

## Political Polemics and Gender Instability in Elkanah Settle's *The Female Prelate*

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**Abstract:** *Restoration drama is remarkably loaded with questions about politics and sexuality in both artistic and social life. This study examines the cultural anxieties surrounding gender and its implications in Elkanah Settle's The Female Prelate (1680) where gender roles signify less about biological traits and more about the Restoration cultural scene. We argue that the gendered discourses the play introduces possess a twofold critical relevance that combines the contemporary social expectations of the male/female and complicated political partisanship in the Restoration period. We argue that by assigning specific masculine and feminine roles to characters, Settle shows his political stand and expresses his views regarding the most heated political debates of the period. The study demonstrates how the play destabilizes the traditional conceptions and expectations of gender. This remarkable gender instability can be best evaluated through a combination of literary and historical analysis.*

**Keywords:** Elkanah Settle, Restoration Period, Gender, Politics, Charles II, The Female Prelate

### 1. Introduction and Literature Review

This study explores the masculine/feminine dialectics in Restoration drama from a New Historicist point of view to highlight the fact that the prevailing contemporary sexual, political and religious views were the most significant factors in shaping how the two sexes were portrayed on the Restoration stage. On the surface, Elkanah Settle's play tackles the sexuality of a nation set geographically far away from England. Nevertheless, Settle primarily employs the characters and events of his play as allegory for relevant internal controversies in England.

A brief historical background on the representations of gender roles and sexuality on the Restoration stage is fundamental for this discussion. Sex, as a dramatic theme, was not unique to the Restoration stage, of course. In fact, sexual relationships in Jacobean and Caroline drama occurred with "a frankness unprecedented" on the English stage (Wiggins, 1998, p. vii). However, as Elizabeth Woodrugh (1995) points out, sexual content was highlighted at this time by the presence of real female actresses on stage, enhancing the authenticity of representations of adultery, cuckolding, and libertine life. This added power to staged discussions that parallel and comment on historical court behavior. In part, the strength of this shift in theater performances was a reaction to the disciplined nature of Puritanical ideology of the 1650s.

During the Interregnum, many aspects of life were monitored according to the strict regulations of Puritan rule. Puritan leaders wanted to establish a new lifestyle that eliminated all "corruptive" pleasures of monarchical regimes. Under Puritan rule, restrictions were imposed on "unfruitful" pastime activities such as the theatre, and only certain "virtuous" genres of art, such as opera performances, were permitted (Wiseman, 1998). Furthermore, Puritan legislators in Parliament attempted to suppress what they perceived as deviant sexual behavior. Prostitution and excessive use of alcohol were targeted, and people who violated orders were whipped and disgraced in public and later exiled to colonies (Capp, 2012).

The restoration of Charles II relieved much of the anxiety that the Puritan regime had caused. Maximilian E. Novak (2001) argues that the Restoration period witnessed the younger generation's assertion of freedom and selfhood. Sexual freedom was among the major demands that young individuals in the new,

royalist society called for. Novak adds that the new generation expressed a strong will to change the rigid control of the older patriarchal generations. After the end of Puritan rule, people found themselves not only attending dramatic performances in theatres, but also watching plays that explicitly discussed themes of adultery, homosexuality, and incest. These sexual themes were often explicitly tied thematically to the English nobility. Comedies, in particular, reflected life at Charles' court and discussed the aristocratic libertine lifestyle.

In fact, Charles II and his rakish courtiers were involved in a number of well-publicized sexual relationships, making this common knowledge. Matthew Jenkinson (2010) states that "[t]he king and his more notorious courtiers indulged in priapic pursuit with a number of mistresses and Charles himself begat a panoply of bastards" (p. 212). Turner and Grantham (2002) point out that Charles was known for his numerous relationships with women, from an actress of low-birth, Nell Gwyn, to the aristocratic Louise de Kerouaille. The public and continual pursuit of sexual relationships ended with the king fathering a dozen illegitimate children by his seven mistresses (Fraser, 2011). Political fallout from this complicated his reign as discontent increased for Charles spending much public wealth on his numerous, personal mistresses. Hutton (1989) points out that many English subjects questioned paying taxes that, in fact, were spent on their monarch's pleasures.

Charles's flamboyantly luxurious and possibly effeminate lifestyle was often seen as irresponsible as the King paid less attention to many crucial issues, including producing a legitimate successor. Within a few years of his marriage to Catherine of Braganza, it became clear that the royal couple were facing serious problems in producing an heir. Barry Coward (2003) points out that many Parliament members tried to convince Charles to divorce the Queen in an attempt to remarry him and secure the nation with a legitimate Protestant heir. Another solution that was offered to the King was legally legitimizing Charles's eldest son in preparation for making him the obvious heir (Webb, 2014). Many Whig leaders urged this course so that the Duke of Monmouth could ascend the throne (De Krey, 2017). Charles ignored all these suggestions, and at the same time, continued his sexual adventures, producing more and more illegitimate offspring.

As the antics of the nobility made sex topical, so popular religious prejudices also added a twist to representations of sexuality on the Restoration stage. These prejudices established a strong association between particular religious beliefs and sexual behavior and traits. A decade into Charles's reign, unease about Catholicism had renewed among his country's Protestant subjects. Part of this was political. People saw the increasing Catholic influence at court as a source of danger that could strengthen French hegemony. Further, the lack of a legitimate heir meant that Charles' Catholic brother, James, remained next in line. Parliament struggled to legally exclude James from succession. In addition, the "Popish Plot" which broke out in 1678 spread scares about the menacing Catholic danger. All these complex issues and the intersection between politics and religion are reflected in many Restoration dramas.

The convoluted political, cultural, and religious issues found expression on the stage at the intersection where sexuality was depicted. In practice, this played out in the form of highly sexualized performances that involved bold libertine scenes. In many senses, the obscene and indulgent theatre of the Restoration period reflected the spirit of the English court.<sup>1</sup> Sexual pleasure was then the core of many problems for England during Charles's reign. His court's libertine nature shaped the dynamics of his political regime, affected the life of the whole nation, and defined, to a certain extent, the broad lines of his foreign policy.

Elkanah Settle was an active figure in the Whig party during the Popish Plot and the exclusion crisis (1678-1681). One of the influential pamphlets he wrote during this time is *The Character of a Popish Successor* (1680). Warner (2001) explains that due to Settle's reputation for having a skillful dramatic

<sup>1</sup>For more about court Libertinism and Restoration drama see Alnwairan (2022)

mastery of scenic effect and due to his reputation as a violent advocate for Protestantism, he was asked to organize anti-Catholic processions on Queen Elizabeth's birthday. The pageants were extremely popular and they manifested the increasing support for the Whig party. The accumulating hatred towards Catholicism resulted in significant political consequences. More than merely reflecting religious tensions, the pageants marked a new period in English political history as people showed more support for the Whig party. Williams (2010) argues that the pope burning processions associated symbolic representations of traditional Roman power, cruelty, and corruption with current Roman (meaning Catholic) attempts to overthrow the government and liberties of England.

This study sheds light on Settle's *The Female Prelate* to reflect how the above-mentioned cultural debates decided the way in which gender was staged late in the rule of Charles II. The discussion below will show that masculinity and femininity on stage are linked to the Restoration cultural dynamics more than representing real human traits. The choices relevant to gender and sexuality were employed by Settle to comment on the general cultural scene of the Restoration. This study is significant in the sense that it draws attention to the relation between patriotic sentiments, the attitude of the playwright, and the specificity of gender representations on the Restoration stage.

## 2. Theory

In order to put our topic in its appropriate context within the critical discourse that examined themes of masculinity and femininity in the modern English theater, it is important to refer to the ideas of New Historicism, which can be helpful in the examination of the political and social forces that contributed to the construction of gender roles in Restoration drama. New Historicism is useful to our research because it investigates the cultural, political, and religious influences that played a role in developing cultural ideas and understanding sexual norms during this time. Additionally, it investigates how dramatists used gendered characters to communicate certain political statements to their audiences. The New Historicist approach emphasizes the idea that authors cannot separate themselves from the period in which they live. This means that the ideological framework of their society penetrates all of their efforts.

The New Historicists analyze a text by placing it in the historical period in which it was composed; as a result, they stress the importance of recreating the culture in which the work was originally formed. Therefore, the better a person understands a culture, the better he/she understands its literary production. The idea that writing is a social construction generated by society is central to the New Historicist school of thought. In return, culture contributes to forming literature, which helps shape culture. In accordance with these presumptions, a more in-depth understanding of the social, political, and religious components of the Restoration period is required to properly analyze the works of literature written during that period. As a result, the present research clearly refers to a wide range of non-literary texts, such as political and religious writings, which contribute to the developing a comprehensive mapping of the environment in which the literary work was developed.

New Historicism is a method that, according to Stephen Greenblatt (2015, 1982), questions the presumptions that distinguish between the literary foreground and the political experience or, more broadly, between artistic production and other forms of social activity. Greenblatt does not regard literary works as a static collection of texts that are distinct from all other types of expression or as a consistent set of representations of historical facts that occur in the world outside them. Instead, he views these works as representing areas of power, locations of conflict, and fluctuating interests in the world. In this regard, the perspectives of the New Historicists are very helpful to our research since they see literature as a kind of civil interaction and explore the intricate and intertwined connections between literature and society. Our research follows the ideas of the New Historicist mode of philosophy and focuses on incorporating historical contexts into the examination of literary works. In this instance, the theatrical

study of Settle's play is connected to the basic conceptions of the civilization that created the play, the English Restoration period.

### 3. Discussion

As Susan Owen (1996) notes, the Restoration witnessed a shift of the private into the public in relation to the court's affairs. As a public forum for the expression of courtly intrigue, the Restoration stage was ready to bring the *arcana imperii* in front of the public. What is apposite for this study is the extent to which Restoration playwrights used the supposed sexual association of Catholicism as an allegory for the sexual excess of the court in England.

In Settle's play, the Roman Catholic Church, a religio-political entity that threatens the authority of the British monarchy and pledges to take "revenge" on members of the English nobility, poses a serious threat to the nation. *The Female Prelate* is an anti-popish play staged at the height of the Popish Plot with a dedication to the Earl of Shaftesbury, an influential figure in Parliament during the crisis. Settle's *The Female Prelate; Being The History Of The Life And Death Of Pope Joan* is a tragedy telling the story of the supposedly historical, ninth-century figure, Pope Joan. In the late 1670s, Whig propaganda popularized the legend and helped bring it back into the public consciousness. According to Rustici (2006), the legend describes a woman who rose to political and religious power through her cunning character. The narrative gained popularity among anti-Catholic campaigners, and it begins with a German woman called Joan disguising herself as a male to travel with her lover. Her position as a "male" afforded her access to education, and Joan succeeded in her studies, eventually rising to be elected as pope. The legend tells that Joan got pregnant after serving as Pope for two years. Since she was unaware that she was going into labor, Joan scandalously gave birth during a public papal procession. Tragically, according to the legend, the popess "died either in childbirth or at the hands of a Roman mob enraged over her deception" (Rustici, 2006, p.1).

Settle's play depicts tragic events inside the Catholic church that are initiated by the lustful and deceptive "female pope." The play opens with the young Duke of Saxony, a Guest in Rome, telling his wife about the unfortunate death of his father, the previous duke. As the narrative unfolds, it reveals that the priest responsible for Old Saxony's death was a woman. Joanna Angelica, the duke's previous mistress, is said to have disguised herself as a priest to obtain personal access to the duke and exact revenge on him for moving on to another lover. And she is the same lady who, through a series of deceptions, passes herself off as a man to become Pope John. The identity of the popess is revealed at the end of the play when, unaware she was in labor, she miscarries in the street. Joanna's body is cast in the Tiber by an angry mob.

The play is an excellent illustration of how Restoration theater examined and satirized the sexual conduct of the elite through the use of witty dialogues. The representation of the gendered identities in the play seems to have been strongly impacted by the lascivious attitude of the English court. This will be illustrated through the analysis of the circumstances that surrounded the writing of the play. The discussion below examines the discourse of masculinity versus femininity by referring to social and political backgrounds against which the body is seen as a representative of a complex fabric of cultural dynamics.

The instability of the traditional gender formation in the play is noteworthy, especially when projecting it against the political and religious controversies of the period. The young Duke of Saxony is a good example. Although figured as the "good guy" in the play, he is portrayed as less manly than similar characters in heroic drama. He scarcely performs his role as heir of Saxony. He is referred to as "the harmless Blusterer" (Settle, 1680, p. 7) and a naïve person who trust the justice of the Catholic Church, characterizing the court in Rome as the "Head and Spring of Justice" (Settle, 1680, p. 6). In addition, Saxony's effeminate image is manifested in the play through his recurrent associations with women. In

most of the scenes of Saxony appears in company with his young wife, Angeline. Instead of seeking revenge for the loss of his father, Saxony's attention is distracted by the beauty of his wife:

Sax: MY dearest Angeline, my softest Bride!  
Oh never did the Rising Sun salute  
A man more happy, or a day more glorious:  
Last night, our Nuptial Coronation night:  
Oh the vast Scenes of my immortal Joys!  
To what high Orb of Glory am I wrapt? ...  
(Settle, 1680, p. 2)

Settle, like other Whig writers, was deeply concerned with similar accounts about Charles II's effeminate behavior, something connected to his well-documented womanizing. These concerns can only be seen through the Restoration conception of effeminacy. Zimbaro (2014) explains that during the Restoration period, people thought that excessive heterosexual relationships could make a man effeminate. In Restoration sexuality, the unrestrained desire for a woman increased the risk of feminization. For Laqueur (1992), effeminacy in early modern England was considered "as a condition of instability, a state of men who through excessive devotion to women became more like them" (p. 123). Laqueur adds the view that "men who associated too extensively with women could lose the hardness and definition of their more perfect bodies and regress into effeminacy" (p. 7). Restoration thought considered excessive contact with women dangerous to masculinity. In a sense, this was one of the reasons behind the playwright's concern with Charles's sexual behavior. For the public mind of this time, masculinity was one of the basic characteristics of the successful leader, a trait that was always the opposite of effeminacy. Restoration writers feared that their monarch's masculine identity was endangered by his unruly and excessive contact with females.

Despite making claims that he seeks revenge of his father's blood, the prince does nothing in reality. He boasts: "That's not enough t'appease a Father's Ghost,/Blood requires blood, and vengeance wields a Sword/That cuts on both sides" (Settle, 1680, p. 4). He also claims that he will kill the false pope in public: "Thanks, my kind Stars, he is a Prince, a Cardinal,/Fit for my Father's Victim. Oh, 'twere brave/To stab him in the publick Consistory" (Settle, 1680, p. 5). Shortly after, the prince hesitates and prefer a safe revenge to avoid being caught by the Romans. Instead of carrying out his revenge as a brave prince, he follows his wife's advice and delays his revenge:

Thy Reasons and thy Love shall guide my hand:  
I'll take thy kind advice and move more calmly.  
Rashness and Vengeance never were Allies:  
Revenge is witty when it walks, not flies. (Settle, 1680, p. 5)

In the play, Angeline proves more courageous than her husband. She supports him and encourages him to "bear it like a man" (Settle, 1680, p. 21). When he is taken to prison, she cries, "Keep up your courage, guard your Royal Honour:/ Think not one thought below your Princely Birth"(Settle, 1680, p. 24). Even when he has a chance to attack the popess, he does not take a quick action and instead is "disarm'd by the people" (Settle, 1680, p. 71). The prince is humiliated and taken to seclusion by the angry rabble.

The other side of the gender instability comes from the title character, a female disguised as a man. The cross dressing trick proves successful, as Joanna, aided by her strong character and extraordinary ability to learn, travels through different countries and joins monasteries without raising suspicions about her sex. She boasts:

Thus far has my Disguise, and my Designs  
Deceived the blinded world; for seven long years  
My Arts and Sex concealed: nay, and to heighten  
The miracle, I have lived an undiscovered Woman,  
Bred amongst Priests, high fed, hot-blooded Priests,  
Those long-wing'd Hawks at all the Female Game:  
Yet I've defied their keenest eyes to track me: (Settle, 1680, p. 6)

Settle mixes his mockery of the Catholic faith with allusions to gender transformation as Joanna leaves behind her femininity in the play. The popess declares:

Let 'em but bring me golden Offerings,  
And I would make Heavens Chrystal Hinges fly:  
Fill my Exchequer, and my Purgatory  
Should soon be empty. Yet methinks for our  
Stoln pleasures sake, I should be kind to Love,  
And sell my pardons cheap to poor expiring Lovers. (Settle, 1680, p. 7)

While Settle criticizes the corruption of the Catholic Church by referring to the selling of indulgences that was common in medieval times, the proud popess character undergoes a gradual shift to masculinity, displaying arrogance and might. Joanna's courtier, Lorenzo, wonders about her miraculous "Sexes Transformation" (Settle, 26). Joanna attributes this transformation of her character to a strong character that cannot be matched by the other women of her time:

My Soul was brighter than the Shrine that held it.  
Heaven gave me those prodigious depths of knowledge,  
That infinite Mass of Sense, that with disdain  
I left my native barbarous *Germany*,  
To search the Treasures of the Learned *Athens*. (Settle, 1680, p. 27)

The implications of masculinity in Joanna's character can be best understood when examined through the complex texture of the Restoration religio-political context. We argue that this instability in gender roles in the play reveals Settle's double criticism of both the weaknesses of the monarchy's institution on the one hand, and the menacing danger of the Catholic tide that was, as many Whigs believed at that time, increasing to unprecedented levels. Before the strata of gender dynamics of the play can be peeled away, it is necessary first examine the religio-political backstage of the era.

In the play, female masculinity is used by Settle to highlight the Catholic influence that threatened to impact all aspects of life in England. This started at suspected leniency towards Catholicism and ended in the very real Catholic mistresses of Charles II who interfered in the state's decision making.<sup>2</sup> The references to Old Saxony's mistress cannot go unnoticed by the Restoration audiences. At least, references to two mistresses of Old Saxony's are mentioned in the play. Joanna narrates how she was the secret mistress of previous duke before another woman interfered and takes over Joanna's position:

<sup>2</sup>For more about Settle's hostility towards Catholicism see (De Krey, 2017 and Alnwairan, 2020).

I lived a Lady in the Saxon Court,  
And the Dukes private Mistress, undiscovered  
Both by his Dutchess, that sharp watchful *Juno*,  
And this young Prince, that subtle *Mercury*.(Settle, 1680, p. 28)

Joanna notices the Duke's dislike of her after two years, and she decides to leave the court and return disguised as a priest. She shortly discovered the reason behind the Duke's abandoning her: "My long Prophetick Fears proved but too true; / A beauteous Saxon Lady, called Leonora, / Was the curst Ravisher of all my Joys" (Settle, 1680, p. 29). Old Saxony stands in for Charles II in the minds of the Restoration audience, with a not-so-subtle sense of how he has been corrupted by femininity, and how his pursuits are likely to end.

Settle attacks Catholicism in his play, but railing against the increasing influence of Catholicism in England was the fashion on the late 1670s. It is important to understand that these religious concerns and fears were always connected to the political scene of the time. Settle's play is not only propagandistic in the anti-Catholic Restoration manifesto but also a stark oppositional reaction by the rising Whig party. It is indicative here to refer to the play's dedication in which Settle praises the Earl of Shaftesbury, a prominent Whig leader, as "his Sovereign's best Subject, and his Countries truest and faithfullest Champion" (Settle, 1680, n.p). This flattery of a hostile oppositional figure like Shaftesbury underscores a direct criticism to monarchy and its inability to take actions against the challenges that faced the nation. In the dedication to the play, like many of his political pamphlets (See *The Character of a Popish Successor* (1680), Settle warns of popery while stressing that preserving the Protestant faith is the only way to save the nation from chaos and infighting:

Our *England* has in one circumstance the fate of *Troy*; our Establisht Religion is our true *Palladium*; and whilst that is preserved, we are invincible, unhurt by all the Hostility of the world; but that once gone, our ruin'd *Troynovant* is but an universal Conflagration: and he that like your Lordship most studies to secure that *Palladium*.(Settle, 1680, n.p)

#### 4. Conclusion

The discussion above was concerned with examining how public anxiety regarding the transformations of the traditional gender roles on stage presents a discourse of crisis and conflict within the English Restoration culture. Settle's theatrical gender transformation techniques are representative of relevant sexual, religious, and political transformations in Restoration public life. The analysis of *The Female Prelate* reveals the extensive use of gender implications on stage in order to convey specific political messages in regards to contemporary political and religious life in England. Restoration Whig playwrights, like Settle, tended to reach a consensus on the ways they could highlight the menacing dangers of Catholicism, on the one hand, and Charles II's libertine lifestyle on the other. The King's well-known sexual adventures, his irresponsibility, and his leniency toward Catholic expansion in the nation gave ammunition to Whig propaganda which relied on allegorical stories and characters to comment on the King's inability to rule his kingdom and meet the aspirations of the people. For an audience familiar with allegorical performances like the Restoration audience, Settle's allusions to male effeminate behavior and female masculine monstrosity could be easily projected on the contemporary religio-political scene when both effeminacy and Catholicism were seen as endangering the very existence of Protestantism in England.

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