle, how we could dote, as they reproach we did,
How love so much, that which at present seems unlovely.

ISMAEL: When time has worn the gaudy gilding off,
The sacred varnish that your liking gives,
He will then seem forlorn and stale as me,
An object less for love than wonder. (IV/240f.)

Ismael is probably right in suspecting that Homais may soon grow weary of her new paramour as well. Her passionate professions of never ending love for Levan are indeed no more convincing than the customary male protestations at

the moment of triumphant possession. What is more relevant, however, is the fact that the speakers' roles are again completely reversed. The man takes the part of the forsaken, pleading lover, the traditional role of innumerable betrayed virgins and cast off mistresses. Homais, in turn, uses the very arguments which the Restoration libertines employ to discard their conquests, namely an inability to renew the erstwhile emotional attachment,¹² though, in typical rakish fashion, she promises to pay off the former lover financially and materially.

Just how disturbing this arrogation of a masculine role and unabashed licentiousness was to a hostile spectator is indicated in *The Female Wits*, where the Homais-character confesses with unlovely bluntness: "I am a libertine, and being so, I love my husband's son, and will enjoy him" (412). However, in her relationship to this lover she is given an entirely conventional "feminine" language; *she* is anxious lest he prove false: "But is there no falsehood in a form so lovely? If there is, these eyes that let the object in, must weep forever" (*The Female Wits* III/420).

It cannot be said that Homais in *The Royal Mischief* only employs the language code of a rake to give voice to her sexuality. However, when she uses *female diction*, the language she invents to express her desire is not passive, whining and reproachful, but vigorous, seductive and active. One of the most interesting passages is the section where she sends her eunuch Acmat with her portrait in order to lure Levan into her apartment by sensually describing her longing. The scene is a fascinating counterpart to the scene in Act I in which Homais confesses that she fell in love with Levan's picture and reports of his bravery. Levan, too, is captivated by a visual image and narration—a triumphant homage to the power of words:

ACMAT: Sure there's a sympathy between you, for
Thus she bears her when she sees your picture,
Which drawn at length, almost as graceful as
The original, is the chief ornament
Of her apartment, answering
Exactly to her waking curtains.
How often have I seen this lovely Venus,
Naked, extended in the gaudy bed,
Her snowy breast all panting with desire,
With gazing, melting eyes, survey your form,
And wish in vain 't had life to fill her arms. (II/229)

In this description Homais is both the object of desire and the desiring subject. As in a hall of mirrors, the woman masturbating in front of the portrait of her desired lover is, at the same time, turned into the object of desire for this man, who in turn is invited to visualise her desiring gaze as he himself gazes at her portrait with desire. The sophistication of this device as well as its erotic suggestiveness is completely lost in the parody of *The Female Wits*, which evidently

intends to ridicule the blatant sensuality of the original but only manages to sound cold and harmless when presenting the heroine's transports of delight:

Her curtains by me drawn wide, discover your goodly figure. Each morn the idols brought, eagerly she prints the dead colours, throws her tawny arms abroad, and vainly hopes kisses so divine would inspire the painted nothing, and mould into man. (*The Female Wits* II/415)

Homais disdains hypocrisy, admitting her feelings with breathtaking honesty, even if she thereby violates all the existing codes of acceptable female behaviour. To quash Levan's scruples she may consent to letting him believe that his uncle is impotent and her marriage still unconsummated, but at the crucial moment she refuses to conceal her libido, which she describes in sexually explicit, graphic and visual terms. Although the pose would suggest the traditional female postures of humility, self-sacrifice and the female body as a gift, her hyper-active part in the seduction subverts any idea of female submissiveness and passive conquest. The faithful eunuch, announcing the coming of the prince, counsels her:

ACMAT: Let him not find you vicious, and his throne
And bed are surely yours forever.

HOMAIS: What? To conceal desire when every
Atom of me trembles with it! I'll strip
My passion naked of such guile, lay it
Undressed and panting at his feet, then try
If all his temper can resist it. (III/231)

Contrary to all warnings to the opposite, her impassioned desire does not seem threatening to the man, but proves contagious; when he has seen and kissed her, Levan sinks to *her* feet:

She faints! By heav'n, I've caught the poison
Too, and grow unable to support her. (III/234)

Although Manley presents the villainous heroine as charismatically attractive and largely refrains from moral comment, she is willing to appease the audience with a conventional ending and, in the preface, justifies the four and a half acts of indulgence towards Homais by the punishment meted out to her in the last scene – a punishment not found in the source, J. Chardin's *Travels*.¹³ Manley may well have been disingenuous in the poetic justice with which she ends her play, but it would have been unwise for female playwrights, who were frequently censored for their ignorance of the rules of dramatic composition, to take issue with such entrenched beliefs as the didactic function of literature and the need to reward virtue and avenge vice.¹⁴ Yet the play itself invites the audience to doubt the kind of justice administered in the denouement.

At the moment of her apparent triumph, the returned Prince of Libar-

dian stabs Homais with his sword—a phallic symbol that can only be meant ironically in view of his impotence. As if to contradict this moralising conclusion, her dying speech, with its passionate disdain of her husband and her “effeminate” accomplices (V/259), plus her attempt to strangle Levan so that they may continue their orgy in hell, point to her irrepressible sensuality, blending eros and death. At first Homais addresses her husband, then her lover Levan:¹⁵

HOMAIS: Thou dotard, impotent in all but mischief,
How could'st thou hope, at such an age, to keep
A handsome wife? Thy own, thy devil will
Tell thee 'tis impossible.

Thus I dash thee with my gore,
And may it scatter unthought plagues around thee,
Curses more numerous than the ocean's sand,
Much more inveterate than woman's malice,
And but with never-ending time expiring.

PRINCE OF LIBARDIAN: Rail on, thou can'st deceive no more.

HOMAIS: O thou too faintly lover! can'st thou hear him?

That coward Ismael, too, who reaped my foremost joys,
What an effeminate troupe have I to deal with.

I'll meet and sink him in the hottest lake,
Nay plunge to keep him down. Oh I shall reign
A welcome ghost, the fiends will hug my royal mischief.

Grim Osman and his Princess grace my train,

One sent by poison, t'other by new fires,

But thou, my darling evil,

When fate had nothing else to do but join us,

When expectation beat the loudest march,

And full-blown joys within an instant of us,

'Tis more than life can bear to be defeated.

Be thou a shade and let us mingle then,

There feast at large what we but tasted here.

Thus with my utmost force I'll bear thee with me,

Thus strangle thy loved neck, thus die together.

But, oh, a curse on fate and my expiring strength. (V/259)

The fusion of love and death is entirely appropriate to an age in which *dying* was still a metaphor for orgasm, yet the vividness with which such a physical afterlife is actually pictured on the point of death is unusual, albeit not completely unique. A hint at the similar eroticism of death, though much more elusive, and in fact, ending only in an abortive murder attempt, can be found in *Aureng-Zebe*, when Nourmahal says:

... let him die by me!
 He, stifled in my arms, shall lose his breath;
 And life itself shall envious be of death. (III/249)

Even in death, then, Homais eclipses all the other characters. Her corrupting influence is likened to the irresistible force of fate. The Prince of Libardian thereby exonerates his beloved nephew, who committed incest with Homais and shed innocent blood, from all guilt – “thy faults ... were fate’s, not yours” (V/260) – and in his last words Levan himself blames his sins on

Beauty, death’s keenest dart,
 More fruitful far than any other fate,
 By whose enchantments all my glories fade
 and innocence, unwary, is betrayed. (V/261)

The old prince, too, heaps responsibility for all the horror solely on woman, the temptress:

What mischief two fair guilty eyes have wrought.
 Let lovers all look here, and shun the dotage. (V/261)

In view of the husband’s obsessive jealousy and the lover’s casual virtue this would seem absurdly inappropriate as a moral conclusion;¹⁶ as a subversive strategy, however, it highlights the hypocritical patriarchal propensity to demonise female sexuality. Instead of bringing the moral issues of the play into sharp focus, these sententious verse lines again expose the double standard Manley has attacked throughout the play,¹⁷ and from which she herself suffered all her life.

Homais is one of the most fascinating female characters in Restoration tragedy, and the candour and fervour with which she professes her desires mark a rare instance of female erotic poetry in the drama of the time. A passionate woman who loses nothing of her attraction despite her lasciviousness, she takes the initiative as a seductress in an age when women were supposed to be passive in love relationships. Both the male idiom of the libertine and her discovery of a female language of desire testify to her independence from restrictive role models and corroborate the subversiveness of the author’s vision. Despite the flaws of *The Royal Mischief*, particularly of a technical nature, it deserves to be remembered as an unabashed expression of female desire and an almost unique document in its time.

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Notes

1. Mrs. Manley, in the autobiographical novel *Rivella*, claims that she was tricked into a bigamous marriage by a relative and then left to bear the consequences. She was also fairly open about the lovers she was involved with. The anonymous satire *The Female*

Wits, written in the manner of Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, mercilessly derides the female playwrights Delarivier Manley, Mary Pix and Catherine Trotter and, in particular, ridicules the plot of *The Royal Mischief*. The reason for this travesty, staged at Drury Lane, was probably not the play's undeniable faults, but the fact that Manley, after a quarrel, had taken *The Royal Mischief* from Drury Lane to the rival Lincoln's Inn Fields, where it enjoyed a success.

2. In the prefaces to *The Lucky Chance* and *Sir Patient Fancy*.
3. *The Spanish Friar or the Double Distress* contains a passage describing a *man's* desire; and *Oroonoko* would be a different case altogether because it deals with the love of a married couple.
4. NOURMAHAL: I dreamed, your love was by love's goddess sought;
 Officious Cupids, hovering o'er your head
 Held myrtle wreaths; beneath your feet were spread
 What sweets soe'er Sabaeon springs disclose,
 Our Indian Jasmine, or the Syrian rose;
 The wanton ministers around you strove
 For service, and inspired their mother's love:
 Close by your side, and languishing, she lies,
 With blushing cheeks, short breath, and wishing eyes;
 Upon your breast supinely lay her head,
 While on your face her famished sight she fed.
 Then, with a sigh, into these words she broke
 (And gathered humid kisses as she spoke),
 Dull and ungrateful! Must I offer love?
 Desired of gods, and envied even by Jove:
 And dost thou ignorance or fear pretend?
 Mean soul! and dar'st not gloriously offend?
 Then, pressing thus his hand—
 AURENG: I'll hear no more ... (*Aureng-Zebe*, IV/260)
5. After having exploited her political influence to rid himself of his enemies, Abdelazar comments on the death of the Queen in the following manner:
 ABDELAZAR: Farewell, my greatest Plague,
 Thou wert a most impolitick loving thing
 And having done my Bus'ness which thou wert born for,
 'Twas time thou shouldst retire,
 and leave me free to love, and reign alone. (V/ ii/82)
6. See for instance, Hellena in *The Rover* or Cornelia in *Feigned Courtesans*.
7. It would be wrong, however, to argue, as Pearson does (195), that this equally applies to mild Bassima, who fell in love with the vizier Osman not because he captured her as a prisoner of war, but because he chivalrously released her.
8. See Behn *The Amorous Prince*: "This Passion, Sir, Possession will destroy / And you'll love less the more you do enjoy" (II/ii/129).
9. Manley in fact goes much further than Behn, of whom Hutner (4) speaks in these terms.
10. Pearson (198) argues that all women in the play wield power. However, the play does not really juxtapose masculine women and effeminate men, since it is only Homais who assumes a masculine role, not Bassima. Levan and the Protector are weak and passive, but Ismael and Acmat (ironically, a eunuch) are active villains. In fact only the villainous characters are energetic and initiate action, those who retain vestiges of virtue are all passive (and for this very reason rather insipid). Bassima has,

indeed, fared very ill at the hands of modern feminist critics, yet a chaste wife who confesses her attraction to another man but will nevertheless not commit adultery, is not an uncommon figure in the drama of the time. See Behn's *Abdelazar*, where the villain's virtuous wife says:

A Deed like that My Virtue wou'd undo,
And leave a Stain upon your Glories too;
A Sin, that wou'd my hate, not Passion move;
I owe a Duty, where I cannot love. (III/iii/50f.)

11. The double standard is often most impressively dramatised by women playwrights. Here is an especially articulate excerpt from *Antiochus the Great* (1701) by the little known Jane Wiseman, which features a sympathetically portrayed discarded mistress who is in the typical position of having lost her attraction now that she has yielded.

LEODICE: What have I done, that you shou'd hate me thus?

Be Just, and charge me with another Crime,
Besides my guilty Love of false Antiochus,
And I'll be patient, and deny I'm, wronged.

ANTIOCHUS: What need I search for other Faults?

I am in love with Vertue, yours is lost.

LEODICE: Thus when Malicious Devils have seduc'd

And plung'd our poor unwary Souls in Sin,
Themselves Accusers of those Crimes they've urg'd.

If Vertue be the only thing you Love,
And has alone the power to keep you true;
Why does your Treacherous Sex take so much pains
To undermine the beautiful Foundation?
Oh! Let all fond believing Maids by me be warn'd,
And hate as I do, base ungenerous Man;
Whom if you trust, you're sure to be betray'd.
Fly from their power, laugh at their Complaint;
Disdain their Love, and baffle their Designs;
So you may scape my Sufferings, and my Faults. (III/133)

12. Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe* once more suggests itself for comparison, especially as regards similarities in the imagery the speaker (Morat) uses:

You talk as if it were our bridal night:
Fondness is still the effect of new delight,
And marriage but the pleasure of a day:
The metal's base, the gilding worn away.

...

Would you force love upon me, which I shun?
And bring coarse fare, when appetite is gone? (IV/266)

13. See Clark, 161.
14. Female playwrights often avail themselves of endings restoring the male order even though the plays, dramaturgically, would permit different conclusions. Behn, for instance, conventionally ends *The Rover I* by marrying the rake to the chaste heroine and having the courtesan jilted. In *The Rover II*, however, Willmore makes off with the prostitute instead of the virtuous heiress.
15. The scene was singled out for special ridicule in *The Female Wits*, where the "livid gore", with which she sprinkles her husband, calls for melodramatic stage effects: "D'ye hear, property man? Be sure some red ink is handsomely conveyed to Mrs

Knight" (*The Female Wits* III/429).

16. Moralising conclusions that have little to do with the real moral issues of the play were not uncommon at the time. Writers were anxious to show that they took the didactic function of literature seriously. To the modern reader these concluding lines often seem trite and inadequate.
17. Apart from the reversal of roles I have pointed out, it is also undeniable that Levan wants to punish his wife with death for her supposed adultery, yet blithely commits incest with his aunt himself. This double-think was attacked in *The Female Wits*, yet is, in fact, not uncommon in the drama of the time.

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