This is a postprint!
The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in
Life Writing 13.4 (Taylor & Francis, 2016): 449-64.
http://www.tandfonline.com/DOI: 10.1080/14484528.2015.1073715.

‘Rais’d from a Dunghill, to a King’s Embrace’: Restoration Verse Satires on Nell Gwyn as Life-Writing

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This work was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) under Grant T 589-G23.

Abstract

Nell Gwyn (1650-1687), one of the very early theatre actresses on the Restoration stage and long-term mistress to King Charles II, has today become a popular cultural icon, revered for her wit and good-naturedness. The image of Gwyn that emerges from Restoration satires, by contrast, is considerably more critical of the king’s actress-mistress. It is this image, arising from satiric references to and verse lives of Nell Gwyn, which forms the focus of this paper. Creating an image – a ‘likeness’ – of the subject is often cited as one of the chief purposes of biography. From the perspective of biography studies, this paper will probe to what extent Restoration verse satire can be read as life-writing and where it can be situated in the context of other 17th-century life-writing forms. It will examine which aspects of Gwyn’s life and character the satires address and what these choices reveal about the purposes of satire as a form of biographical storytelling. Gwyn’s case, it will be argued, demonstrates that Restoration verse satire, which participates in many of the biographical conventions of the period, ought to be revaluated as a site of early modern life-writing.

Keywords

Nell Gwyn, Restoration verse satire, biography, life-writing

‘Rais’d from a Dunghill, to a King’s Embrace’: Restoration Verse Satires on Nell Gwyn as Life-Writing

Nell Gwyn (1650-1687), one of the very early theatre actresses on the Restoration stage and long-term mistress to King Charles II, is revered today as a cultural icon. She features in numerous biographies, in movies and recent romance novels; pubs, luxury apartment blocks, recipes and marmalade companies are named after her. Gwyn was a celebrity in her own day, treasured and despised, publicly discussed, repeatedly portrayed by court painter John Lely, and frequently written about, especially by Restoration satirists. In an age that witnessed a surge of misogynist satires, the king’s mistresses proved a popular target. The public’s preoccupation with Gwyn must be seen in the context of a marked obsession with courtesan figures in Restoration culture (see Conway 5), reflecting anxieties about female sexual and political agency, an obsession which in Gwyn’s case was amplified by the newly developing celebrity cult surrounding actresses and their socially and morally doubtful standing.

Today Gwyn is represented primarily as a good-natured trickster figure and/or romantic heroine, and, as such, in an overwhelmingly positive light. In an article for the *Daily Mail*, luridly entitled ‘Royal Mistress Nell Gwyn’s Expenses Would Shame our MPs But She Was Worth Every Penny,’ Andrew Roberts introduces her as ‘one of the most attractive characters in British history’ and credits her with ‘lifting the spirits of a nation’ after eleven austere years of Puritan rule. The image that emerges from Restoration satires, by contrast, is considerably more critical of the king’s actress-mistress. It is this image, shaped in satiric references to and verse lives of Nell Gwyn, which forms the focus of this paper. In its visual sense, the term ‘image’ – like ‘portrait’ – is related to biography: a ‘catching of likeness’ (Lee, *Biography* 2-3) that attempts to ‘recreate’ a character. From the perspective of biography studies, this paper will probe to what extent Restoration verse satire can be read as biography (however fragmented) – or as life-writing, to use the more inclusive term –, and where we could situate it in the context of other 17th-century life-writing forms. It will examine which aspects of Gwyn’s life and character – which biographemes, to borrow Roland Barthes’s term (9) – the satires address in their representations of her and what these choices reveal about the purposes of Restoration satire as a form of biographical storytelling.

Restoration Verse Satire and Life-Writing

‘Ultimately, what I have attempted to present in this biography is an intimate portrait of Nell Gwyn,’ Charles Beauclerk, a descendant of the actress, notes in *Nell Gwyn: Mistress to a King* (published in 2005; Beauclerk 3). For this purpose, he frequently draws on Restoration verse satires, examining them for clues to his ancestor’s life and treating the ‘myths and stories that informed her life’ as key to understanding Gwyn’s ‘significance for her time’ (3). In his 2000 biography *Nell Gwyn*, Derek Parker similarly includes occasional quotes from satires to shed light on certain periods in Gwyn’s life, for instance when speculating about her possible beginnings as a child prostitute (Parker 11). In view of the dearth of ‘hard facts’ and in the almost complete absence of autobiographical writings,[1] it is hardly surprising that biographers today draw on any source for information about their subject, even if it belongs to a genre whose truth-value is uncertain, to say the least. In doing so, they continue a trend among Gwyn biographers that is discernible already in the eighteenth century: Thomas Betterton’s *History of the English Stage* features two chapters about Gwyn’s life, the first of which contains a lengthy quotation from the 1681 satire ‘A Panegyric,’ referred to as ‘Lord Rochester’s account’ of Gwyn’s life (56). In the second chapter we learn, ‘Some reported, that a Battalion of Soldiers begot her’ (Betterton 111), a phrase which contains an almost verbatim quotation from the 1688 lampoon ‘The Lady of Pleasure’: ‘No man alive could ever call her daughter, / For a battalion of arm’d men begot her’ (Etherege, ‘The Lady of Pleasure’ ll. 7-8). ‘Her first employment,’ Betterton continues, ‘is said to be Selling of Herrings; next was exposed by Madam Ross, a noted Procuress, to those who would give half a Crown’ (111), which distinctly echoes the 1677 ‘Satire’ attributed to John Lacy:

> Of thine anointed Princess, Madam Nelly,
> Whose first employment was with open throat
> To cry fresh herrings e’en at ten a groat,
> Then was by Madam Ross expos’d to town,
> (I mean to those that would give half a crown) (ll 24-28)

These instances of recycling satires of Gwyn in biographical writings about her suggest that these verse satires may have been considered viable biographical archives by some early modern life-writers, despite their questionable factual basis.

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[1] Gwyn was illiterate but a few letters have survived which were presumably dictated to a scribe. Many famous observations and anecdotes about her conduct at court stem from the reports, letters, diaries or memoirs of others, such as the famous *Pepy’s Diaries* and the memoirs of the Comtesse D’Aulnoy.

The question of satire's referentiality, its relation to the extra-textual world, has long been a matter of debate in satire criticism, with views broadly ranging between two opposing poles, one conceiving of satire as deriving its value primarily from its link to the real world,[2] the other regarding it as a purely verbal, literary artefact whose connection to a historical reality – if not entirely obscure – is, at best, irrelevant. Evidently in line with the latter view, Rose A. Zimbardo insists that Restoration satire is 'not concerned with external existents at all' (*At Zero Point* 14); it 'exists nowhere but in language, for it is both *of* and *in* language' ('Semiotics' 29). While this may be true of some satires, others very obviously relate to historical persons and incidents, as Dustin Griffin points out. He suggests that the terms on which the referentiality debate has been carried out have not made allowance for the great variance within the genre as regards, for instance, the type of referent (a specific person vs. a class of people) or the different degrees of explicitness (from full proper names to allegorical names; see Griffin 120-1). Even in cases where a historical person is clearly and unambiguously addressed, however, the very nature of the genre – its habitual exaggerations and distortions – should stand as a warning to take the 'information' it provides too literally, as Griffin concedes: 'historical particulars in satire always have a curious in-between status' (123). Thus, a satire may be clearly referential and yet not be 'true.' To argue, in consequence, that satire's factual unreliability excludes it from the domain of life-writing, would, however, introduce a misleading opposition between satire as fiction and life-writing as incontrovertible fact. Scholars of early modern life-writing have long drawn attention to the epistemological challenges posed by life-writing forms in an age when biography was not yet bound by the generic conventions commonly ascribed to it today.[3] Harold Love, for instance, argues for a reconsideration of gossip as one of the foundations of early modern life-writing (Love 91-104). To cite a prominent example, Thomas Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, a wonderfully vivid collection of short biographies composed during the last decades of the 17th century, relies on local gossip, anecdotes and 'ancient jests' about his subjects as biographical source material (such as the 'switter swatter' story about Raleigh, cf. Love 93). We cannot approach 17th-century life-writing as we would modern history, with its 'clear notions of evidence and archive,' Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker conclude (9). Thus, satire and life-writing in the early modern period cannot simply be treated as opposites when it comes to their factual truth value.

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[2] For a more detailed discussion of the referentiality debate in satire criticism, see Griffin 115-124.

[3] Significantly, the first recorded appearance of the term 'biography' dates back to 1661; cf. Donaldson 67.

Furthermore, the forms of early modern lives differ considerably from the generic conventions of modern biography, which is traditionally understood as an extended, linear narrative of coherent development. Sharpe and Zwicker note that early modern life-writing can hardly be conceived of as a genre at all: ‘The very sites of early modern life writing in prefaces, paratexts, dedications, and epistles themselves preclude the notion of an established or even predominant genre of life writing’ (7). As a textual mode, then, lives were very much in flux in the early modern period, consumed in fragments, ‘in and through the texts that we assign to a variety of other genres: history, romance, travel narrative, classical translation, hagiography, biblical exegesis’ (Sharpe and Zwicker 7-8). And verse satire, we might add. Sharpe and Zwicker’s point about the fragmented nature of life-writing, its indeterminate existence within various other genres, is important with regard to Nell Gwyn as a biographical subject. As references to Gwyn of varying length are scattered across numerous satirical poems from the period, such an inclusive approach opens up a new, biographical perspective on these referential fragments.

While satire criticism and biography theory have largely been operating independently of each other, both, interestingly, have ascribed an educational function to the textual genre they study. The point has often been made – and just as frequently refuted – that Restoration satire can be subsumed under Augustan satire, and as such, constitutes a deeply ‘moral’ genre that typically has a corrective function: exposing its target to ridicule for departing from a virtue, a particular social norm, it explicitly or implicitly refers readers to said norm and encourages them to follow it.[4] Similar claims have often been made about biography (see, for instance, Lee 16-17) and about early modern life-writing in particular. Thus, for Sharpe and Zwicker, ‘exemplarity is at the heart of early modern lives and early modern life writing’ (4). Michael McKeon observes that ‘like their predecessors, early modern historians made ample use of concrete examples to teach abstract precept, a rhetoric of exemplarity that moves from the local instance to the general application’ (339). Thomas Fuller’s *History of the Worthies of England* (1662) is a famous case in point:

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[4] See, for instance, Alvin Kernan, *The Plot of Satire* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Pr., 1965), and Mary Claire Randolph, who proposes a bi-partite structure of criticising folly and reinforcing a norm in ‘The Structural Design of the Formal Verse Satire’ (*Philological Quarterly* 21 (1942): 368-384); for a general discussion of the rhetoric of satire, see Griffin 35-38.

in many ways a precursor to the *Dictionary of National Biography,* it explicitly states as one of its aims 'To present examples to the living, having here precedents of all sorts and sizes; of men famous for valour, wealth, wisdom, learning, religion, and bounty to the public' (Fuller 2). This notion of exemplary biography can be traced back as far as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, from the first century A.D., in which the virtues and moral failings of famous men are set up as examples to be emulated or avoided.

The notion of satire's educational function – its upholding of a moral standard – has been fiercely criticised in more recent scholarship on the Restoration period. Robert D. Hume, for instance, emphatically argues against a misconceived application of the Augustan ideal to Restoration satire, insisting that much of the latter is 'purely and simply malicious or outrageous, written to hurt, startle, or amuse,' and that 'Carolean satire was almost always topical, personal, and hurtful. It was more often subversive and shocking than corrective or constructive' (Hume 371), a point to which I shall return later. For the present purpose, it is important to observe that Restoration verse satire and life-writing, two modes that are commonly thought to have little in common, are related in the sense that both have been repeatedly attributed an exemplary, didactic function, an idea that will also be examined in the following discussion of satires about Nell Gwyn. This section will take a closer look at the common parameters underlying the various satirical representations of Gwyn and probe the idea that verse satires can be regarded as 'biographical'.

Nell Gwyn in Restoration Verse Satire

'Hard by Pall Mall lives a wench call'd Nell. / King Charles the Second he kept her. / She hath got a trick to handle his p------, / But never lays hands on his sceptre,' begins the unattributed poem 'Nell Gwynne,' dated 1669, the year after the king and Gwyn had begun their relationship, and a year before she gave birth to their first son. If biographical representation can be understood as an attempt at a 'likeness,' of answering the question 'what was she like?', the author of this early Gwyn poem seems to picture his subject as a promiscuous, skilled lover who has no ambition to exert political influence on the king. This view of Gwyn as someone who – in contrast to the King's other long-term mistresses Barbara Palmer and Louise de Kéroualle – does not attempt to influence the king's political decision-making is more or less consistent across the different satires in which she is mentioned. An invective against

Charles II from 1677 entitled ‘Satire’ and attributed, with some reservations, to John Lacy, Gwyn’s dance master and possibly lover in her early days at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, alludes to the danger of royal mistresses coming to dominate the king: ‘Was ever prince’s soul so meanly poor, / To be enslav’d to ev’ry little whore?’ The idea implied in these lines, of a natural hierarchy upset, has been identified by Felicity Nussbaum as a regular theme in Restoration satirical verse: ‘woman, as violator of the authority of her contractual bonds to the patriarchal order’ (3). ‘Satire’ does not, however, suggest that Gwyn attempts to directly interfere in affairs of state. The biographical ‘facts’ it does cite against her are of a different kind:

> Of thine anointed Princess, Madam Nelly,
> Whose first employment was with open throat
> To cry fresh herrings e’en at ten a groat,
> Then was by Madam Ross expos’d to town,
> (I mean to those that would give half a crown),
> Next in the playhouse she took her degree,
> As men commence in th’ university:
> No doctors till they’ve masters been before,
> Nor any player but she’s first a whore.
> Look back and see the people mad with rage
> To see the bitch in so high equipage,
> And ev’ry day they do the monster see,
> They let ten thousand curses fall on thee. (ll. 24-38)

The sarcasm communicated through the author’s obvious misapplication of the title ‘Princess’ is underlined by his account of Gwyn’s extraordinary career. Growing up in poverty, Gwyn first worked as a street vendor (Beauclerk mentions this as a possibility, 37-38), then as a prostitute at Madam Ross’s (again mentioned as a possibility in recent biographies; Parker 12; Beauclerk 14-15), and finally as a theatre actress. These stages of her life, which for the author seem emblematic of Gwyn’s vulgar and immoral nature, are represented as an upward social progression that is as unlikely as it is outrageous, culminating in her liaison with the head of state.[5] Apparently, it is not simply Gwyn’s alleged sexual licentiousness – the assumption that she may have been a common prostitute – which provokes the author’s indignation, but the fact that the life-course of a person of such humble and vulgar beginnings has led her all the way up to the position of royal mistress. She has attained an economic and social status that she is clearly not entitled to, which renders her ‘monstrously’ out of place: a ‘bitch in so high equipage.’ Describing Gwyn’s ascent – a common trope in life-writing – in masculine terms of career progression again serves to vilify her. Her ‘immoral’ pursuit of a stage career is shown to be nothing like the successive increase in academic honours that marks the path of educated men of good birth. King Charles is thus reproached for elevating a low-born, coarse and lewd woman to the position of royal mistress, rather than for the fact that he is having extramarital affairs.

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[5] Nell Gwyn was, in fact, not the only Restoration actress who entered into a liaison with an aristocrat. Actress Margaret ‘Peg’ Hughes, for instance, became long-term mistress to Prince Rupert of the Rhine, first cousin of King Charles II, at around the same time when Gwyn’s relationship with the King began, thus rendering Gwyn’s social ascent extraordinary in degree rather than kind.

There are numerous other satires which deride Gwyn’s lowly origins, such as ‘A Panegyric’ (1681), wrongly attributed to John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, which begins as follows:

> Of a great heroine I mean to tell,
> And by what just degrees her titles swell,
> To Mrs. Nelly grown from cinder Nell. (ll. 1-3)

As the title indicates, the poem ironically appropriates a form that enjoyed some popularity during the Restoration and before and is closely associated with life-writing.[6] Defined in 1708 by John Kersey as ‘a Speech deliver'd before a solemn and general Assembly of People, especially in Praise of a great Prince’ (qtd. in Garrison 4), panegyrics had already been composed by the likes of Ben Jonson, Abraham Cowley, Edmund Waller and John Dryden in praise of their respective Stuart monarchs, enumerating their excellent qualities and heroic deeds, and glorifying the Restoration. Abraham Cowley’s ‘Ode, Upon His Majesties Restoration and Return’ (1660) may serve as an example here. Associating the birth, and then the Restoration, of Charles II with a rising star (ll. 13-20; Richard Cromwell, by contrast, is referred to as a ‘falling-star’ l. 210), it evokes the king’s ‘many years of trouble and distress’ (l. 160), relating the story of his suffering in exile and connecting it to the formation of his character:

> But in the cold of want, and storms of adverse chance,
> They harden his young Virtue by degrees;
> The beauteous Drop first into Ice does freez,
> And into solid Chrystal next advance.
> His murdered friends and kindred he does see,
> And from his flaming Country flee.
> Much is he tost at Sea, and much at Land,
> Does long the force of angry gods withstand.
> He does long troubles and long wars sustain,
> E’re he his fatal Birth-right gain.

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[6] Paulina Kewes explicitly mentions the panegyric as a format of early modern royal biography (187).

> With no less time or labour can
> Destiny build up such a Man,
> Who's with sufficient virtue fill'd
> His ruin'd Country to rebuild. (ll. 283-297)

In similar terms, though of course on a sarcastic note, 'A Panegyric' relates the struggles and rise of young Nell Gwyn, its 'great heroine':

> Much did she suffer first, on bulk and stage,
> From the black guard and bullies of her age;
> Much more her growing virtue did sustain
> While dear Charles Hart and Buckhurst su'd in vain;
> In vain they su'd – curs'd be the envious tongue
> That her undoubted chastity would wrong! (ll. 4-9)

Like other satires, this one foregrounds the humble beginnings of 'cinder Nell' to discredit her character, placing her first on a bulk (the stall of a street vendor), then on the theatre stage, and referring to her lovers Charles Hart, a celebrated actor (Parker 50), and Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, with whom Gwyn embarked on a brief affair in 1667 (Parker 75). Gwyn's 'native dirt' (l. 16) and 'dirty hand' (l. 21) are ridiculed, as well as her first job in the theatre as an orange seller (l. 23).[7]

> Fate now for her did its whole force engage,
> And from the pit she's mounted to the stage.
> There in full luster did her glories shine
> And, long eclips'd, spread forth their light divine.
> There Hart's and Rowley's soul she did ensnare,
> And made a King the rival to a play'r:
> The King o'ercomes, and to the royal bed
> The dunghill's offspring is in triumph led. ('A Panegyric' l. 26-33)

Again, her development is described, albeit ironically, in biographical terms through the figure of an ascent, and again the emphasis lies on the impropriety of Gwyn's liaison with the king (Rowley), who is degraded by being made a 'rival to a play'r.' The anonymous author includes more biographical material to stress this point, mentioning her father's death in Oxford prison (ll. 62-3)[8] – suggesting that Gwyn was descended from a criminal – and calling her mother a 'martyr of the ditch' with a habit of 'drunkenness' (ll. 70-4).[9] A similar move to defame Gwyn by reference to her parentage can be found in the unattributed 'Satyr Unmuzzled' (1680), where Mrs. Gwyn is pictured 'in muddy ale and sack' (l. 107); 'Her tears were brandy, mundungus was her breath, / Bawd was her life, and common shore her death' (ll. 111-2). Another lampoon on Nell Gwyn, 'The Lady of Pleasure, A Satyr' (1688), whose attribution to Sir George Etherege has been called into doubt,[10] announces its 'Argument' in distinctly biographical tones[11]: 'The Life of Nelly truly shown, / From Cole-yard, and Cellar, to the Throne, / Till into the Grave she tumbled down.' Written after Gwyn's death, 'The Lady of Pleasure' proceeds in the typical cradle-to-grave mode of biography, closing with the fact that Gwyn survived the king only briefly (by two years). It begins as follows:

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[7] Orange girls had a reputation for selling more than just fruit. See the entry on 'Orange Moll' in *The Methuen Drama Dictionary of the Theatre*; see also Beauclerk 56-8, and Parker 46-7.

[8] Cf. Parker 4 and Beauclerk 12 on this point. There seems to be no reliable documentary evidence of the life of Gwyn's father. Interestingly enough, Beauclerk speculates that the legend of his death in Oxford prison may well be true, citing 'A Panegyric' as his source (Beauclerk 12).

> I sing the Story of a Scoundrel Lass,
> Rais'd from a Dunghill, to a King's Embrace:
> I trace her from her Birth and Infant Years;
> To Venus none so like as she appears:
> To Madam Venus the Sea-froth gave Birth;
> To Madam Nell, the Scum of all the Earth. ('The Lady of Pleasure' ll. 1-6)

Again we encounter the idea of an inappropriate ascent from the bottom of the social ladder, underlined by a reference to Gwyn's lewd, alcoholic mother (ll. 7-11), as an indictment of her daughter's character and indicator of her proper place, driving home once more the anxieties about class mobility[12] that Gwyn's life-course provoked. Opening a life narrative with references to the biographee's origins and parentage is a common practice in biography even today and forms a central element particularly of English biography, as Stella Tillyard argues (31-32). English biography has traditionally relied on notions of character – determined, at least in part, by origins – as the shaping factor of a person's life-course and achievements, a view that was already current in the sixteenth century (Tillyard 31). In their representation of Nell Gwyn's origins, Restoration verse satires thus rely on a narrative pattern that is distinctly biographical.

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[9] Mrs. Gwyn is said to have fallen into a ditch in a state of alcoholic intoxication and subsequently drowned; see Beauclerk 292-3. She had worked as a prostitute, as had Nell Gwyn's sister Rose, see Beauclerk 13.

[10] See James Thorpe's commentary in *The Poems of George Etherege*, p. 142.

[11] Less obviously, 'A Panegyric' and 'The Lady of Pleasure' could also be related to the long-standing tradition of verse lives of saints, which flourished well before the Restoration, John Capgrave (15th century) and Elizabeth Cary (early 17th century) being two notable representatives. Already in the late 16th century, this metrical form of hagiography was appropriated by George Whetstone to commemorate secular figures, as for instance in his 'Sir Phillip Sidney, His Honorable Life' (1587).

[12] Interestingly enough, it is precisely this upward mobility which makes Gwyn a suitable Cinderella-character for 21st-century romance novels. Diane Haeger, author of the Gwyn novel *The Perfect Royal Mistress* (2007), notes that 'readers here in the U.S. really relate to characters who pick themselves up by the bootstraps, move through poverty, and triumph over adversity. It is a quintessentially American tale' (Haeger interview). See also Gillian Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet* (2011) and Susan Holloway Scott's *The King's Favorite* (2008), two romantic novels that similarly depict Gwyn's rise and liaison with the king. While biographer Charles Beauclerk explicitly refers to Gwyn as a 'Cinderella' of the Restoration (2), Gwyn's unmarried state, which distinguishes her from her mythical foil, in fact poses considerable structural problems to romance writers (see Novak 2014).

'Even then she had her Charms of brisk and witty, / Which first inslav'd a Cully of the City' (ll. 32-3), the 'Lady of Pleasure' continues, drawing a picture of Gwyn as the quick-witted, forward coquette that has become so familiar to us from biography, film and fiction, and thus referring to her relationship with a merchant called 'Duncombe.'[13] Subsequently, John Lacy, Charles Hart, and Lord Buckhurst are mentioned as consecutive lovers, the latter being addressed by Hart in a manner that once more foregrounds the impropriety of Gwyn's ascent: 'Take her my Lord, quoth Hart since you're so mean, / To take a Player's leavings for your Q----'[14] (l. 62-3). And then, 'By these degrees, the ranting Whore crept up, / Until she mounted to the Sovereign Top' (l. 74-5). According to 'The Lady of Pleasure,' it was her merchant-lover who introduced Gwyn to the theatre once he had grown 'Nell-sick':

> Besides, he knew she had both Wit and Sence,
> Beauty, and such a stock of Impudence,
> As to the Play-house well might recommend her,
> And therefore thither was resolv'd to send her;
> Where soon she grew, being in her proper Sphere,
> The Pride, and Envy of the Theater. (l. 48-53)

Gwyn is thus portrayed as an intelligent, witty, beautiful young woman with a pertness that did not recommend her to polite society but which, in the author's view, qualified her as a perfect candidate for a career on the stage, a milieu of ill repute where an extrovert character, or 'impudence,' would prove an advantage and where indeed she thrived. While references to Gwyn's lovers and keepers in satire primarily serve to condemn her as promiscuous, they do provide a glimpse of the relationships that mattered in her life. Similarly, references to Gwyn's stage career, though clearly intended to underline her immorality, shed light on the impression her person made on others – something that any biographer, interested in ‘catching a likeness,’ would set out to do.

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[13] In another satire, 'Mrs. Nelly's Complaint' (1682, presumably by Etherege), the merchant's name is given as Duncombe: 'Duncombe, by my great sway and power preferred, / For mounting me well first now mounts the Guard' (l. 81-2). The editor and antiquary William Oldys gives the name as 'Duncan,' see Beauclerk 40.

[14] Here probably for 'quean,' hussy, which has the same etymological roots as 'queen,' cf. *OED* 'quean, *n*.'

The satires of her day do not depict Gwyn merely as a social overreacher and ‘flaming Whore’ (‘The Lady of Pleasure’ l. 9) who incites the king to sin, they also treat her as an enemy of the state, as a dangerous woman whose sexual allure distracts the king from his duty of government and who has some influence, however indirectly, on public affairs. In ‘Further Advice to a Painter’ (1671), Andrew Marvell compares Charles II to emperor Marcus Aurelius’ ‘degenerate’ son Commodus, suggesting he takes little interest in ruling his country, as they both ‘to their more belov’d delights repair, / One to his pathic, the other to his play’r’ (ll. 9-10). In another satire, ‘Royal Resolutions’ (c. 1671), Marvell has the king say, ‘I’ll wholly abandon all public affairs, / And pass all my time with buffoons and players, / And saunter to Nelly when I should be at prayers’ (ll. 43-5). The idea that men are weakened by women’s sexual power has been identified by Nussbaum as another common trope in the anti-feminist satiric tradition of the age (50-51; she cites Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras* as an example in point). For Alison Conway, such negative representations are indicative of a general ‘fear of female rule’ (36), which was fuelled by Gwyn’s ability to ‘claim the king’s attention whenever she pleases, and at whatever moral, economic, and political cost’ (36). In part, this fear can also be attributed to the fact that, barred, as a woman and a commoner, from official political functions, Gwyn was to an extent an unknown quantity, someone with easy access to the monarch but whose influence on him – in direction and degree – was difficult to determine.

From some satiric representations, then, the king’s actress-mistress emerges as a figure posing a danger to the public which surpasses that of mere distraction. ‘A Ballad Called the Haymarket Hectors,’ a pro-Parliamentarian satire dated 1671 and possibly authored by Marvell, refers to the famous incident when Sir John Coventry was waylaid on a night in December 1670 and had his nose slit to the bone by the king’s Life Guard (under the command of the Duke of Monmouth) for daring to criticise, however indirectly, the king’s affair with Gwyn in the House of Commons:

> […] to equal her lover, the baggage must dare
> To be Helen the Second and cause of a war.
> And he, our amorous Jove,
> […]
> Must lend her his lightning and thunder;
> And for one night prostitutes to her commands
> Monmouth, his Life Guards, O’Brien, and Sandys. (l. 17-24)
> […]

Nay he'll venture his subsidy so she cloven may see,
In female revenge, the nostrils of Coventry. (l. 29-30)

Gwyn is attributed considerable agency in this poem, initiating a role reversal that makes the king her 'whore' so she can execute her revenge. There is no actual evidence that the historical Gwyn was in any way directly involved in the Coventry scandal, but at any rate she is identified as its cause. The comparison with Helen of Troy, presumably prompted by Gwyn's first name as well as by her legendary beauty, also appears in 'A Panegyric,' evoking the (potentially) devastating consequences of the king's liaison with her. The same can be said of the lines, 'Consulting his cazzo, he found it expedient / To engender Don Johns on Nell the comedian' ('A Ballad' l. 11-12). The simultaneous reference to Gwyn's sons and to Don Pedro's scheming 'bastard' brother in *Much Ado About Nothing* reflects the country's anxieties about the lack of a legitimate heir to the throne and the threat of civil unrest ensuing from the king's illegitimate children (which would later materialise in the Monmouth rebellion[15]). The anonymous satire 'On the Prorogation' (1671), which treats of the king's second prorogation of Parliament in 1671 from the point of view of an indignant MP, also contains a critical reference to the king's sons by Gwyn:

Nell's in again, we hear, though we are out.
Methinks we might have met to give a clout
And then prorogue again: our wont hath been
Never to miss a session 'gainst lying in.
For always 'gainst time, the French invades,
'Gainst when we money raise to keep the jades,
And twenty to one, before next spring is over,
March'd must our horse again be unto Dover
To guard the shore against the Dutch and French,
When all this means but new supply for wench. (l. 97-106)

Gwyn's second son James was born in December 1671. This passage sarcastically suggests that 'Parliament should have been permitted to meet in order to vote the new baby a diaper (*clout*)' ('On the Prorogation,' commentary, 183), criticising the king for according the birth of yet another illegitimate son more importance than the responsible governing of his country. It thus links the images of Gwyn as a 'distractor' and producer of potentially troublesome illegitimate offspring by introducing a specific biographeme (Gwyn's motherhood), which is evaluated in a political context.

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[15] James Scott, Duke of Monmouth, is of course another frequent subject of Restoration verse satire, his illegitimacy making him a popular target. The unattributed satire 'The King's Vows' (1670), for instance, which resembles Marvell's 'Royal Resolutions,' ironically depicts him as 'a fine son (in making though marr'd) / If not o'er a kingdom, to reign o'er my Guard, / And successor, if not to me, to Gerrard' (l. 25-27), thus also mentioning the (apparently outrageous) biographical fact that he was promoted to Commander of the King's Lifeguards, succeeding Lord Gerrard in this position.

Another point of criticism that is revealing of Gwyn's life is also addressed in the above passage: the fact that, like the king's other mistresses, she subsisted on public funds. Andrew Roberts marvels that

> Nell travelled everywhere by sedan chair, ordered a silver bed that cost £1,135 (or over £150,000 at today's values), bought three barrels of oysters a week, ordered children's gloves by the dozen (at a shilling each) and put her rum, brandy, cheese, custard pots and even fruit down to the public exchequer. (Roberts)

This is also brought up earlier in the 'Prorogation' satire, combined with yet another lashing out at Gwyn's origins:

> Have we more millions giv'n in ten years' space
> Than Norman bastard had and all his race,
> Hurri'd up money bills 'gainst the Dutch and French,
> But see all spent upon a dunghill wench? (ll. 10-13)

And yet, in satires that mention her together with other royal mistresses, Gwyn is frequently assigned a special status, distinguished from her competitors by her nationality and religious beliefs. Although she 'also always carries the shadow of political influence cast by her nefarious counterparts,' as Conway notes in her excellent analysis of the intersection of religious and nationalist discourses with the figure of the courtesan, the king's protestant mistress (who 'hath got a trick to handle his p------, / But never lays hands on his sceptre,' 'Nell Gwynne') came to stand for 'a principle of Protestant disinterestedness' (Conway 18). Thus, in Rochester's dramatic poem 'Dialogue' (c. 1675/76), which features the Duchess of Portsmouth (Louise de Kéroualle) and Nell as speakers bragging in very frank terms about their intimate relations with the king, the satire's final critique refers only to the king's catholic mistresses:

> *People.* Now heavens preserve our faith's defender
> From Paris plots and Roman cunt;
> From Mazarin, that new pretender,
> And from that politique, Grammont. (ll. 13-16)

Hortense Mancini, the Duchess of Mazarin, began a liaison with King Charles shortly after her arrival in England in 1675. She is also represented in Edmund Waller's 'The Triple Combat' (c. 1676). Gwyn, as 'lovely Chloris,' whose 'matchless form made all the English glad' (l. 29), is this poem's local heroine, who contends with the French

Portsmouth (‘springing from the antient race / Of Britons, which the Saxon here did chase,’ ll. 7-8) and Mazarin the ‘Roman’ (l. 3) for the king’s favour. That on some level Gwyn’s nationality and religious leanings turned her, in the course of two decades, into a ‘vaginal antidote to the Catholic distemper lodged in Portsmouth’s “pocky bum”,’ as Conway (36) diagnoses, is also made plain in the unattributed satire ‘The Whore of Babylon’ (1678; qtd. in Conway 32). This diatribe against the Duchess of Portsmouth opens with the unflattering address, ‘You treach’rous Whore of France, may Rabble’s rage / Seize thee, & not till thou’rt destroy’d aswage,’ to finish on the following lines:

> Permit a change, our ruins to confront,
> Let us be govern’d by an English C–t;
> The kingdom can’t by whoring suffer want
> If princes swives concubines that’s Protestant. (ll. 11-14)

Such satires are revealing of Gwyn’s position as one of several royal mistresses at the English court, pointing to another set of relationships that shaped her existence, through which she was subjected to rivalries and attained significance as an icon of specific political and religious (anti-)causes.

To ‘entertain the reader with delight’: A Conclusion

Elements of Nell Gwyn’s life, social position, and aspects of her character are utilised in Restoration satire to condemn Gwyn on a moral level, to criticise her ‘undue’ ascent to the position of royal mistress, to point to the potential for conflict her role entails, but also to redeem her as the famous ‘Protestant whore.’ These satires can be read as life-writing in varying degrees. Some of them function mainly as an archive of biographical information, containing clues about Gwyn’s life, even though their presentation is coloured by an agenda that is blatantly obvious. In other cases, as demonstrated in Lacy’s ‘Satire,’ ‘A Panegyric,’ and ‘The Lady of Pleasure,’ satire can be understood as life-writing in a narrower sense, when it weaves several biographemes into a narrative account of Gwyn’s life-course that goes beyond the cursory ‘dunghill wench’ reference. Such satirical representations draw on discursive operations familiar to us from various forms of early modern life-writing: they feature the typical cradle-to-grave progression, they employ narrative patterns such as the figure of ascent and the emphasis on origin and parentage as the source of character and life-course, they appropriate life-writing modes such as the panegyric, and they can generally be seen to ‘do the work of life-writing’ as they attempt to draw a portrait of Gwyn’s character and central relationships in her life. All of this suggests that early modern life-writing and verse satire, as discursive practices, may be closer in the ways they generate claims about their subjects than we think.

Enlisting verse satire among the genres or sites of Restoration life-writing requires some further reflection though. Returning to the idea of exemplarity, which has repeatedly been identified as the predominant purpose of early modern life-writing (see e.g. Sharpe and Zwicker 13, Love 99), the Gwyn satires point to an obvious problem. Unlike her aristocratic rivals, Nell Gwyn seemed to harbour no political aspirations of her own. She would not fit the category of ‘worthies’ that included royals and nobles, preachers and martyrs, parliamentarians and cavalier heroes, or poets – in short, individuals with a claim to public ‘greatness’ (McKeon 339), who exerted influence in their respective fields. Her achievements on stage violated contemporary notions of feminine decency, her position as royal mistress even more so, and women were on the whole excluded from those notions of exemplary greatness that, for many scholars, defines life-writing in the Restoration (queens being a rare exception). If ‘biographical worthiness’ in the period is approached primarily through the lens of positive exemplarity that studies individual biographical texts as building blocks of a history of national achievement, Gwyn does not fit the bill.

Once biographical exemplarity is extended to accommodate those life-stories that teach by negative example, the Gwyn satires come back into view.[16] Such an approach evokes the traditional conception of Restoration satire as a ‘moral,’ didactic genre, which seems to be confirmed by the example of John Lacy’s ‘Satire.’ Addressed to Charles II, it mounts a fierce critique of both the lewd overreacher and the wayward ruler who falls for her. The lines ‘And ev’ry day they do the monster see, / They let ten thousand curses fall on thee’ (Lacy ll. 37-38) can be referred to the original meaning of monster as a visible manifestation of a moral failing. Deriving from Latin *monstrare*, to show, and perhaps also *monere*, to warn, monster used to denote ‘one who has so far transgressed the bounds of nature as to become a moral advertisement’ (Baldick 50), someone to be put on show as an emblem of a particular vice. Moreover, after declaring the king ‘enslav’d to ev’ry little whore’ (l. 8), ‘Satire’ concludes by citing the Turkish sultan Mahomet as a positive example, a man who killed the woman he loved to demonstrate his dedication to his people, as she had caused him to neglect his duties. It thus offers a solution, with reference to a moral norm that contrasts with the behaviour it decries, urging the monarch to ‘promise to amend’ (l. 88), which renders its tone conspicuously Augustan.

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[16] It should be noted that ‘great’ influential statesmen, too, would sometimes find elements of their lives strung together in a biographical fashion and vilified by their political adversaries in Restoration verse satire. ‘The Litany of the Duke of Buckingham’ (1680), for instance, gives an extensive portrait of George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham, criticising his financial dealings, his affair with the Countess of Shrewsbury, the fact that their illegitimate infant son was buried in Westminster Abbey, and relating his political downfall in 1674. Similarly, “On Plotters” (1680) lists biographemes of the Duke of York’s life – among them his conversion to Catholicism, his support of (in the author’s view) unpopular courtiers, his marriage to a Catholic princess, as well as his politically questionable travels to Flanders and Scotland – to discredit him as a potential successor to the English throne.

Among the Gwyn satires, Lacy’s forms an exception, however, and the solution it offers concerns mainly the king. Most of the other texts do not share its clear moral impetus. On the whole, satires about Nell Gwyn seem to confirm Robert D. Hume’s view of Restoration verse satire as ‘more often subversive and shocking than corrective or constructive’ and as ‘malicious or outrageous, written to hurt, startle, or amuse’ (Hume 371). It could be argued, of course, that all satires about Gwyn brandish her as a ‘whore’ and thus condemn the sin of adultery, but this is not foregrounded. Rather, Gwyn’s outrageous ‘ascent’ from street girl to royal mistress seems to be the focus of their interest. If the satires were written in an exemplary vein, meant to deter others from imitating Gwyn in this respect, it is precisely the extraordinariness of Gwyn’s life-course which would seem to render such a practical, educational purpose superfluous. This is not to say that their lack of a clear moral proposition – an example to emulate *or reject* – excludes the Gwyn satires from the domain of the biographical in early modern England. My argument is, on the contrary, that a general preoccupation with exemplarity has led scholars to ignore Restoration verse satire as a site of life-writing.

The very label ‘extraordinary’ to this day carries significance as a paradigm of the biographical and is emphatically attributed to Gwyn’s life-course in Restoration satire. It features, for instance, in the ending of ‘A Panegyric,’ which in a (mock-)biographical fashion insists on the exceptional cultural status of the biographee:

> Thus we in short have all the virtues seen
> Of the incomparable Madam Gwynne,
> Nor wonder others are not with her shown:
> She who no equal has must be alone. (l. 82-5)

Though Gwyn – in an ironic reversal of the panegyric tradition – is here described as ‘unequalled’ and ‘incomparable’ on a negative scale, the very fact of her attested extraordinariness makes her a typical subject for biography today and apparently made her life a popular source for writers then, as material that would 'startle' and 'amuse.' Significantly, even Thomas Fuller, whose primary intention in *Worthies of England* was quoted as presenting exemplary men 'famous for valour, wealth, wisdom, learning, religion, and bounty to the public' (Fuller 2), cites as a further aim of his collective biography 'to entertain the reader with delight' (2). Just like satire, Restoration life-writing could fulfil a number of different purposes and in life-writing, too, the exemplary function may retreat behind the appeal of a 'delightful' or 'startling' or 'amusing' story.[17] These functions can vary considerably between writers and even between individual texts, as the Gwyn satires demonstrate.

Being a woman of ill repute rather than a politician, clergyman or war hero, Nell Gwyn could not count on having her life written in the places and forms reserved for exemplary 'worthies.' Although the argument for a didactics-by-negative-example can to some extent be made with reference to the Nell Gwyn satires, exemplariness does not, apparently, lie at the heart of the portraits these texts draw of the king's actress-mistress. Rather, Restoration satirists seem to have relished, above all, their subject's extraordinary life-course, with all its transgressions of class and propriety, as an opportunity for effective story-telling. They catered to a 'persisting and universal appetite for stories' (Lee 18), which for Hermione Lee explains much of the appeal of biography in all ages. Narrating Gwyn's life, or elements of it, and thereby, perhaps inadvertently, commemorating their subject, satirists have contributed significantly to Gwyn's entrance into the biographical canon and laid the foundation for her status today as a British cultural icon. Gwyn's case demonstrates that Restoration verse satire, which participates in many of the biographical conventions of the period, ought to be revaluated as a site of early modern life-writing.

7,163 words

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[17] In that sense, Fuller's statement of purpose can also be seen to hark back to Horace's famous dictum, "Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae" (*Ars Poetica* l.333).

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