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# "The London jilt"

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# The London Jilt

Roger Thompson

THE HARVARD UNIVERSITY LIBRARY owns the only copy of *The London Jilt* known to survive.<sup>1</sup> The title page reads: "The *London Jilt*: / OR, THE / POLITICK WHORE. / SHEWING, / All the Artifices and Stra- / tagems which the Ladies of Plea- / sure make use of for the In- / treaguings and Decoying of Men; / Interwoven with Several Pleasant / Stories of the *Misses Ingenious* / Performances. / LONDON, / Printed for *Hen. Rhodes*, next door to the *Bear-Tavern* near *Bride-lane* in / *Fleet-street*. 1683."

The Harvard copy is probably the so-called "Second edition corrected" advertised in the *Trinity Term Catalogue* of 1684, since it has "The Second and Last Part" bound up with it.<sup>2</sup> Both parts are duodecimo, with pages measuring 8.3 × 14.3 cms.; the first part has one hundred and twenty pages, the second one hundred and twenty-eight. Each part has a frontispiece, that of the first signed by Burnford. The binding is calf, with the impression of the label, reading "London Jilt," on the spine.

The book's provenance is reasonably straightforward. On the flyleaf, in manuscript, is "Nar. Luttrell His Book 1685." His library passed to Edward Wynn in 1732, and in 1786 was dispersed by sale. The Harvard volume passed, probably *via* James Bindley, who owned a copy, to George Hibbert; the label of lot 4813 in the sale of Hibbert's library by Evans, 16 March 1829, is still in place. The volume was last recorded at auction in the Britwell sale, where it was sold on 17 March 1926 to Pickering for £11-10-0. Pickering quickly sold it to Edgar

<sup>1</sup> Shelfmark EC65.A100.68312 in Houghton Library, Harvard. Microfilm and photocopy are on file.

<sup>2</sup> The First Part is in the Hilary 1683 issue, the Second and Last Part in the Easter 1683 issue of the *Term Catalogue*. The two separate parts were entered in the *Stationers' Register* on 13 Feb. and 17 April 1683 respectively. The title page of the second part is identical with the first, except for the inclusion of "The Second and Last Part." Mr. Hugh Amory has kindly helped me with details of publication and provenance.

Wells, the New York dealer. Harvard acquired it on 14 March 1927 with funds bequeathed under the Lionel de Jersey Harvard Gift.<sup>3</sup>

As the title page suggests, *The London Jilt* belongs to that popular branch of Restoration prose, the rogue tale.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the stock moralizing of the preface "To the Reader" and the last paragraph of the last part, the author's stance is completely amoral. Much of the intended interest of the narrative lies in the "artifices," "stratagems," "intreagues," and "ingenious performances" of the "miss," who tells her own story. Unlike such better-known examples of the species as Head and Kirkman's *The English Rogue*, the jilt sticks with few digressions to the central narrative theme of her adventurous and profitable life. This is a fairly conventional story. She is the daughter of a poor and unhappy marriage. After her father's death, her mother turns to prostitution. Her career is soon blighted by smallpox. Fortunately the jilt herself is ready for the game, and her mother exchanges the role of whore for bawd. We meet many of the commonplaces of the whore story in the first part: the impotent lover or Limberham, the repeated sale of the young girl's maidenhead, the series of middle-aged keepers mulcted of annuities or presents, the gallants on the side, the careful management of appointments by the maid, and breathtaking escapes from tight corners when customers arrive unannounced or overstay their time. The pace of the second part is more hectic. The jilt soon comes to regret her marriage to a young, adroit, but jealous tobacco-man. In a *novella* situation they come together in the dark in a Drury Lane brothel which specializes in the off-duty wives of citizens, and the husband is worsted by the jilt's quick-thinking trickery. A miserly customer is profitably betrayed to the spiritual court and the jilt and a gallant pose as a married couple at a respectable boarding-house. There is a dash of sadism when an old adversary slits open the belly of the anti-heroine's guard dog. The story reaches a distasteful climax with two episodes involving excrement and vomit. We leave the complacent narrator living in unalloyed comfort, with her lace

<sup>3</sup> The fate of Luttrell's library is described in *D.N.B.* H. Collman & G. Brown, eds., *Britwell Handlist* (London, 1933), p. 606, records both the book and Luttrell's signature. *Book Auction Records 1925-26*, Vol. XXIII, Part 1 (London, 1926) has details of the sale of this copy to Pickering. I am grateful to Mr. Dudley Massey, managing director of Pickering & Chatto Ltd., for details of the disposal of the book to Wells through their catalogue 234. Miss Caroline Jakeman, of the Houghton Reading Room, kindly supplied details of Harvard's acquisition of the work in 1927.

<sup>4</sup> F. W. Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery* (New York, 1907).

shop, her employed "miss," her £100 annuities, and hypocritical sentiments.

There are elements of realism in this saga, as with most rogue literature. For the unromantic jilt the profit motive is paramount. Thus, middle-aged clients are preferable to young bucks. Aging and physical decline are the major occupational hazards. As the number of cheated customers increases, she is forced to change her base of operations more and more often. On the other hand, there is glamorization too. Only once does she become pregnant, and then the child is conveniently still-born. She never catches venereal disease, nor do exploitive bullies descend on her for protection money or pimping rights. There is altogether insufficient apprehension, violence, and boredom for credibility. Central to the appeal is the wench's keenness as a cheat and wheedler, and only once in a score of adventures is she worsted.

With the exception of the two scatological incidents at the climax of Part II, the tone of the writing is bawdy. All the charred sexual chestnuts current from at least Shakespeare's time are raked out of the dying embers, and dot the text in the form of phallic symbols, metaphors, and leering indirections. The book is as free of obscenities as it is of pornographic detail and erotic stimulants. Nonetheless, the author conveys a pervasive sense of sexual naughtiness, reminiscent of the classic English dirty post-card or the subtler variety of filthy joke.

As a whore story, *The London Jilt* is obviously not in the same class as *Moll Flanders*. It is however distinctly superior in style, situational inventiveness, and plausibility to the common run of Restoration rogue tales. The writing and narrative scheme have a vigor which carries the reader along in its racy flow. On the other hand it does not descend into a mere chapbook catalogue of cheats. There is a sustained attempt to develop the anti-heroine's character and motivation, and to give a sense of process as her career unfolds. The author regales us with interesting inside information on topics like beauty aids, contraception, and contemporary medicine, as well as more general comments about the social and psychological stresses of London life.

The whore story was undoubtedly a popular and profitable branch of rogue literature for decades before Defoe transformed it.<sup>6</sup> Apart

<sup>6</sup> For an informative survey, covering the whole of the seventeenth century, see Margaret Katanka, "Women of the Underworld," unpublished M.A. Thesis, Bir-



from such semi-pornographic pieces as *The Crafty Whore* (1658) or *The Whore's Rhetorick* (1684), there was a steady flow of this kind of bawdy, both in Restoration characters and in more sustained narratives. Typical of the former are *The Character of a Town Miss*, published about 1680,<sup>6</sup> Head's sketches of female wheedlers in *Proteus Redivivus* (1673), *The Crafty Miss, or The Excise Man well fitted*, *The Two-Penny Whore*,<sup>7</sup> both black-letter ballads, Richard Ames's *Female Fire-Ships* (1691), or the titillating vignettes with which Dunton spiced *The Night-Walker* (1696). The most frequently reprinted narrative was Mistress Dorothy's story in *The English Rogue*,<sup>8</sup> though Head tried his luck again with the uninspired *The Miss Display'd* (1675). Even this poor thing was reissued three years later as *Madam Wheedle, or The Fashionable Miss Display'd*. As this plagiarized from Goodman's play *Holland's Leaguer* (1632), so others followed the Spanish pattern of *La Picara* by Castillo Solórzano, adapted for English readership and published by Starkey in 1665. Ned Ward was another who specialized in accounts and descriptions of prostitutes. His *Insinuating Bawd and Repenting Harlot* (1698) has been described as "the most explicit and discursive examination of a whore" in the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Henry Rhodes, the publisher of *The London Jilt*, presumably saw the chance of quick profit, and thus the accumulation of capital for his infant business, in this venture.<sup>10</sup> He may also have foreseen a boost to his sales from the topical scandal caused by the conviction of the notorious London madam, Mother Creswell, and the unsavory exposures at her trial.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the market for disreputable literature appears to have been particularly keen in the 1680s.<sup>12</sup>

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mingham University, 1973. A droll acted before Charles II at Newmarket in 1680, but otherwise unconnected with our subject, was entitled *The Politick Whore*.

<sup>6</sup> Reprinted in Philip Pinkus, *Grub Street Stripped Bare* (London, 1968), pp. 280-284.

<sup>7</sup> Both in *Roxburghe Ballads*, II (London, 1774), 486, 577.

<sup>8</sup> This takes up a large portion of Parts III and IV (London, 1671).

<sup>9</sup> Katanka, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Cyprian Blagden, "Memorandum Book of Henry Rhodes 1695-1720," *The Book Collector*, III (1954), 28-39, 103-117, has a brief survey of his career as a publisher of cheap literature, 1680-1720.

<sup>11</sup> H. H. Schless, ed., *Poems on Affairs of State*, III (New Haven, 1968), 294, 384.

<sup>12</sup> See my "Aspects of the Restoration Book Trade," H. C. Allen & R. F. Thompson, eds., *Contrast and Connection: Bicentennial Essays in Anglo-American History*, to be published in 1976.

The book certainly seems to have sold well. A "second edition corrected" appeared in 1684, and, to judge by a preliminary analysis of library sale catalogues of the 1680s and 1690s, *The London Jilt* was second only to *The English Rogue* in popularity among English bawdy. As well as Luttrell, Elias Ashmole, Thomas Britton, the celebrated small-coal man and bibliophile, and Richard, Lord Maitland, the translator of Vergil, owned copies. The booksellers Partridge, Chiswell, Rolls, and Parkhurst had it in stock.<sup>12</sup> Its fame crossed the Atlantic. Chiswell sent the Boston bookseller John Usher two copies on 5 September 1683, on order. It was quickly reordered, for on 29 May 1684 we find Chiswell writing to Usher "London Gilt is out of print and not to be had."<sup>14</sup> Four decades later, Nathan Prince, the brilliant but spiky Harvard tutor, recorded *The London Jilt, or The Politick Whore* in his polymathic list of "Ye Authours in those Arts and Sciences which I intend to gain an insight into."<sup>16</sup>

The main unsolved mystery about *The London Jilt* is its authorship. Arundell Esdaile attributed it to a very minor poet and novelist, Alexander Oldys, in his authoritative *List of English Tales and Prose Romances*.<sup>16</sup> Wing followed suit.<sup>17</sup> Both are woefully wrong. The source of Esdaile's error is a novel written by Oldys and published by S. Briscoe in 1692 called *The Female Gallant or, The Wife's the Cuckold*.<sup>18</sup> This has the totally misleading variant title at the head of the text of *The London Jilt: or, the Female Cuckold*. Esdaile understandably assumed from this that *The Female Gallant* was another, re-titled, edition of our *Jilt*. In fact, the two books could not be more dissimilar. *The Female Gallant* is prosaic Restoration comedy in novel form. It relies for its flat effects on conventional caricatures of a materialistic, unmannered "cit" and a rustic booby, and a mind-boggling hexagonal romantic plot involving trans-sexual disguises, mistaken identities, courtly honor, and restrained, mannered passion. This is worlds away

<sup>12</sup> B. M. Collection of Sale Catalogues. See *A List of Catalogues of Book Sales 1676-1900 now in the British Museum* (London, 1915). My analysis is by no means complete at this stage.

<sup>14</sup> Massachusetts Historical Society, Jeffries Family Papers, Vol. XV, fols. 87, 89, reprinted in W. C. Ford, *The Boston Book Market 1679-1700* (Boston, 1917), pp. 116, 139.

<sup>16</sup> MS. in Harvard University Archives.

<sup>17</sup> (London, 1912), p. 279.

<sup>18</sup> O. 266.

<sup>18</sup> Bodleian So.B.174.Art.

from our vulgar little tart. Only a Shakespeare could have created such divergent pieces, and Alexander Oldys was no Shakespeare.<sup>19</sup> The still-anonymous author of *The London Jilt* was a hack of the Head-Kirkman school, catering for a bawdy-minded bourgeois readership, not a poet and romancer aspiring to courtly patronage. It was such as Henry Rhodes and our author that Roger North was vilifying, in the very year that *The London Jilt* was first published, when he wrote: "It is wretched to consider what pickpocket work, with the Help of the Press, these Demi-booksellers make. They crack their brains to find out selling subjects, and keep hirelings in garrets, on hard meat, to write and correct by the grate."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Esdaile also credits Oldys with *The Fair Extravagant, or The Humorous Bride. An English Novel* (1682); Oldys also contributed verses to C. Moschini, *Brutes turned Critics* (1695); G. J. Grey, ed., *General Index to [W. C.] Hazlitt's Handbook & Bibliographical Guide* (London, 1893), p. 557, and wrote *An Ode by Way of Elegy on . . . Mr Dryden* (London, 1700). He may be "A. O." lampooned in *A Session of the Poets*, 1696. I owe this last reference to the kindness of Mr. Hugh Amory.

<sup>20</sup> Life of Rev. John North, in A. Jessopp, ed., *Lives of the Norths* (London, 1890), II, 281-282.

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