

"A Kind Mistress is the Good Old Cause": The Gender of the Heir in *Marriage à la Mode*

Laura Rosenthal

In Buckingham's play *The Rehearsal*, the characters Jonson and Smith witness a new tragicomedy written by "Bayes," a caricature of John Dryden. They watch as a gentleman and a physician reveal the tragicomedy's political intrigue to each other, but hear nothing because the characters communicate by whispers. When the small audience expresses its confusion to the playwright, Bayes answers that "they are suppos'd to be Politicians; and matters of State ought not to be divulg'd" (2.1.69-70). As part of its parody of other Restoration plays, *The Rehearsal*, as Susan Staves has argued, mocks the political anxiety that followed the Civil War.¹ But this play expresses that anxiety as well. The tragicomedy places two kings at the head of its state to whom the people show "the same affections, the same duty, the same obedience" (1.1.236). At one point, the gentleman and the physician draw their swords, sit down on the two thrones, and thus usurp the two kings. "There's now an odd surprize," Bayes comments. "The whole State's turn'd quite topsie-turvy, without any puther or stir in the whole world" (2.4.70-2). A couple of scenes later, the two rightful kings descend from the clouds and the usurpers sneak off--this without any puther or stir either.

The plot of *The Rehearsal's* play-within-the-play identifies, satirizes, and expresses two central anxieties over royal power in the Restoration. Not only does Buckingham give us a king and a usurper, but he doubles this doubling, offering four pretenders to the throne. Clearly he invents two kings and makes the revolution absurdly swift for comic effect. But such a precarious state not only mocks similar plots in serious contemporary drama, but in itself speaks to a deep anxiety about the stability of the king's authority. Further, the whispering of political intrigue not only makes Smith and Jonson uneasy, but

Laura Rosenthal wrote this essay while completing her doctorate at Northwestern University. She is now an assistant professor of English at Florida State University.

probably struck a vein of discomfort in the larger audience as well. At a time when a king had been beheaded in living memory--about twenty years ago--and when his son had returned by Parliament's request within the decade, when numerous extremist groups were either cooking up or exposing secret plots, when the king made covert arrangements with Louis XIV, and when the possibility of a Catholic heir raised arguments about altering the line of succession, the whispering of a play's central plot may have come disturbingly close to political realism.

Now Buckingham did not necessarily have the recent instability of the British throne on his mind when he wrote this play. He could have been thinking primarily about heroic drama. But the production of *The Rehearsal* before its particular audience at one moment in history indeed produced a political meaning; it theatricalized politics.² Thus we do not need to attempt to unlock the playwright's consciousness to discuss the cultural poetics formed by an artistic representation of political life.³ Political life encompasses all experiences of power, from obedience to a monarch to the defiance of a husband. John Dryden's *Marriage à la Mode* intensely explores political life, yet frustrates all attempts to discover a definitive position of stable ideological advocacy. *Marriage à la Mode*, exactly the kind of play that *The Rehearsal* parodies, simultaneously theatricalizes and destabilizes the Restoration attempt to reconstruct the ideology of the divine right of kings.

Hans Robert Jauss suggests that any text that becomes popular must answer a question that the receiving culture asks. Dryden gives us two plots in *Marriage à la Mode*, answering two distinct questions.⁴ In the comic plot, the courtier Palamede falls in love with Doralice, the wife of his best friend Rhodophil, who in turn falls for Melantha, the fiancée of Palamede. The heroic plot involves two peasants, Leonidas and Palmyra, who turn out to be the rightful heir and the daughter of the usurper, respectively. Leonidas and Palmyra love each other, but when brought into court Argeleon, a favorite to the usurping king Polydamas, falls in love with Palmyra. His sister Amalthea falls in love with Leonidas. Now without waiting for his culture to ask, Dryden himself poses the question that the comic plot answers in Doralice's opening song:

Why should a foolish marriage vow
Which long ago was made,
Oblige us to each other now
When passion is decayed? (1.1.4-7)

To its answer we shall return. Finding the question that the heroic plot asks, though, presents a greater challenge. As in *The Rehearsal*, power changes swiftly and mysteriously in this play: only in the last act does Dryden reveal the true king to the audience. At first the play identifies Leonidas as the son of Polydamas the usurper, then later it identifies Palmyra as his daughter and

Leonidas as a mere peasant. Finally, with the country on the brink of a civil war, we discover the true identity of Leonidas as the son of the king whom Polydamas usurped.

In the heroic plot, Dryden begins with the "disguised ruler" convention, which appears frequently in Renaissance drama as well.⁵ But the political significance of Dryden's twist on this convention lies in the limits of the audience's knowledge. Throughout the experience of this play, the audience remains ignorant of the true heir's identity (as does the true heir) and confused by the rapid changes in power. Shakespeare, however, wrote a different kind of disguised ruler play.

The disguised ruler convention provides the starting point for the plot of *Measure for Measure* as well. But Shakespeare did not innovate this kind of play. As Leonard Tennenhouse points out, the years 1604-1606 saw several disguised ruler plays in which the monarch watches as a substitute tries unsuccessfully to maintain order. The entire plot of *Measure for Measure* turns on the Duke's hidden identity. Lucio's denunciations of the friar-cowled Duke to his own face create the funniest scenes in the play; Isabella, ignorant of his true identity, reveals her character by confiding in him. The other characters cannot see through the Duke's disguise, but the audience enjoys Lucio's errors and Isabella's complicity because it never doubts the true center of power. While the plot destabilizes power for the other characters--though never really for the Duke himself--Shakespeare, by letting the audience in on the secret and by showing how easily the characters can fail to recognize the Duke, represents power as centralized and stable but uncomfortably panoptic.⁶

In *The Tempest*, Miranda starts out ignorant of her true noble identity, as she had been for most of her life. But in the first scene after the storm, Prospero reveals this status to Miranda and to the audience. So while Ferdinand may not immediately recognize her nobility, nor she his royalty, the audience remains conscious of both their identities. In fact, after Prospero's opening conversation with Miranda, we know exactly whose genealogy merits power and have only to watch as Prospero maneuvers the other characters back into their proper places. Like *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest* destabilizes power for other characters in the world of the play, but not in the consciousness of the audience. The audience may come to understand the fragility of power, its shifting and its reversals, but it always knows who usurps what from whom, as well as the birthright of each character. For many years Miranda remained ignorant of her genealogy, but the text excludes that part of her life.

The heroic plot of *Marriage à la Mode*, however, ends where *The Tempest* begins: Dryden does not reveal the birthrights of the characters until the fourth act. Their mystery, in fact, sustains and creates the drama. As in Shakespeare's plays, the characters respond inappropriately because they cannot identify the true center of power, but unlike the Shakespearean theatrical experience, in Dryden's the audience--especially the Restoration

audience with its sharp class stratification--comes to suspect *itself* of an inappropriate response.

When the heroic plot begins, Artemis announces that the king, who had been believed childless, has begun to search for his long lost heir. Amalthea then reveals to her "some private passages of state":

Know first
That this Polydamas, who reigns, unjustly
Gained the throne. (1.265-8)

That Polydamas's men had no trouble identifying two young peasants "of uncommon beauty/ And graceful carriage" as nobility confirms the audience's confidence in the transparency of class, the stability of hierarchy, and the equivalence of birth and merit. But soon after, the play explodes these assurances. *Marriage à la Mode*, as Michael McKeon has argued, represents the dialectical ideology of a culture in transition from an aristocratic world of unambiguous hierarchy, to a world of bourgeois individualism where outward status does not necessarily reflect inner worth. McKeon identifies the heroic plots as "emergent" culture. The marriage contracts in the comic plots, McKeon points out, themselves identify this contradiction: on the one hand the lovers pledge their affection, but on the other hand their legalistic language harkens back to the earlier practice of marriage for duty, not for love. But drama not only reflects history, it helps create it as well. While McKeon insightfully describes the play's dialectical ideology, I hope to expose here the process by which performance of *Marriage à la Mode* theatricalizes similar contradictions by frustrating, on the one hand, the audience's ability to identify the true ruler, but at the same time providing a final assurance that only one of the possible heirs could have claimed legitimacy. In other words, the play not only *represents* a destabilized ideology, but it *destabilizes* ideology for its historical audience.

When Polydamas demands that Hermogenes identify the parents of the beautiful peasants just brought to court, Hermogenes lies. "My wife and I," he responds. The king refuses to accept this answer and demands of Hermogenes another at the peril of death. "Sir," the old man confesses pointing to Leonidas, "he is yours" (l. 392). Since Hermogenes lied once, the king pauses before accepting this new answer. Argeleon and Amalthea, as McKeon points out, see nobility only through the eyes of self-interest: Amalthea recognizes nobility and a resemblance to the king in Leonidas because she wants to marry him; Argeleon, who wishes to marry Palmyra, reminds the king of the old man's capacity to lie. Argeleon and Amalthea have both love and the potential to inherit a kingdom at stake in the identification of the heir. The audience, on the other hand, not only has nothing at

stake, but has no reasonable basis on which to decide whether or not to believe Hermogenes.

In Act III, when Polydamas threatens to kill Palmyra for her audacity to continue loving Leonidas, now her social superior, Hermogenes startlingly identifies *Palmyra* as the king's daughter and Leonidas as his own child. Now even though Hermogenes produces new evidence, the audience still has reason to doubt this revelation.⁷ First we have already seen Hermogenes lie at least once, and maybe twice. Perhaps now he tells a third. Second, we now understand how interest can construct nobility: Argeleon, who stands to gain a kingdom, ushers in the old man and calls attention to his news. And Hermogenes, who raised both the boy and the girl, would do anything to prevent her death. Perhaps we cannot distinguish an heir so easily. The audience finds itself in the position of having respected Leonidas's kingship (albeit player kingship) perhaps falsely, and worse, perhaps having falsely undervalued Palmyra. The audience has played Lucio to several disguised figures in this play.

Palmyra indeed turns out to be the daughter of Polydamas, but Hermogenes and his companion later reveal Leonidas as the son of Theagenes--the king whom Polydamas usurped--and thus the truer heir than Palmyra. When Leonidas escapes from his bonds and proclaims his own kingship from the scaffold, Palamede, Rhodophil, and apparently enough citizens to spark a rebellion believe him. As in *The Rehearsal's* tragicomedy, one king swiftly and easily replaces the other.

At the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero forgives but severely rebukes his brother the usurper:

For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother
Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive
Thy rankest fault. (5.1.130-132)

By contrast, Leonidas welcomes the usurper into his own family as the father of his wife. In return Polydamas proclaims

O, had I known you could have been this king,
Thus godlike, great, and good, I should have wished
T'have been dethroned before. 'Tis now I live
And more than reign; now all my joys flow pure,
Unmixed with cares, and undisturbed by conscience. (5.500-4)

While heroic drama makes scant claims to realism, this speech characterizes a particularly excessive reconciliation to defeat. To make one final comparison to Shakespeare, at the end of *Henry IV*, part I, Prince Hal proclaims that he must kill Hotspur because two such potential heirs cannot remain alive. Yet Leonidas *marries* the other potential heir, and forms with her father the

usurper a happy family. Dryden thus integrates and subdues the major threat to Leonidas' power.

While Shakespeare and Dryden use a similar "ruler in disguise" plot, they wrote for different historical audiences and theatricalized different politics. When Dryden first staged this play, England had recently replaced a commonwealth with a rediscovered "true heir." Charles II lived for years as a king with no kingdom, and when he gained the throne, his favorite anecdote became the story of how he hid out in England's countryside for months, disguised as a peasant. Later he generously rewarded those who had assisted him. To return to the problem of the heroic plot's answering character, then, it seems that the question the receiving culture asks is, how can you tell who is the king? How do you find the true center of power? Dryden leaves these questions unanswered but resolves the political problem of two rival factions with a happy marriage. In order to understand the full cultural and political implications of this ending, we must return to the comic plot, where marriage itself is the object of scrutiny.

The comic plot answers the question that Dryden poses at the beginning of the play. Doralice asks why a man and a woman should stay married to each other when their passion has wilted. Throughout the play, each lover tries to escape from his or her legitimate mate and pursues an illegitimate one. Gradually they all come to understand the entire picture, and Act V finds Rhodophil and Palamede glaring at each other in jealousy over women they do not care for, their hands grasping their swords. They began as dear and loyal friends, but now stand poised to kill each other. After considering their options, Rhodophil arrives at the solution: "I think, Palamede, we had as good make a firm league not to invade each other's propriety,"⁸ to which Palamede responds "From henceforth let all acts of hostility cease betwixt us, and that in the usual form of treaties, as well as by sea as by land, and in all fresh waters" (5.381-85). According to the stage direction, Palamede claps his friend on the shoulder when Rhodophil tells his wife that he has "a great temptation to be sealing articles in private" (5.391). Why should they remain faithful? Because if they did not, male homosocial friendship would become impossible.⁹

Palamede and Rhodophil do not consult the women about this contract: sexuality remains under their exclusive control. They realize that their own security in the virtue of their wives must take priority over sexual adventure. In order for each to maintain his dominance and, equally if not more importantly, his homosocial affection, he must establish a contract with his rival. The characters represent both marriage and illicit affairs as violent domination and even rape. Palamede imagines that the worst part of marrying Melantha would be the challenge of silencing her. He declares "I must kiss all night in my own defense, and hold her down like a boy at cuffs, nay, and give her a rising blow every time she begins to speak" (2.92-95). In imagining her intrigue with Rhodophil, Melantha acts out (to her supreme embarrassment when the king happens by) a fantasy of rape. "Nay, now I vow you're rude,"

she cries to the imaginary rapist. "What do you mean to throw me down thus?" (3.1.270-273). The agreement between the men solves their problem because it establishes inviolate lines separating the domestic kingdoms in which each reigns. But it also establishes a proper order *within* the marriage that provides the foundations for the entire political hierarchy. Contemporary arguments supporting patriarchy metaphorically describe the king as the father of his subjects; the king maintains his power over them because God gave fathers a natural authority over their wives and children.¹⁰ Hobbes, for example, formulates authority in the family as follows:

Private Bodies Regular [i.e. families], and Lawfull, are those that are constituted without Letters, or other written Authority, saving the Lawes common to all other Subjects. And because they be united in one Person Representative, they are held for Regular; such as are all Families, in which the Father, or Master ordereth the whole Family. For he obligeth his Children, and Servants, as farre as the Law permitteth, though not further, because none of them are bound to obedience in those actions, which the Law hath forbidden to be done. In all other actions, during the time they are under domestique government, they are subject to their Fathers, and Masters, *as to their immediate Sovereigns*. For the Father, and Master being before the Institution of Common-wealth, absolute Sovereigns in their own Families, they lose afterward no more of their Authority, than the Law of the Commonwealth taketh from them. (*Leviathan*, 285, emphasis mine)

Thus, it is only once Palamede and Rhodophil have established their domestic contract that they can charge to the rescue of Leonidas and restore order for the entire country.

Based on the comic plot's justification for marriage, the heroic plot offers a symbolic resolution of its multiple centers of power. Marriage solves the problem of political stability because it conquers and reintegrates, but does not destroy, the rebellious faction. Instead of representing two men as the young heirs to opposing factions--a Hal and a Hotspur, if you will--Dryden gives us a man and a woman. The man can rape or marry the woman into submission, but, as the comic plot reveals, can never feel entirely confident of her fidelity. Destroying threats to stability no longer seems possible. So while we cannot identify the heir during the play, in retrospect Leonidas, the man, *had* to be the legitimate one in order to both dominate and reintegrate the usurper. In this manner, the plot subdues the rebellious faction and brings it under the control of the "true" one. Instead of destroying the illegitimate family, Dryden marries it to the legitimate one.

Leonidas maintains his dignity throughout the play. When it appears he has lost the kingdom to Palmyra, he scoffs at the triviality of court life and

contemplates his own inner virtue. "Tis true, I am alone," he says, but "So was the godhead ere he made the world" (3.1.486-487). And when Polydamas stands in the way of his kingdom and his love, he faces the heroic challenge of overthrowing the illegitimate reign. When Palmyra has no kingdom and still loves Leonidas, however, she helplessly suffers Polydamas's humiliating threats:

First, in her hand
There shall be placed a player's painted scepter,
And on her head a gilded pageant crown;
Thus shall she go,
With all the boys attending on her triumph:
That done, be put alone into a boat,
With bread and water only for three days. (3.1.312-21)

Polydamas's plan, of course, mocks the very idea that she could ever reign as queen or claim legitimate power; he points to the absurdity of accepting this woman as the true heir. And while she briefly enjoys the status of a princess in Polydamas's court, the play subverts any legitimacy this confers as Polydamas's illegitimacy becomes more and more central. As in the comic plot, though, the contract of marriage finally establishes the proper hierarchy, though one with, uneasily, no guarantee of stability.

By the time this play appeared on stage, Charles II had already married. But at the time of his Restoration, several of his advisors suggested that he marry, for the benefit of the country, Cromwell's daughter. Now this play appeared too late to allegorize such a solution for Charles, but the marriage of Leonidas and Palmyra theatricalizes a politics of the domination, but not destruction, of a rebellious faction. Puritans did not instantly disappear at the Restoration; many, in fact, earned the strategic forgiveness of the crown.¹¹ With the line of succession violently broken and the ideology of divine right shaken, Charles commanded only one of several centers of power. The comic plot demonstrates the social necessity of marriage: how it enforces proper hierarchy, allows men to remain at peace with each other, and keeps women safely under control. The heroic plot theatricalizes the legitimate, necessary, and supposedly loving domination of the true, masculine heir over the feminine and analogically Puritan child of a usurper. Masculine heirs represent legitimate power in this play, feminine heirs represent illegitimate power.

When the king calls Palamede to battle at a point when he hopes to bed Doralice, he answers the call and leaves her, though he still cannot yet solve the affairs of state until he solves his domestic ones. In his sexual frustration, he grumbles out a couplet that puns on the play's political context and political ambivalence:

Rogues may pretend religion and the laws,
But a kind mistress is the Good Old Cause. (4.3.195)

Northwestern University

Notes

1. Staves 71-73. "Buckingham proceeds to develop," she argues, "what is, after all, not only the germ of countless heroic plays and Restoration tragedies, but also the problem of Cromwell and Charles, James and William."

2. For a somewhat different use of the term "theatricalizing politics," see Judy Lee Oliva, "Theatricalizing Politics: David Hare and a Tradition of British Political Drama," diss., Northwestern University, 1988. Oliva discusses how Hare takes advantage of theatricality—including such effects as lighting, costume, and scenery—in order to emphasize his political ideas.

3. See the introduction to Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) where Greenblatt outlines the process of defining "cultural poetics" during the Renaissance.

4. For a discussion of this play's structure, see Laura S. Brown, "The Divided Plot: Tragicomic Form in the Restoration," *ELH* 47 (1980): 67-97.

5. See Leonard Tennenhouse, "Representing Power: *Measure for Measure* in its Time," in *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982).

6. Tennenhouse argues that the monarch's God-like view in this play suggests the justification of the divine right of kings.

7. See also McKeon 155.

8. Auburn glosses "propriety" as "property."

9. John Gillis in *For Better, for Worse: British Marriages 1600 to Present* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) describes marriage in the seventeenth century as "simultaneously patriarchal and companionate" (82). While marriage manuals place the husband at the head of the family, actual practice probably allowed for more flexibility and great variation (55-83). This play represents a kind of marriage, though, where affection between the men takes priority over their adulterous desires, and where men take firm, even violent, control over wives and heterosexual lovers.

For a discussion of homosocial practices in seventeenth century courtship, see Gillis, part 1. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses this idea to illuminate several literary texts.

10. See Gordon Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought: The Authoritarian Family and Political Speculation and Attitudes Especially in Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975).

11. Including, as Lawrence Lipking has reminded me, Dryden himself. Though given a royalist education, Dryden was born into a Puritan family and had composed "Heroic Stanzas Consecrated to the Glorious Memory of His Most Serene and Renowned Highness, Oliver Cromwell" in 1659.

