



**HAL**  
open science

# Games and the Margins: Winning Fops and Gambling Women on the Restoration Comic Stage

Clara Manco

► **To cite this version:**

Clara Manco. Games and the Margins: Winning Fops and Gambling Women on the Restoration Comic Stage. *Etudes Epistémè: revue de littérature et de civilisation (XVIe - XVIIIe siècles)*, 2021, 39. halshs-03933794

**HAL Id: halshs-03933794**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03933794>**

Submitted on 10 Jan 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **Games and the Margins: Winning Fops and Gambling Women on the Restoration Comic Stage**

Clara Manco

Malgré ses associations traditionnelles avec la compétition homosociale et le prestige de l'ethos aristocratique, le jeu à mise est en réalité pratiqué aussi par des personnages marginaux dans les comédies de la Restauration. Cet article se propose d'explorer les implications symboliques de cette présence dans les pièces écrites sous les règnes de Charles II et de Jacques II. Ce que nous disent ces personnages qui jouent, qu'il s'agisse de femmes ou de personnages supposément ridicules, c'est à quel point le jeu constitue un moment de suspension, voire de renégociation des hiérarchies théâtrales, mais aussi, par extension, sociales et politiques, que celui-ci ne soit qu'un moment de triomphe carnavalesque ou qu'il constitue une revanche véritable du faible sur le fort.

théâtre, comédie, Restauration, John Dryden, Aphra Behn, jeux, piquet, dés, personnages féminins, triche

Les jeux et les marges: Petits maîtres victorieux et joueuses dans la comédie de la Restauration.

Although gambling is traditionally associated with homosocial competition and with the prestige of the aristocratic ethos, Restoration comedies abound with examples of marginal characters at the gambling table. This article explores the symbolic implications of these marginal gamblers in plays written and produced during the reigns of Charles II and James II. These characters, whether they be women or comic butts, show us to what extent gambling constitutes a moment of suspension, or even of renegociation of theatrical, social and political hierarchies, ranging from brief moments of carnivalesque relief to genuine revenge of the weak over the powerful.

theatre, comedy, Restoration, John Dryden, Aphra Behn, games, gambling, Piquet, dice, women characters, cheating

Clara Manco a soutenu une thèse sur la comédie de la Restauration en septembre 2020. Ancienne élève de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure et agrégée d'anglais, elle travaille depuis trois ans en tant qu'enseignante de langue à St John's College, Cambridge.

The activity of gambling, despite often occurring during moments of strong tension in Restoration plays, is not a visually spectacular display on the stage.<sup>1</sup> One could easily argue that it is not a very “stage-genic” activity; it relies on small elements such as dice or cards, the gamblers are usually rather quiet and soft-spoken, and the gestures required – such as sitting in a chair, picking up and throwing small objects, and casting side-glances – are generally understated and unlikely to trigger strong audience responses. Indeed, the gambling scene’s theatrical efficacy as a means of representing competition, seduction or entertainment, seems at first glance inferior to that of staged duels, seduction, or quarrels.<sup>2</sup> The spectator is, by necessity, physically far-removed from the centre of action. A gambling scene represents a considerable risk for a staged play of turning what should be a climax of dramatic tension into an involuntarily underwhelming nadir. Yet this risk is *de facto* overcome as gambling is exceptionally present in so-called “Restoration comedies”, both as a metaphor and an activity.<sup>3</sup> What are the stakes of a gambling scene? What does the act of gambling symbolically offer that competing activities, when performed on stage, do not?

One of the primary seventeenth-century discourses on gambling directly associates the practice to the male aristocratic status. Norbert Elias included gambling in his analysis of an ostensible consumption ethos.<sup>4</sup> It is framed as a performative ritual of belonging and prestige, in which the full acceptance of, and indeed exposure to, self-destruction as a realistic outcome creates tension and release – one of the status symbols and key expressions of early modern masculinity, not unlike the duel. The key conceptual elements of this discourse on gambling are risk-taking,

---

<sup>1</sup> I will use here the word “gambling” exclusively in the admittedly anachronic sense of “playing with stakes”. The appropriate contemporary word would rather be “gaming” (an activity performed by a “gamester” and “gamestress”) as the use of the verb “to gamble” is only attested by the *Oxford English Dictionary* from the 1750s onwards. Using the contemporary term would, however, risk blurring the crucial distinction between playing with or without stakes for a modern reader, although these stakes can be indifferently of a financial, material or purely symbolic nature.

<sup>2</sup> This situation might be contrasted with gambling scenes in films: to name but the most famous example, the tension and meaning in the famous gambling scene of Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975) lies on specifically cinematic devices, namely close-ups, background music and slow-motion.

<sup>3</sup> What is referred to with the umbrella term “Restoration comedy” varies greatly in practice. In this article, I will use it to designate the comedies produced under the reigns of Charles II and James II, between 1660 and 1688, although the limits of this inquiry might be extended further.

<sup>4</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, eds. E. F. N. Jephcott and S. Mennell, Dublin, University of Dublin Press, 2006 [1969]. The reality of the loss of aristocratic family fortunes at the gambling table is highlighted by Lawrence Stone, who names a series of spectacular examples in his study *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy (1558-1641)*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965). Although it is centered around an earlier period, this analysis provides a useful framework for the symbolic interpretation of gambling, for example when Stone writes that “[aristocratic pride] makes men play for higher stakes that they can afford in order to give an impression of magnanimity and carefree opulence” (*id.*, p. 568).

defiance of fate, disdain for money, all of which are elements that are deeply embedded in aristocratic male culture.<sup>5</sup> The true element of class distinction is neither the cash nor the estate that is won or lost itself. Rather, it is the ostensible indifference to the outcome that asserts superiority. Yet a victory in gambling is an equally strong signifier, as one only has to observe that it coincides with the social and sexual superiority of the rakish figure in the vast majority of Restoration comedies.<sup>6</sup> Thus, victory is not only a question of luck and probability, which are non-transcendental: in the aristocratic discourse on gambling, victory becomes providential, necessary, and belongs ontologically to the characters whose superiority it both proves and constitutes. In this symbolic economy, women may belong to this homosocial equation under the form of movable stakes which might be won or lost – heiresses being especially desirable in order to assert both sexual and financial dominance.<sup>7</sup> In this symbolic system, cheating constitutes an attempt to keep the social prestige associated with risk-taking while nullifying legitimate threats. It thereby can be interpreted as interfering with fate, which makes it as highly compromising an act as, for example, a rigged duel.

This practice of gambling can be opposed in Restoration comedies to the acquisitive ethos of the characters who favour patient accumulation and avoidance of risk. These are generally citizens, Aldermen, Justices of the Peace: despite the disparity of their condition and the position of power they might actually occupy in carolean society, on stage these stock characters share the same theatrical destiny of systematically becoming ridiculed comic butts, which might lead us to refer to them collectively as “inferior” characters. The aristocratic heroism of risk-taking becomes, in bourgeois discourse, a symptom of corruption, a morally reprehensible and socially disruptive practice, whose excesses should be avoided for moral and practical reasons. Although it characterises gambling negatively, the bourgeois discourse seems however to ultimately recognise rather than ignore the appeal of sublime risk-taking and contempt for money in masculine performance: its insistence on the addictions, the scandals

---

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Richard underlines the legal (as opposed to purely symbolical) origin of the association between gambling and the aristocracy. While gambling was forbidden, or at least controlled, amongst the general population throughout the seventeenth century, it was legal all year round at court (Jessica Richard, *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-Century British Novel*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 9).

<sup>6</sup> The term “rake” is a contested one. Although the discussion around this stock-figure is not the purpose of this article, definitions and taxinomies of rakish figures might be found in particular in John Traugott, “The Rake’s Progress from Court to Comedy: A Study in Comic Form”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 6, n° 3, Summer 1966, p. 381-407; Robert D. Hume, “The Myth of the rake in ‘Restoration’ comedy”, *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, n° 10, Spring 1977, p. 25-55; or in Harold Weber, *The Restoration Rake-Hero: Transformations in Sexual Understanding in Seventeenth-Century England*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Marriage in general is also commonly compared to a gamble, where happiness or distress are ultimately in the hands of chance.

and the financial ruins it causes fails, therefore, to constitute a fully convincing competing narrative to the bourgeois negative discourse<sup>8</sup>.

In this article I will explore, through a study of several marginal characters at the gambling table on the Restoration stage, the hypothesis of an appropriation of the prestige of gambling. The gamblers on the Restoration comic stage are not only assertive male aristocratic figures competing for dominance; they can also be “inferiors”, like fops or citizens, both of whom contemporary and inherited theatrical traditions repeatedly condemn to failure and humiliation. In this symbolic economy, women gamblers (also called “gamestresses”) are also marginalised, although, as we will see, theirs is by no means a negligible presence. The growing importance of the discourses concerning chance, probability, randomness and luck, as opposed to fate, Providence or even merit, allows the possibility and even favours positive outcomes for marginal characters.<sup>9</sup> But the narratives of triumph and equality compete rather than replace one another, an ambivalence that is reflected in the variety of the aesthetic choices through which marginal gambling can be framed. Nevertheless, the predictability of the game, as well as the contemporaneous theatrical and literary stereotypes, which would typically command inferiority and defeat for the margins, are simultaneously challenged. Marginal participation in gambling activities, which sometimes involves cheating, does not necessarily reverse the narrative of domination but complicates it and produces unexpected, more flexible interpretative frameworks and narratives. Gambling is, therefore, an expression of various competing social, theatrical and aesthetic discourses.

### **(Class) war through other means? The trope of the losing comic butt**

The position of marginal characters at the gambling table, in the majority of cases, is on the losing side. For the comic butt to lose at the gambling table is a predictable fate. The figure of the losing comic butt, whether he be a *fop*, a citizen, a Justice of the Peace or an Alderman, is coherent with its inscription in a regime of overall social, sexual, and indeed political inferiority.<sup>10</sup> However, even this type of presence rarely leaves aristocratic superiority and privilege unchallenged.

---

<sup>8</sup> I use the term “sublime” here in its most general acceptance.

<sup>9</sup> On the history of probability theory, see Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Although some exceptions may be found, the depiction of the social categories associated with the City of London exclusively as comic targets is still as lively in the new plays written and staged at the Restoration as it

The figure of the inferior character who is also logically inferior at gambling (the “loser” trope, in both senses of the term) is perhaps best embodied by Sir Martin Marr-all, the eponymous character of Dryden’s play, first staged in 1667. Sir Martin has every characteristic of the comic butt: his own servant makes fun of him as he incompetently and unsuccessfully tries to woo a young lady, but ends up married to a maid by mistake. The reference to his lack of success at the gambling table appears justified in the opening scene, a clue that this particular inferiority has to be taken as a metonymy for his failure in a broader sense. This extract clearly exemplifies the symbolic articulation at work:

*Sir Martin* – My villainous old Luck still follows me in Gaming, I never throw the Dice out of my hand, but my Gold goes after ’em: if I go to Picquet, though it be but a Novice in’t, he will picque and repicque, and Capot me twenty times together: and, which most mads me, I lose all my Sets, when I want but one of up.

*Sir John* – The pleasure of Play is lost, when one loses at that unreasonable rate.

*Sir Martin* – But I have sworn not to touch either Cards or Dice this half year.

*Sir John* – The Oaths of losing Gamesters are most minded; they forswear play as an angry Servant doth his Mistress, because he loves her but too well.<sup>11</sup>

Sir Martin’s spectacular defeat at every game, whether due to bad luck when he plays dice or to a lack of proficiency as with piquet, does not lead him to understand his place. This systematic “losing against all odds” is also what later characterises Sir Martin’s consistent failures in love. Despite his valet Warner’s elaborate, fool-proof strategies to help him in his wooing, Sir Martin always manages to frustrate these attempts in gradually more spectacular ways. His persistence in failing at what he is unfit for is the first sign of his unsuccessful appropriation of a broader aristocratic ethos: he is a coward though he tries to be brave, and proves incapable of successfully pursuing young Millicent despite her youth and impressionable character. Sir Martin systematically loses because he is an essentially “inferior” character – a status which excludes him from the normal rules of probability according to which

---

was in previous theatrical traditions, for example Elizabethan. The significant shift in these depictions could be said to take place around the dynastic change of the so-called “Glorious Revolution”, in 1688-89.

<sup>11</sup> John Dryden, *Sir Martin Marr-all: or, The Feign’d Innocence*, London, Henry Herringman, 1691, act I, p. 4-5. I have departed here from usual theatrical practice by replacing the scene number which, when it exists, is often inconsistent and unhelpful, with the page in the original edition, which might be an easier reference to find. The typography and spelling, including probable mistakes, is also that of the original edition, except for the names of characters which I have written in full each time for the sake of clarity. On some occasions, the italicised stage directions have been changed to keep a contrast with the character names. *Sir Martin Marr-all* was a tremendously successful comedy, performed at least 27 times between August 1667 and October 1686, particularly during the 1667-8 season. The first available edition is, however, significantly posterior to the first stage performance (source: William Van Lennep, Emmett L. Avery and Arthur E. Scouten (eds.), *The London Stage, 1660-1800*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1965, as for all references to contemporary staging). The metaphor of the angry servant beating his mistress might be taken as a reference to Luck as a female figure, here represented under a degraded form.

victory and defeat should alternate. In this case, losing vast amounts of cash is no longer a sign of the glamorous confrontation of the careless and defiant male with fate: it is a weakness and an addiction, of which Sir Martin is remarkably aware despite his lack of appropriate response.<sup>12</sup>

Gambling here is therefore part of a coherent symbolic system. However, Sir Martin's association with the gambler's discourse already suggests a possible reversibility of the trope. The normative stance comes from the reasonable Sir John Swallow, an altogether positive character who preaches moderation and prudence – an ideal and strategy ultimately closer to bourgeois acquisitiveness. On the one hand, Sir Martin's losing habits are in line with his more general status as a failure, but on the other, the ostentatious and careless spending which would normally be characteristic of glamorous characters (those who are witty, win heiresses over, *etc*) is here attached to a comic butt.

One might compare this play with one of Dryden's earlier comedies, *The Wild Gallant*, which constitutes a canonical example in this respect. The play was presented with very moderate success, at least as far as the available sources show, in February 1663, but the performances were followed by at least five editions.<sup>13</sup> This comedy includes two scenes of card playing (more than one being exceptional), in acts I and IV, although only the second involves money. The extract taken from act I is seemingly unrelated to the action taking place before and after. The setup is an ironic one: Justice Trice, a ridiculous character, is discovered by the other characters (and at the same time by the audience) to be gambling on his own, against himself:

*Trice* – Cinque and Cater: my Cinque I play here Sir, my Cater here Sir: Now for you Sir: but first I'll drink to you Sir; upon my Faith I'll do you reason Sir, mine was thus full Sir: pray mind you play Sir: – Size Ace I have thrown: I'll play them at length Sir: – will you Sir? then you have made a blot Sir; I'll try if I can enter: I have hit you Sir.  
– I think you can cog a Dye Sir.  
– I cog a Dye Sir? I play as fair as you, or any man.  
– You lye Sir, how lye Sir; I'll teach you what 'tis to give a Gentleman the lye Sir. –  
*Throws down the Tables.*  
*They all laugh and discover themselves.*<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Another allusion to gambling as an addiction might be found in Thomas St Serfe's *Tarugo's Wiles*, in the following exchange between Tarugo and Horatio: "Tarugo – For that reason, whilst I am young, I'll bestir myself like a Lord that comes to his Honour before his Fortune. Horatio – Right! or like a hungry Courtier that's been long out of play" (Thomas St Serfe, *Tarugo's Wiles: or, the Coffee-House*, London, Henry Herringman, 1668, act V, p. 41).

<sup>13</sup> Source: W. Van Lennep, E. L. Avery and A. H. Scouten (eds.), *op. cit.* There are traceable editions of the play in 1669, 1684, 1688, 1694 and 1695 as part of Dryden's complete works. The first available edition, perhaps not the first, comes out therefore six years after the theatrical performances, which leaves open the possibility of textual modifications.

<sup>14</sup> John Dryden, *The Wild Gallant*, London, Henry Herringman, 1669, act I, p. 13. The expression "to give the lye" reminds us of the analogy between duels and games.

Comedy here relies on a “play”-within-the-play, or rather a game, namely a game of dice. The character of Trice does both players in turn, presumably adopting two different voices and gestures to reinforce the comic effect of the repetition of “Sir”. Trice absurdly accuses himself of cheating, to the point of making himself angry, while other characters observe and laugh. Being laughed at is the treatment we expect for Justice Trice, because of his social status and the theatrical tradition to which he is attached. This scene, however, introduces the audience to the theme of cheating and the imagined cheat is a gentleman. This seemingly nonsensical situation only acquires meaning when it is compared with the second gambling scene from act IV. This time the game is one of piquet:

*Table set with Cards upon it.*

*Trice walking: Enter Servant.*

*Servant* – Sir, some Company is without upon Justice-business.

*Trice* – Sawcy Rascal, to disturb my Meditations.

*Exit Servant.*

I, it shall be he: *Jack Loveby*, what think’st thou of a Game of Picquet, we two, hand to fist! you and I will play one single Game for ten pieces: ’tis deep stake *Jack*, but, ’tis all one between us two: you shall Deale *Jack*, who I, Mr. Justice, that’s a good one, you must give me use for your hand then; that’s six i’th hundred? Come, lift, lift, mines a ten; Mr. Justice: – mines a King, oh ho, *Jack*, you Deale. I have the advantage of this I’faith, if I can keep it.

He Deales 12 a piece, 2 by 2.

And lookes on his own Cards.

I take seven, and look on this – Now for you *Jack Loveby*.

*Enter Loveby behind.*

*Loveby* – How’s this? am I the man he fights with?

*Trice* – I’ll do you right *Jack*; as I am an honest Man you must discard this, ther’s no other way: if you were my own Brother I could do no better for you. – Zounds, the Rogue has a Quint-Major, and three Aces younger hand. –

Looks on t’other Cards.

Stay; what and I for the Point? but bare Forty, and he Fifty one: Fifteen and Five for the Point, 20, and 3 by Aces, 23. well, I am to play first: 1.23. 2. 23. 3. 23. 4. 23. – Pox on’t, now I must play into his hand: 5 – now you take it *Jack*, 5. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. and the Cards Forty.

*Loveby* – Hitherto it goes well on my side. –

*Trice* – Now I Deale: How many do you take *Jack*? All? then I am gone: What a rise is here! 14 by Aces, and a Sixieme Major: I am gone, without looking into my Cards. – I, I (*Takes up an Ace and bites it*) thought so: If ever a Man Play’s with such curs’d Fortune, I’ll be hang’d, and all for want of this damned Ace – there’s your ten pieces, with a Pox to you, for a Rooking beggarly Rascal as you are.

*Loveby* – What occasion have I given you for these words, Sir? Rook and Rascal! I am no more Rascal then your self, Sir.

*Trice* – How’s this! How’s this!



*Loveby* – And though for this time I put it up, because I am a winner.  
*Snatches the Gold.*

*Trice* – What a Devil do'st thou put up: not my Gold I hope *Jack*?

*Loveby* – By your favor but I do; and 'twas won fairly; a Sixieme, and Forteen by Aces by your own confession. -- What a Pox we don't make Childrens Play I hope?

*Trice* – Well, remember this, *Jack*, from this hour I forswear playing with you when I am alone ; What, Will you bate me nothing on't?

*Loveby* – Not a farthing, *Justice*: I'll be Judged by you, if I had lost you would have taken every piece on't : what I win, I win. – and there's an end.<sup>15</sup>

This passage is, once more, an actor's purple patch, not clearly justified by the plot.<sup>16</sup> The source of comedy is essentially the same as in the previous extract: Trice's uncontrolled anger (he bites a card), his depiction of the game as "deep stake" (although he is alone), and his absence of awareness that he is observed are all intended to trigger laughter. Oddly, Trice seems to be aware that he is playing on his own ("I forswear playing with you when I am alone"). This time, the Justice names his imagined adversary, an appropriate action if we consider the line "am I the man he fights with?" – which confirms that gambling is, in fact, a milder figure of the duel. The opponent is Jack Loveby, the hero of the play and a poor aristocrat, whose name is also incidentally that of an ambiguous figure at cards.<sup>17</sup> The parallel between the two scenes seems to suggest that Loveby was already the anonymous adversary of the first instance. The imaginary rivalry between Trice and Loveby could be a long-standing one, with the use of Jack's first name suggesting a certain familiarity. The real Loveby, who has been observing the Justice, gradually substitutes himself for his own image, snatches the gold, arguing that "'twas won fairly", and that they were indeed not making "Childrens Play". Loveby predictably outsmarts Trice and wins the real gold of the imaginary game, a move typical of a trickster character.

The absence of adversary frames both scenes as clearly comical: being a Justice of the Peace automatically makes Trice a comic butt, and the audience can recognise under this imaginary gambling scene an echo of the *miles gloriosus* – the cowardly soldier who is only brave when there is no one to fight him –, as well as the image of a child who cannot correctly grasp the difference between truth and fiction.<sup>18</sup> Trice's defeat is unambiguously damning. Yet

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, act IV, p. 41. Piquet is a complex but popular game where strategy plays an important role.

<sup>16</sup> There is unfortunately no trace of the original distribution for this play.

<sup>17</sup> Jack Loveby, however, calls Trice only by his title of "Justice". The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates back the first use of the term "Jack" to designate the card formerly known as the Knave in 1674, in Charles Cotton's *The Compleat Gamester*. The term may however have been already in use a few years before that date.

<sup>18</sup> *The Town-Fopp* apparently was not a very successful play. There are only two known representations in Autumn 1676, and only one edition, outside of the original, in 1699 (W. Van Lennep, E. L. Avery and A. H. Scouten (eds.), *op. cit.*).

Loveby's "victory" is a rather problematic one. Although not without faults, Loveby is intended as the dashing hero of the play; in this scene, however, he is neither particularly competent at the game nor intrinsically merits winning, nor is he even blessed by luck or Providence. Although he unconvincingly refers to his own practice as "fair play", it would in fact not be entirely unfair to define it as cheating instead. In this instance, Loveby is therefore playing the part of a trickster. This ambivalence is of notable consequence for the symbolic economy of the play. By taking advantage of another character's ingenuity for purely monetary purposes, Loveby becomes the antithesis of the heroic spender associated with aristocratic glamour. While Trice's place as a comic butt is undisputed, Loveby's victory is thus not a distinct sign of unquestioned superiority but is instead degraded by the fact that it is neither lucky nor providential, and involves no risk-taking, prestige or skill whatsoever.

More complex is the case of Aphra Behn's Bellmour in *The Town-Fopp*, first staged in 1676.<sup>19</sup> Bellmour is the hero of the play and a rakish character, defined by his excesses, who falls into a self-destructive frenzy of gambling after the trauma of the loss of his true love, Celinda. The reference to excessive gambling appears during the peak of tension in act IV, when Bellmour is even presented losing against the comic butt and his rival in love, Sir Timothy Tawdrey:

Scene a Chamber, a Table with Box and Dice.

*Enter Bellmour, Sir Timothy, Sham and Sharp.*

*Bellmour* – Damn it, give us more Wine. [*Drinks*].

Where stands the Box and Dice? – Why *Sham*.

*Sham* – Faith, Sir, your luck's so bad, I han't the conscience to play longer – *Sir Timothy* and you play off a hundred Guineys, and see if luck will turn.

*Bellmour* – Do you take me for a Countrey Squire, whose Reputation will be crackt at the loss of a petty thousand? you have my Note for't to my Goldsmith.

*Sham* – 'Tis sufficient if it were for ten thousand.

*Bellmour* – Why *Sir Timothy* – Pox on't thou'rt dull, we are not half debaucht and lewd enough, give us more Wine.

*Sir Timothy* – Faith *Franck*, I'm a little maukish with sitting up all night, and want a small refreshment this morning – Did we not send for Whores?

*Bellmour* – No, I am not in humor for a Wench–  
By Heaven I hate the Sex.

All but divine *Celinda*

Appear strange Monsters to my eyes and thoughts.

*Sir Timothy* – What art Italianiz'd, and lovest thy own Sex?

*Bellmour* – I'm for any thing that's out of the common Road of Sin, I love a Man that will be damn'd for something! To creep by slow degrees to Hell, as if he were afraid

---

<sup>19</sup> Aphra Behn, *The Town-Fopp: or Sir Timothy Tawdrey*, London, James Magnes and Richard Bentley, 1677, act IV, p. 44. A male character shown weeping is an extremely rare occasion on the Restoration comic scene, and Bellmour in *The Town-Fopp* is the most memorable example.

the World shou'd see which way he went, I scorn it, 'tis like a Conventickler – No, give me a Man, who, to be certain of's damnation, will break a Solemn Vow to a Contracted Maid.

*Sir Timorous* – Ha, ha, ha, I thought thou wou'dst have said at least – had murder'd his Father, or ravish'd his Mother – break a Vow quoth ye – by Fortune I have broke a thousand.

*Bellmour* – Well said my Boy! a Man of Honour! and will be ready when e're the Devil calls for thee – So – ho – more Wine, more Wine, and Dice.

*Enter a Servant with Dice and Wine.*

Come, Sir, let me – [*Throws and loses*].

*Sir Timothy* – What will you set me, Sir?

*Bellmour* – Cater Tray – a hundred Guineys – oh damn the Dice – 'tis mine – come a full Glass – Damnation to my Uncle.

*Sir Timothy* – By Fortune, I'll do thee reason – give me the Glass – and *Sham*, to thee – Confusion to the musty Lord.

*Bellmour* – So – now I'm like my self, profanely wicked.

A little room for life – but such a life

As Hell it self shall wonder at – I'll have a care

To do no one good deed in the whole course on't,

Lest that shou'd save my Soul in spite of Vow-breach.

– I will not dye – that peace my sins deserve not.

I'll live, and let my Tyrant Uncle, see

The sad effects of Perjury, and forc'd Marriage.

– Surely the Powers above envy'd my bliss,

Marrying *Celinda*, I had been an Angel!

So truly blest, and good. [*Weeps*].

In this passage, we once again find the topical association between genuine manliness and the ethos of aristocratic consumption (“Do you take me for a Countrey Squire, whose Reputation will be crackt at the loss of a petty thousand?”). By losing large sums at the gambling table with indifference and drowning his sorrows in wine and prostitutes, Bellmour knowingly tries to present himself as the theatrical stereotype of the rake. Yet his behaviour does not trigger the other character's admiration. Rather, it is a cause of concern even for Sham who, despite his ominous name, seems to feel pity for the hero. The love-sick Bellmour repeatedly loses at dice, is tempted by prostitutes and homosexual intercourse, and even weeps at the end of the scene. All these elements frame excessive gambling as a degradation rather than a form of fate-defying heroism.<sup>20</sup> Remarkably, gambling is inscribed in a proto-psychological discourse. The self-destructive element of gambling, normally associated with bourgeois mistrust for the practice, is placed here at the centre. Bellmour's defeat is symbolically mitigated by an allusion later in the play to the fact that Sir Tawdrey has actually cheated Bellmour: this news, though only given in passing, retrospectively undermines Tawdrey's victory and partially deprives it of its

---

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*, act IV, p. 52.

prestige. At the same time, being a “bubble” (that is, a naive victim of deceit) also undermines Bellmour as a hero, especially since this defeat is never truly redressed.

This series of examples demonstrates that gambling is far from being the exclusive preserve of heroes who assert their dominance. “Inferior” characters, whether they be Justices, citizens or fops, also appropriate the rhetoric of gambling, and not systematically to imitate the leading male figures. Winning is a possibility for them, however qualified their victory. It is true that their performance is often an incomplete one, in particular through cheating. Yet conversely, the “dominant” performance is not always prestigious either, it can be likened to that of a trickster, and it does not always fulfill the expectations of sublime indifference to the outcome. Gambling can thus equally challenge aristocratic discourse and reinforce it.

### **Unruly women gamblers**

In *The Romance of Gambling*, Rebecca Richard presents gambling as an essentially homosocial competition where women are more often the stakes than the participants. She stresses what she considers to be a surprising consistency in eighteenth-century representations of female gamblers, articulated around two competing narratives. The monstrous gamestresses are often depicted as unattractive addicts, disfigured by their all-consuming passions, losing sight of their true natures as love-interests, wives and mothers. The alternative depiction is that of the lady who is forced or tempted to offer her “last stake”, that is, her body and honour, to pay off her gambling debts with sexual favours, as is the case for example in Colley Cibber’s *The Lady’s Last Stake*, or in Susanna Centlivre’s *The Basset Table*.<sup>21</sup> We can find an allusion to such a practice, perhaps entirely imagined, in *The Souldiers Fortune* by Thomas Otway, staged between 1680 and 1685.<sup>22</sup> Lady Dunce is very strongly attracted to Captain Beaugard (played by stage-star Thomas Betterton), who used to be her lover before having to leave for the war. When he comes back, she is married but willing to take up an affair with him. In the following extract, Sir Jolly Jumble (whose name again reminds us of a playing card, the Jolly Joker) acts as the go-between:

*Lady Dunce* – ... then come both and play at Cards this Evening with me for an hour or two, for I have contriv’d it so, that Sir *David* is to be abroad at Supper to night, he

---

<sup>21</sup> J. Richard, *op. cit.*, chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup> *The Souldiers Fortune* was performed at least five times between 1680 and 1685, and there are four known editions of the play, plus one in Otway's complete works. Elizabeth Barry was cast in the first performance, probably as Lady Dunce (W. Van Lennep, E. L. Avery and A. H. Scouten (ed.), *op. cit.*).

cannot possibly avoid it; I long to win some of the Captain's Money strangely.  
*Sir Jolly Jumble* – Do you so, my Gamester? (...)  
*Lady Dunce* – Come, Sir, shall we call for the Cards?  
*Beaugard* – And what shall we play for, pretty One?  
*Lady Dunce* – E'en what you think Best, Sir.  
*Beaugard* – Silver Kisses, or Golden Joys! Come, let us make Stakes a little.<sup>23</sup>

The ambition of Lady Dunce to “win some of the Captain's Money” is an obvious metaphor for a sexual initiative and a desire that cannot be expressed openly – as a form of rhetorical continuity between female gambling and sexual availability. The “last stake” narrative, as Hogarth's painting bearing this name suggest, may very well be a ploy to keep the appearance of female passivity in a consensual context. Indeed, in this example where Lady Dunce imagines herself winning the game, it is perhaps the gentleman who is going to have to give up his last stake.<sup>24</sup> This example is representative of how, contrary to Richard's conclusion, which is drawn from an eighteenth-century corpus, the tale told by female gamblers on the Restoration comic stage is rather one of agency, albeit within the admittedly narrow frame of plausibility. Not only do female gamblers exist on stage, and not only are not punished for their freedom, but there is evidence that their gambling on stage is a way to turn the tables in their favour.

The assertiveness of gambling women is particularly visible in the following extract taken from a 1668 comedy by Charles Sedley entitled *The Mulberry-Garden*.<sup>25</sup> The play opens on a debate between two brothers, Sir Everyyoung and Sir Forecast, about the way in which their daughters should be educated. Rather topically, the Tory (Everyyoung) is in favour of freedom whereas the Whig (Forecast) argues in favour of more control:

*Sir Forecast* – What do you count it nothing, to be all  
Day abroad, to live more in their Coach  
Than at home, and if they chance to keep  
The house an Afternoon, to have the Yard  
Full of Sedans, the Hall full of Footmen  
And Pages, and their Chambers cover'd all over  
With Feathers and Ribands, dancing and playing  
At Cards with 'um till morning.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Otway, *The Souldiers Fortune*, London, James Magnes and Richard Bentley, 1681, act III, p. 30-34.

<sup>24</sup> William Hogarth, *The Lady's Last Stake*, circa 1759. Its original title, *Piquet: or Virtue in Danger* is even more explicit.

<sup>25</sup> Three performances are known in May and June 1668. Aside from the original 1668 edition, there is only one known printed version, from 1675 (W. Van Lennep, E. L. Avery and A. H. Scouten (ed.), *op. cit.*).

<sup>26</sup> Charles Sedley, *The Mulberry-Garden*, London, Henry Herringman, 1668, act I, p. 3.

After this depiction, which brings to mind a female version of the aristocratic male consumption and leisure ethos (caricatured in a lifestyle of strolls, dances and ribbons), Sir Forecast waxes lyrical on the comparative merits of quiet domestic activities, such as reading “novels”. To conclude this tirade, Everyyoung reassures his brother that the two female gamblers they have raised “are no men in womens / Cloathes”, as if gambling threatened their gender, if not sexual roles.<sup>27</sup> This extract poses as many questions as it answers. It is unclear, for example, whether the women gamble with money – which would imply that they enjoy a disposable income and could enhance the scandal of their allegedly manly behaviour. Equally unclear is whether the audience is expected to cast moral judgement on the loose women for misbehaving, or to laugh at Sir Forecast, who feeds into the stereotype of the old domestic tyrant complaining about the young being young. Where does the comedy lie in this extract?

On the one hand, the conquest of a relative freedom for the sympathetic female characters against their crotchety elders is a very common comic plot. On the other hand, the play presents Sir Forecast and Sir Everyyoung as interchangeable in many ways, the one as ridiculous as the other. To present Sir Forecast as a reactionary caricature does not necessarily mean that the opposite attitude, that of letting young, unmarried women roam and gamble on their own, should constitute a stable normative stance. What one can establish with certainty, however, is the symbolic importance of gambling as a transgressive activity suggestive of (excessive) freedom, fun, and possible sexual promiscuity. All these elements, usually associated with masculinity, force Everyyoung to reassure his brother that the women are still women, an assertion which might, paradoxically, reinforce the impression that they are not.

It would be too simple, however, to simply frame women at play as rebellious figures. The female gambler from *Flora's Vagaries*, a comedy by Richard Rhodes performed for the first time in 1663, does not correspond to Sir Forecast's description of the unruly female. In this comedy, the gambler is actually the quiet and shy Otrante. Otrante is the daughter of the rich old Senator Grimani, a former merchant, who wants to forcibly marry her to a fool. She, however, loves the brave Lodovico, who is visiting her in act IV at her house. Predictably, Grimani, the old father, unexpectedly comes back. Flora, Otrante's cousin, is much more resourceful and sassier than her, and Giacomo is a manservant.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, act I, p. 4. Interestingly, the play features another gambler, Estridge, who is shown playing ombre. Olivia, his love interest, says about him that “losing Gamblers / Are but ill company”. This assertion confirms the importance of gambling in the distribution of gender roles, but also places Estridge's masculine performance as a failure (*Ibid.*, act I, p. 8 and 10).

*Grimani* within [*he has been knocking at the door*] – Daughter, Neece, the Devil, are you all deaf.

*Flora* – Who is that keeps a noise there? Dispatch, do something or other, quickly.

*Grimani* within – Your Uncle, *Flora*.

*Lodovico* – I have a Sword, I am sure will bring me off.

*Otrante* – O, do not use it, that will ruin us. (...) Dear *Lodovico*, get under the Table, and lye there close a little, we'll contrive him off some way presently.

*Grimani* within – 'Tis I, *Grimani* my self, you know my voice.

*Lodovico* – Well, if there be no remedy, I must: this is a judgement, come, cover me, am I hid?

*Flora* – Well enough, I'll let him in.

*Otrante* – Heaven be propitious now, or I am lost for ever, I must take heed my hopes betray me not.

*Enter Grimani, Flora and Giacomo.*(...)

*Grimani* – Indeed I returned sooner than I thought for, what were you and your Cosin doing now?

*Flora* – Uncle, we were piecing your old Ruffs in the neck, you wear them out extremely behind.

*Grimani* – Well, lay by your work, we will have a game at Cards, *Giacomo*, go fetch some Cards and Counters, picket, you play well at it. (*Exit Giacomo*)

*Otrante* – I am no Gamester, but if you please to play, I'll have a fire made in your Chamber, the Weather's cold.

*(Enter Giacomo with Cards)*

*Grimani* – No, no, 'tis well enough here, sit down, come, left, I deal, how many take you in?

*Otrante* – (I fear I shall be discovered) I take seven, Sir.

*Grimani* – Take them, and I will have the rest. So now, what say you to the point.

*Otrante* – A little game, some three and fifty.

*Grimani* – 'Tis a good hunch out.

*Otrante* – Quart Major.

*Grimani* – And that too, I think the Dog's under the Table.

*Flora* – If he be found, he will be made a Puppy of.

*Otrante* – Three Kings.

*Grimani* – No, that's not good, come out, this Cur.

*Otrante* – Nine, and there's ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen.

*Grimani* – I had forgot my Aces, this filthy Dog will bite me by the shins, anon.

*Otrante* – No, Sir, 'tis a gentle Cur. You have lost your Aces fourteen.

*Grimani* – Come out, and be hang'd, or I'll fetch you out.

*Flora* – I must have a trick for this, I see.

*Otrante* – Pray Sir, let him alone, he will not hurt you.

*Grimani* – Go fetch me the Dog-whip, an ugly Cur, no other place to sleep in, out, out, to Kennel Bull, go fetch me the whip, I say.

*(Enter Flora with a piece of paper and a Candle)*

*Giacomo* – I'll be hang'd if the dog be there, this is some kind of Mystery or other.

*Grimani* – I cannot play for this Dog, out, out, I say.

*Flora* – He'll foul the House if you beat him, Uncle.

*Grimani* – Then you make it clean again. (*Flora pins the paper behind him, fires it*)

*Flora* – Alas the day, fire, fire, Uncle, look about you.

*Grimani* – Where? where? O thou damn'd Quean. (*exit Grimani running after Flora*)

*Otrante* – Ha, ha, ha, this plaguy Wench had helpt is out at a pinch, up, up, *Lodovico*, and be gone quickly.

*Lodovico* – Well, I think you have had tryal enough of my love, I wou’d not endure such another bout for the Dukedom. Farewell. (*Exit Lodovico*).<sup>28</sup>

In this excerpt, the game of piquet which opposes the allied young women to the patriarch plays many roles. In theatrical terms, it allows the use of a table to hide the lover, who is mistaken for the family dog and is kicked under the table, and various gambling-themed puns (“elder hand”/“younger hand”, “Quean”/“Queen”). Although Lodovico, drawing his sword, was expecting to step into the scene as an epic hero, the duel he expects is downgraded into a farce in which he is the comic butt.<sup>29</sup> The game also symbolises the triumph of wits and tactic over unjust authority. Perhaps the most intriguing feature is the shy Otrante’s apologising: “I am no Gamester”. Contrary to what she says, Otrante is actually good at the game, and piquet is a rather complex tactical game similar to today’s poker. This simple clue opens up three distinct possibilities for interpretation: either she enjoys gaming but without excess, or she denies her own skill at a rather complex game to appear modest and feminine, or she speaks the truth and this scene reveals that Providence approves of her scheme by letting her win. Although nothing in the text allows us to describe her game as cheating, her playing against her own father can even be read as an initiation to double-dealing and manipulation, not to mention a symbolic sexual initiation, as Lodovico has access to her legs under the table.<sup>30</sup>

It is also apparent that by forcing the lover to adopt a humiliating position, the women win against both men, the love-interest as well as the patriarch. As she opens the scene with the words, “the Game begun”, Flora might be interpreted either as a puppet-master manipulating her cousin as much as the other characters, or as a mischievous trickster. In both cases, she appears as a character decidedly in control refusing the so-called feminine activities Grimani tries to force the women into at the start of the scene.<sup>31</sup> Her agency can only have been reinforced by the original cast of sassy and charismatic Nell Gwyn as Flora, although the role

---

<sup>28</sup> Richard Rhodes, *Flora’s Vagaries*, London, William Cademan, 1670, act IV, p. 58-60.

<sup>29</sup> A similar burlesque ending follows his clumsy attempt at seducing Otrante, which leaves her disappointed as she was expecting a more gallant courtship. The expression “tryal of my love” is also an echo of the parodic element of chivalry and courtly love.

<sup>30</sup> R. Rhodes, *op. cit.*, act III, p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> Although she is the primary comic force in the play, Flora also has an impish side, as shown by the following expressions describing her: “the down-right Devil is in her”, “Devil in Woman shape”, “Mistress Machiavel”, *id.*, act III, p. 34 and 36).



might also have been owned by Mary Knepp. Otrante and Flora symbolically become the mistresses of the game in this scene: the (gambling) tables have turned.<sup>32</sup>

But the most polymorphous occurrence of female gambling assuredly takes place in another of Dryden's comedies, *An Evening's Love*. The play was first staged in 1668.<sup>33</sup> The passage about gambling is part of a climatic scene at the end of act III when Jacinta, a Spanish woman disguised as a "Musullman" (and therefore wearing a veil to hide her face), wins at dice against her love interest, Wildblood, an Englishman whom she knows to be unfaithful. Beatrix is her waiting-woman and accomplice:

*Wildblood* – This Lady *Fatyma* pleases me most infinitely: now am I got among the *Hamets*, the *Zegrys* and the *Bencerrages*. Hey, What work will the *Wildbloods* make among the *Cids* and the *Bens* of the *Arabians*!

*Beatrix* to Jacinta – False, or true Madam?

*Jacinta* – False as Hell; but by Heaven I'll fit him for't: Have you the high-running Dice about you?

*Beatrix* – I got them on purpose, Madam.

*Jacinta* – You shall see me win all their Mony; and when I have done, I'll return in my own person, and ask him for the money he promis'd me.

*Beatrix* – 'Twill put him upon a streight to be so surpriz'd: but, let us to the Table; the Company staves for us.

[*The Company sit*]

*Wildblood* – What is the Ladies Game, Sir?

*Lopez* – Most commonly they use Raffle. That is, to throw with three Dice, till Duplets and a chance be thrown, and the highest Duplets wins except you throw *In* and *In*, which is cann'd Raffle; and that wins all.

*Wildblood* – I understand it: Come, Lady, 'tis no matter what I lose; the greatest stake, my heart, is gone already [*To Jacinta*]

*They play: and the rest by couples.*

*Wildblood* – So, I have a good chance, two quarters and a fice.

*Jacinta* – Two sixes and a trey wins it. – *sweeps the money.*

*Wildblood* – No matter; I'll try my fortune once again: what have *I* here two sixes and a quater? – an hundred Pistols on that throw.

*Jacinta* – *I* take you, Sir. – *Beatrix* the high running Dice. –

*Beatrix* – Here Madam. –

*Jacinta* – Three fives: *I* have won you Sir.

*Wildblood* – *I*, the pox take me for't, you have won me: it would never have vex'd me to have lost my money to a Christian; but to a Pagan, an Infidel. –

*Maskall* – Pray, Sir, leave off while you have some money.

---

<sup>32</sup> *An Evening's Love* was a box-office smash of the late 1667-8 season, and was even revived around 1686, a success confirmed by the fact that there are at least four editions available during the period, including as part of Dryden's complete works.

<sup>33</sup> The veiled woman is a comic trope, whether it be a Catholic veil, an Islamic headpiece or a gypsy woman's costume. Despite (or because of?) its religious *raison d'être*, it is mostly a sign of treachery, hypocrisy and deceit, which echoes with the similar connotations of the vizard.

*Wildblood* – Pox on this Lady *Fatyma*! Raffle thrice together, *I* am out of patience.  
*Maskall* to him – Sir, *I* beseech you if you will lose, to lose *en Cavalier*.  
*Wildblood* – Tol de ra tol de ra – pox and curse – tol de ra, *etc.* What the Devil did I  
mean to play with this Brunet of *Afrique*?<sup>34</sup>

In this scene, the false dice punishes the false man, and the allied women use cheating as an instrument of poetic justice. Financial revenge is a fit and fair retribution for sexual betrayal. Female characters are generally not permitted to fight for their honour, and to take revenge in cold hard cash at the gambling table is indeed a powerful way of getting their own back, through the symbolic control of monetary exchange and sexual desire.<sup>35</sup> As a Muslim and a woman, Jacinta is supposed to be doubly dominated, as *Wildblood* twice repeats indignantly. *Maskall*'s discreet call to prudence ("leave off while you have some money") goes unnoticed as *Wildblood*'s conquering and confident ways, signified at the start by the epic references ("What work will the *Wildbloods* make among the *Cids* and the *Bens* of the *Arabians*!"), turn against himself. *Wildblood* uses cheap, hackneyed gambling metaphors to subscribe ostensibly to aristocratic carelessness ("Come, Lady, 'tis no matter what I lose; the greatest stake, my heart, is gone already"), but his growing frustration as his luck gradually fades tells a different story.<sup>36</sup> As *Wildblood*'s losses escalate, he becomes less and less capable of losing "*en Cavalier*", with poise and dignity, to the point where it could be argued that the women's real victory is to force *Wildblood* out of his own narrative concerning himself. Eventually, he has to admit not only defeat, but humiliation. The supposedly inferior identity of his opponent ("this Brunet of *Afrique*", "it would never have vex'd me to have lost my money to a Christian; but to a Pagan, an Infidel") is blamed, as if *Wildblood*'s own identity as a man and a rake was in itself enough to guarantee him victory. More than money, *Wildblood* loses the entitlement that gambling was supposed to merely acknowledge.

### ***Conclusion***

Perhaps Jacinta's victory in *An Evening's Love* is but a scant consolation. The necessity to resort to cheating might suggest that this triumph is of an inferior quality. For after she has taught him a lesson, Jacinta eventually forgives and accepts *Wildblood* when he claims his intent to reform.

---

<sup>34</sup> John Dryden, *An Evening's Love, or the Mock-Astrologer*, London, Henry Herringman, 1671, acte III, p. 43 onwards.

<sup>35</sup> There are instances of female characters physically taking revenge against unfaithful lovers, such as Angellica Bianca in *The Rover* (Aphra Behn, *The Rover: or, The Banish't Cavaliers*, London, John Amery, 1677).

<sup>36</sup> The enigmatic expression "Tol de ra" might be interpreted as a sign of *Wildblood*'s calculated carelessness.

The transgression provided by the gambling scene, although successful, is limited. These examples have shown that the gambling table functions as the site of the performance of aristocratic male dominance, of homosocial competition and of sexual control. Yet it also often represents its symbolic challenge. Cheating undermines the value of victory in most cases, but it can also be used as an instrument of poetic justice and its status as a degraded version of the duel is also what allows “inferior” characters, particularly female characters, to appropriate it. The discourses around gambling are indeed extremely varied, ranging from the tragic to the picaresque, but can also remain open. Whether victory be due to luck, Providence or randomness, gambling does not always produce meaning but, more often than not, destabilises it.

It is perhaps the tensions inherent to this openness which the recent staging of John Vanbrugh’s *The Provok’d Wife*, published in 1697, by the *Royal Shakespeare Company* tried to enhance.<sup>37</sup> In this play, the card scene takes place at the moment of highest suspense, where the female character, who has been “provoked” into cheating by a boorish husband, may or may not be punished for her transgression, and plays with her lover and her friends while waiting for fate’s grace or punishment. Stage director Philip Breen chose to present the scene in almost complete silence, leaving room for exchanges of anxious glances between the characters. The game is chosen as an ostensibly neutral signifier, awaiting meaning to transform the play into a comedy or a tragedy.

---

<sup>37</sup> John Vanbrugh, *The Provoked Wife* (spelling modernised in the title), directed by Philip Breen for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-Upon-Avon, 2019.