This is a postprint!
The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in
Contemporary Women's Writing 8.3 (Oxford UP, Nov 2014): 373-390. doi: 10.1093/cww/vpu007.

Julia Novak
University of Vienna

Nell Gwyn in Contemporary Romance Novels: Biography and the Dictates of 'Genre Literature'

Abstract:

Nell Gwyn, King Charles II's legendary actress-mistress, is revered as "one of the most attractive characters in British history," credited with "lifting the spirits of a nation" (Roberts) after eleven years of Puritan austerity. Her extraordinary ascent from low-born street girl and possibly child prostitute to orange-seller in the pit of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane on to celebrated actress and finally to royal mistress has been the subject of numerous biographies and films and has also found its way into a number of recent novels, or 'fictionalized biographies.' Focusing on gender-specific narrative strategies, this paper examines the generic properties of Diane Haeger's *The Perfect Royal Mistress* (2007), Susan Holloway Scott's *The King's Favorite* (2008), and Gillian Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet* (2011).

In view of the remarkable rise of fictionalized biography in the past two decades, it comes as no surprise that several novelists have found Gwyn's life an attractive subject and thus reaffirmed her status as a cultural icon. The fictionalized biography as such is a fascinating hybrid genre, incorporating biographical fact but presenting it in fictional mode. The novels under consideration are all the more interesting for their participation in a specific segment of contemporary "women's fiction": the historical romance novel. While the facts of Gwyn's life complicate the novels' generic plotlines as romance narratives, the romantic elements in turn put pressure on the representation of the biographee's life, which must make concessions to the demands of the genre.

Introduction

"Royal mistress Nell Gwyn's expenses would shame our MPs but she was worth every penny," *Daily Mail* journalist Andrew Roberts proclaimed in 2008, on the occasion of Sotheby's auction of Gwyn's shopping bills from 1675. Today, King Charles II's legendary actress-mistress is revered as "one of the most attractive characters in British history," credited with "lifting the spirits of a nation" (Roberts) after eleven years of Puritan austerity. Her extraordinary ascent from low-born street girl and possibly child prostitute to orange-seller in the pit of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane on to celebrated actress and royal mistress has been the subject of numerous biographies and films and has also found its way into narrative fiction. This paper will examine the generic properties of three recent novels about Nell Gwyn: Diane Haeger's *The Perfect Royal Mistress* (2007), Susan Holloway Scott's *The King's Favorite* (2008), and Gillian Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet* (2011).

In view of the remarkable rise of fictionalized biography as a medium for life-writing in the past twenty years, it comes as no surprise that several novelists have found Gwyn's life an attractive subject and thus reaffirmed her status as a cultural icon. Fictionalized biography as such is a fascinating hybrid genre, incorporating

biographical fact but presenting it in fictional mode. Moreover, the novels under consideration are notable for their affiliation with a specific segment of contemporary fiction: the historical romance novel. This is already signaled by the three book covers, showing images of attractive young women in lavish period dress. Together with the novels' titles rendered in ornamental gold lettering, these immediately suggest an affiliation with the historical romance genre. While cover designs usually lie outside the author's sphere of influence, publishers arguably choose their book covers very consciously, creating visual signals aimed at a particular audience to whom a certain manuscript will most likely appeal – in this case readers of historical romance.

Another paratextual cue to genre identification can be found in reviews of the novels. Thus, Haeger has been explicitly labelled a "romance novelist" by reviewers ("Diane Haeger"), who introduced *The Perfect Royal Mistress* as a book in which "Charles swept [Nell] away" (Rice); similarly, Bagwell's novel has been judged a "passionate royal romance" with a "predictably ravishing" and "genuinely devoted" heroine (Norfolk); and Holloway Scott's Nell has been summed up as a woman "determined to find true love" (Posney). If we follow John Frow's definition of genre as enacted also on an "industrial" level, "in publishers' catalogues and booksellers' classifications . . . and in the discourses of marketing and publicity, together with the whole apparatus of reviewing" (12-13), it becomes clear how production and professional mediation of the three Gwyn novels gear readers' expectations towards the historical romance genre.

Nell Gwyn's biography does, however, contain elements that are difficult to bring in line with the tenets of romantic fiction, and it is the aim of this paper to examine the effects of molding Gwyn's life into a romance narrative: what image of Gwyn do the novels offer as they cast her as a romantic heroine, and conversely, what happens to the typical romance plot when it is constrained by biographical fact? These questions shall be explored with a particular focus on gender-specific narrative strategies in the three novels.

Seizing Upon a 'Romantic Life'? Nell 'Cinderella' Gwyn

Eleanor Gwyn was born in 1650 and grew up in poverty with her mother Ellen and her sister Rose in London's Covent Garden. She began her professional life as an oyster girl or cinder girl and may or may not have worked as a child prostitute (see Parker 11-12, Beauclerk 37-39) before she found employment in the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, as an orange seller in 1663. There, her comedic talent was discovered by the "King's Company,"[1] and Gwyn became one of the very early star actresses on the Restoration stage. She soon entered on a relationship with lead actor Charles Hart and the two of them fuelled a new trend of "mad couple" plays.[2] Thus, not only did Gwyn make theater history as a celebrated audience favorite for the seven years that her stage career spanned, she also, indirectly, influenced literary history, with playwrights such as John Dryden tailoring roles to her talents. After a brief affair with Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, in 1667, she became one of the chief mistresses of the "Merry Monarch" King Charles II until his death in 1685. Nell Gwyn herself died only two years later, in 1687.

This is a postprint!
The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in
Contemporary Women's Writing 8.3 (Oxford UP, Nov 2014): 373-390. doi: 10.1093/cww/vpu007.

At a first glance, Gwyn's life story seems in many ways inherently suited to the generic requirements of historical romantic fiction. It is set during the English Restoration, in a period that is "properly romantic," i.e. sufficiently distant from contemporary readers to exude an "aura of unfamiliarity and mystery" (Ramsdell 111). Gwyn's long-lasting relationship with the king can be shaped into the central love plot that forms the backbone of romantic fiction (Fuchs 124f) and allows for descriptions of "wild explicit sex" (Ramsdell 114) with which the label "historical romance" has almost become synonymous. The genre habitually requires an aristocratic setting (Hughes 2, Ramsdell 138), for which in Gwyn's case the environment of the English court vouchsafes. This court can also conveniently stand for the "oppressive society" (Pamela Regis 31-32) that is again a common feature of romance novels, posing an obstacle to the lovers' union – in this case, for instance, the difference in social class between low-born Nell and her royal lover. Furthermore, the development of the heroine in historical romantic fiction frequently relies on a famous cultural myth: that of Cinderella. It is not difficult to see how Nell Gwyn's life story can be aligned with this popular tale of a poor but strong-willed, hard-working young woman who is eventually rewarded with love and raised to the highest ranks of society. Gwyn biographer Charles Beauclerk, a famous descendent of the actress,[3] explicitly proposes this idea of Gwyn as "Cinderella" of the Restoration: "the 'ashes girl' who finds the prince of her dreams by remaining true to herself" (Beauclerk 2).

All three novels capitalize on the features of Gwyn's life that translate easily into a romance narrative, and they all foreshadow the central love plot early on. In Diane Haeger's *Perfect Royal Mistress* (2007), which opens with sixteen-year-old Nell selling oranges in front of the Theatre Royal, the heroine first encounters the king as early as on page 4, noticing that "her knees were suddenly weak" in his presence (Haeger 7). The beginning of Susan Holloway Scott's *The King's Favorite* (2008) features an eleven-year-old Nell with a strong sense of self, who spies the king for the first time on page 6, immediately making him the center of her plans for the future: "'I mean to make all London speak of me, and rise as high as I can in this world. *Then* the king will seek my company, and the rest of the court besides.' . . . Today belonged to the king. *My* king." (Holloway Scott 9, 13). Gillian Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet* (2011), finally, has a ten-year-old Nell watch the king at the head of a procession from an open window: "Impulsively, Nell blew him a kiss and was immediately overcome with horror at the audacity of her act" (Bagwell 15). When a boy behind her mentions the king's numerous love affairs and asks, "'For who will say nay to the king?'," she thinks to herself, "Not I" (Bagwell 15). She then recognizes the king's mistress, Barbara Palmer, among his followers: "She looked carefully, memorising every detail, and longed to be like her – gorgeously dressed, elegant, and at ease before the adoring crowd" (Bagwell 18).

Interestingly enough, we find similar tendencies of fore-shadowing in Charles Beauclerk's 'factual' *Nell Gwyn* biography:

> And just as the whole country was as nervous and excited as a bride on the eve of her wedding day, brim-full with thoughts of the mysterious groom, so little Nell herself – the Cinderella of the London slums – no doubt spent hours in front of her mother's cracked and grimy mirror, combing the dust and cinders from her hair in readiness for the King's return. . . . Now was the time to gather her wild and faithful crew about her to pour out her dreams of future glory. Listening open-mouthed, they might have heard tell how one day she

> would marry the King and invite them all to the palace for a slap-up dinner. (Beauclerk 22-23)
>
> [H]ad Nell wished to attract the King's attention from among the crowds of several hundred thousand, she would have had little difficulty in procuring herself a pair of stilts on which to teeter out to the Strand . . . . And the little girl on stilts would have rejoiced to stand level with the man who would one day share the secrets of her soul. (Beauclerk 24)

In the novels, just like in Beauclerk's biography, these fictional early encounters with, and fantasies about, King Charles serve to signal Nell's impending love affair with the monarch and anticipate her Cinderella-like rise from poverty to a life of luxury among aristocrats. They introduce an element of fate, indicating either that already at a very early stage there are visible signs of a great love to come, or that young Nell's character – her strong will and sense of self – mark her out as someone who will achieve whatever she dreams of, in her case a liaison with the king of England. In biography criticism, such an approach has long been deemed problematic in that it disregards the role of chance in shaping a person's life-course. It constructs or projects those early signs of the biographee's "special nature" in hindsight, portraying him or her "as somehow different, marked out all along by the seeds of their later greatness" (Stanley 9). While narrating such imagined early intentions and encounters is therefore considered less than ideal in a scholarly biography, it certainly is to be expected in romantic fiction: the three novels' teleological structure indicates their alignment with the historical romance genre, straight away raising expectations of the great love story that is soon to commence.

So far, so good, or rather, so fictive, so good: inventing ambitious plans and fateful encounters (no matter how unlikely) where there is no biographical source material to falsify them is part of the novelist's stock-in-trade. The sources that *are* available, however, complicate the rendering of Gwyn's life as a romantic novel. This is especially noticeable when it comes to the portrayal of the romantic heroine and hero, and, above all, of the characteristic dynamic between them, which determines the generic evolvement of their relationship.

"Pretty Witty Nell": A Dubious Romantic Heroine

Romance novels are generally characterized by an "emphasis on the female sphere," as Barbara Fuchs notes, "from a female protagonist to a view of the world organized around love" (Fuchs 125), which certainly applies to fictional biographies of Nell Gwyn. Placing the heroine's life center-stage, rather than her lover's, also enables the mostly female readership of romantic fiction to identify with the heroine and thus allows for the "vicarious emotional participation in the courtship process," which for Kristin Ramsdell (5-6) constitutes another cornerstone of the romantic fiction genre. The evolution of historical romantic fiction has brought forth a typical character pattern of romantic heroines: they are generally strong-willed, empowered young women (Ramsdell 115) who to some degree challenge the patriarchal bias of their societies, but eventually find fulfilment in traditional monogamous pair-bonding (Hughes 122, Roach 6). They tend to be good-looking, "natural" (Hughes 124), and socially inexperienced (frequently meaning "innocent") but able to "arouse erotic feeling" (Hughes 127).

It is not difficult to identify the function of the heroine's "naturalness" in historical romance novels, especially in relation to the Cinderella myth. Just as Cinderella's naturalness sets her apart from her two "unnatural," scheming, priggish step sisters (whose pretense goes as far as cutting off their own heels), it marks out the romantic heroine as special in her respective social context. The three Nell Gwyn novels substitute the two step sisters with King Charles's other two notorious long-term mistresses Barbara Palmer (née Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, Countess of Castlemaine) and Louise de Kéroualle (Duchess of Portsmouth). While Barbara and Louise are cast as scheming, unfaithful, greedy, manipulative harpies who meddle in politics, Barbara being as ill-tempered and presumptuous as Louise is conceited and recklessly extravagant in her tastes, Nell is consistently portrayed as a spirited, fun-loving young woman who is also big-hearted, generous, honest, faithful, and genuinely devoted to the king. This corresponds to some extent to the public perception of the three royal mistresses in late-seventeenth-century England. Thus, Barbara Palmer was "cordially disliked" from the beginning, as Gwyn biographer Derek Parker notes:

> It was the general perception – shared, indeed, by those close to [the King] – that Barbara occupied time and attention which the King should have been giving to affairs of state. . . . Even the Queen was not immune from her malign influence: the King reluctantly agreed to dismiss Lady Gerard, one of Catherine's ladies-in-waiting, when his mistress had a disagreement with her. He gave way to Barbara in every respect. (Parker 32-3)

Diarist Samuel Pepys complained that "my Lady Castlemaine rules him" and "hath all the tricks of Aretin" (Pepys May 1663); his contemporary John Evelyn called her "the curse of the Nation" (qtd. in Parker 32). Louise de Kéroualle was even more despised by the public, being French and Catholic (Parker 116-7, Beauclerk 223). In comparison with her two rivals, Nell Gwyn was apparently the most popular – or rather, the least unpopular – royal mistress, although one ought to be wary of over-enthusiastic assessments of her popularity, such as in Beauclerk, who writes that Gwyn "brought the monarchy to the people and the people to the monarchy, indeed symbolized the union of King and subject" (3).[4]

At any rate, novelists Haeger, Holloway Scott, and Bagwell have harnessed Gwyn's relative popularity for their respective Cinderella stories and shaped their novels' character constellations accordingly, a likeable heroine with whom readers will easily be able to identify flanked by two disagreeable aristocratic women. Haeger's Nell is perhaps the most extreme of the three Nells, willingly taking on responsibility for her drunkard mother and sickly sister, and adopting a black slave girl on top (charitable, caring, and not racist!). These efforts to turn Gwyn into a romantic heroine that readers can "cheer for" may well be the reason for the conspicuous absence from all three novels of the more problematic facts about the historical Nell Gwyn. As with the other two mistresses, her subsistence, and indeed, luxury, was founded on the king's generosity, and thus, on public money. 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)

Gwyn also developed a passion for gambling and was constantly in debt (see Beauclerk 318); after Charles's death in 1685 she had considerable difficulty keeping her creditors at bay and was forced to mortgage her Bestwood Lodge estate and pawn her silver and jewels (Beauclerk 354). The novels tend to gloss over her assiduous spending of public money, introducing the silver bed merely as a sign of her great love for the king and mentioning her gambling habit at best in passing.

Similarly, Gwyn's notorious practical joke on rival actress Moll Davis from the Duke's Theatre early in 1668 is missing from all three novels, which is remarkable considering that both Beauclerk and Parker treat it at some length in their biographies. Knowing that Davis had been 'summoned' to the king for a particular evening, Gwyn invited Davis to tea that same afternoon and mixed a strong laxative into her food – "with immediate and tumultuous results" (Parker 90; see also Beauclerk 126-7). Including the incident in the novels might have meant endowing the heroine with a rather cruel streak.

Famously, Sir John Coventry was waylaid on the night of 21 December 1670 and had his nose slit to the bone by the king's Life Guard for daring to criticize, however indirectly, the king's affair with Gwyn in the House of Commons – an incident published with great indignation in "A Ballad Called the Haymarket Hectors" (attributed to Andrew Marvell, see *Poems on Affairs of State* I, 168). Again, none of the novels have picked up on this scandal, just as they make no mention of the fact that Gwyn persuaded the king to issue a Proclamation for the Suppression of Coffee Houses in 1675, when she became aware that they were favored meeting places for the Green Ribbon Clubs, whose members were critical of the king's mistresses (Parker 126). Apparently, she, too, did occasionally "meddle" in politics.[5]

As for the tendency of historical romance novels to feature heroines that are socially and sexually inexperienced or innocent, the three novelists would have had to depart considerably from Gwyn's biography to make her a guileless Georgette Heyer type of virgin. Not only have biographers justifiably speculated about Gwyn's possible beginnings as a child prostitute (Parker 12, Beauclerk 15); her more than professional relationship with Charles Hart and her affair with Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst (to whom she referred as her "Charles I" and "Charles II" respectively, the king being her personal "Charles III"; see Parker 174) ensured that she had considerable "social" experience by the time King Charles began to take notice of her. Furthermore, the accounts of contemporaries associate young Gwyn with a merchant called Duncan, who allegedly "kept her" for about two years before she entered the theater (Beauclerk 40, Parker 11).

The novels handle this discrepancy between biography and generic ideal in different ways. In *The Darling Strumpet*, hunger drives the child Nell into prostitution, resulting in much suffering, which is why she gladly accepts Duncan's offer of becoming his mistress. Duncan turns out to be a tyrant, however, who wants to lock her away from the world and threatens to abandon her if she works as an orange girl at the theater to earn her own income, so she leaves their stifling arrangement. At the theater, she begins a relationship with an incredibly benevolent Charles Hart, who

sees himself as a stumbling block to her brilliant future and therefore urges her to leave him and find a rich man, which eventually, if reluctantly, she does:

> 'I know,' he said. 'You must look to your future.' They were both silent for a moment. Nell heard the cry of an oyster peddler outside on the street, and the briny smell of the barrels and heaviness of the barrow handles in her hands came vividly back. 'Yes,' she said. 'I must look to my future.' (Bagwell 183)

However, Nell's brief and un-romantic affairs with the Earl of Rochester and Lord Buckhurst end in disappointment when she finds that she is being treated like "a whore, bought and paid for" (195). King Charles, then, turns out to be the great love of her life; at his death, she "cried out, screaming, sobbing, feeling as if the very air was being cut off from her lungs. She could not breathe. She could not live, without him" (373). Although Bagwell's Nell is far from innocent by the time she becomes the king's mistress, she never behaves cruelly when she ends her earlier relationships with other men; she is forced to take them, and leave them, on the grounds of her precarious economic circumstances and their carelessness and indifference, which leaves her morally intact as a heroine, who finally, after some false starts, finds true love with King Charles.

Similarly, in *The King's Favorite* Nell becomes Duncan's mistress out of need but is made miserable and eventually cast off by Duncan when he gets married. At the theater, Nell feels flattered by Charles Hart's attentions, though bothered by his constant jealousy and later vengefulness; she does not love him, just as she feels no love for Lord Buckhurst, who sees her merely as a brief diversion. Her love for the king, by contrast, is genuine:

> I saw a man who needed love more than another lover, and who needed to laugh above all things. . . . Yet I must be honest in another way, too. I wouldn't refuse the gifts that a king can grant. A ring worth six hundred pounds would have looked most fine upon my finger. But what I'd want first was the man himself. Not the titles, not the jewels, not the estates, but the man. (Holloway Scott 158)

In *The Perfect Royal Mistress*, finally, Nell is a sixteen-year-old virgin and raped by Charles Hart in the theater; she then becomes his mistress to support her sickly sister, which is also the reason why she subsequently succumbs to Lord Buckhurst: "'For a chance at a proper life for us both'" (106), as she explains to Rose. Buckhurst reveals himself to be a lazy, spineless, impotent drunkard who causes her nothing but embarrassment. Eventually she finds true fulfilment with the king of England, reminiscing on his death that "for eighteen years, he had been the great love of her life" (397). This version of Nell seems most intent on sustaining her virtuousness and innocence, omitting the figure of Duncan and depicting her early relationships as violent or depressing, and Nell's motivation as purely self-sacrificial. The tendency to depict these liaisons as unfulfilling, as somehow "not the real thing," is common to all three novels though, and serves as an important strategy to signal that even though King Charles was not her only lover, Nell's love of the king is the only one meaningful to her. In this way, the novels are true to Gwyn's biography in keeping (most of) her relationships in the story, while making concessions to the

romance genre by depicting Nell's emotional development as directed towards her one true love.

"Dark eyes that missed nothing": Charles II as a Romantic Hero

The typical hero of historical romance has been described as a powerful "man of the world who hides his sensitivity under a cynical, even brutal, exterior" (Hughes 17), a man of "high alpha traits" (Roach 9), "saturnine and abrasive" and generally in a "position of wealth and authority" (Hughes 39). His usual development has been characterized as a kind of 'feminizing': as he falls in love with the heroine he begins to reveal a more caring, tender side (Hughes 108,124). As such, he can be conceived of as a "patriarchal alpha hero, who has the power to easily harm [the heroine], but who will not, because she has cracked open his frozen patriarch's heart and taught him to love" (Roach 9).

In the three novels, King Charles II is described as "energetic and athletic" (Haeger 57), "tall and elegant" (Haeger 128), "big and broad shouldered, . . . his deep voice ringing out amidst the clamour and cries" (Bagwell 15) of his well-wishers, with a "darkly handsome face, jaunty carriage" (Bagwell 41), and "dark eyes that missed nothing" (Holloway Scott 69). "There was no chance of mistaking Charles Stuart for anyone else," Holloway Scott's Nell notices adoringly, "even from across the room, I could feel the force of his personality, his regal power" (Holloway Scott 7). Such descriptions clearly align the figure of the king with the powerful, charismatic alpha hero of historical romance novels. In *The King's Favorite*, Charles also has a dangerous streak to him: he is secretive about his politics, and he is irascible, furious with Nell after she and Buckingham have publicly mimicked Louise and the king at a dinner: "Dressed in his usual dark, rich clothes, he seemed to loom over me in somber judgment" (Holloway Scott 281). Similarly, *The Darling Strumpet* includes historical incidents when, for instance, the king flies "into a towering rage" and has the theater closed when John Lacy's improvised jests in Howard's *The Change of Crowns* anger him (Bagwell 163), and when he sends the Duke of Buckingham to the Tower for having the monarch's horoscope cast (Bagwell 189).[6] This menacing side of the king's power reflects well the 'brutality' or 'abrasiveness' of the typical romantic hero.

The Perfect Royal Mistress offers a popular variant of the generic model: Haeger's Charles is certainly powerful, but he is haunted by nightmares of his father's execution, his legendary promiscuity being merely a desperate attempt to distract himself from profound loneliness and despair: "Though he had all of the richness and grandeur that had eluded him in his poverty-ridden exile, his heart was a more difficult void to fill. The harder he searched for someone he could love, the more he found women seduced by the trappings of royalty" (42). His groom of the bedchamber, William Chiffinch, "purveyor of young flesh" (Parker 107), regularly leads young women up the palace backstairs to keep him company, "a young body to help him forget that he loved no one and no one loved him" (Haeger 166). Here we have a classic "tortured hero," following in the footsteps of Mr Rochester & Co, yearning for love and salvation, which he finds in the arms of the heroine. True to the model, Haeger's Charles opens up only to Nell and finally tells her about his nightmares and traumatic memories.

However, none of the novels manages to make the figure of Charles Stuart conform to the pattern of development that is so crucial to the hero of historical romance, and which determines the generic course of the romantic couple's relationship. After some false starts, as numerous obstacles must be overcome, the romantic hero, saturnine and abrasive though he may be, begins to recognize the heroine for the unique, admirable individual that she is. He learns to respect and cherish her, wants to take care of her, desires her intensely; "indeed he is helpless and lost without her love," as Catherine Roach (9) diagnoses. This development has been described as a "winning and taming" (Hughes 17) of the hero by the heroine, which ultimately unites them in marriage (or else, in rare cases, leads at least to the promise of a lasting, monogamous love relationship, see Ramsdell 115) through which Cinderella is raised to the superior social rank occupied by her prince. This is what constitutes the trademark HEA ('Happily Ever After') ending of historical romance, which is "the promise of the genre writer to his or her reader," as Kristin Ramsdell states, "and the writer who breaks it ends up with a confused and disappointed audience" (Ramsdell 19).

To begin with, the Gwyn novels obviously depart from this typical structure of romance narratives as they trace the protagonist's life from her youth through to middle age or death, covering an extensive time span which continues for years after the hero and heroine have become lovers, rather than just for a short period of courtship. This is somewhat unusual but by no means unheard of in historical romance. Roberta Gellis's novels often span many years, for instance. Joan Wolf's *The Rebel and the Rose* (1986), set during and after the American Revolution, is another prominent example of a more extensive narrative, even covering some fifteen years after the wedding. However, the arranged marriage of Wolf's Lady Barbara to Alan Maxwell begins in discord and sees the protagonists arrive at mutual understanding, acceptance and love at the end of the story. Similarly, Anya Seton's classic historical romance and fictional biography *Katherine* (1954) follows the heroine through many years, during which she bears her lover John of Gaunt four children, separates from him for reasons of conscience and is eventually reconciled with, and married to, the hero.

The Gwyn novels – in addition to their (relative) structural anomaly – do not feature this emotionally satisfying conclusion by which the romance genre is defined. As in other romance narratives, the lovers' union is foreshadowed and then postponed in the novels – due to Nell's eventful professional and love life rather than to any concrete obstacles – but as the narratives move towards their conclusion, no great change occurs in Charles's attitude towards her. Readers wait in vain for his whole-hearted commitment, his recognition that "she is everything to me," as would be typical of a romance hero. In Gillian Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet*, Nell takes the Duke of Buckingham's advice to heart: "'Never be a burden. There's a never-ending queue of people making demands upon the king. You must be a welcome respite from all that. Make him laugh. Make him forget his cares'" (Bagwell 214).[7] The same is true for Haeger's and Holloway Scott's heroines: though in both novels the king's affection for Nell is palpable, Nell seems to function primarily as a convenient place of repose for the monarch from beginning to end, a source of erotic pleasure and laughter, away from his political cares. Although Nell's relationship with the king is clearly at the center of each of the three narratives and depicted as "special," she never becomes the partner in the monogamous pair-bonding that the romance model

This is a postprint!
The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in
Contemporary Women's Writing 8.3 (Oxford UP, Nov 2014): 373-390. doi: 10.1093/cww/vpu007.

requires. Charles Stuart, as is well known, never divorced his childless queen Catherine of Braganza,[8] and Nell Gwyn was at no point his only mistress, and certainly not his only sexual partner, during the time of their relationship.[9] There is no gradual recognition of Nell's uniqueness on his part that would prompt him to relinquish his "enjoyment" of other women, and certainly no inclination or chance to propose to her. Consequently, Nell's position does not change in the way of a romantic heroine's ascent. Her social standing becomes in no way level with her lover's, and economically she remains in a precarious position, which is only marginally alleviated by the fact that she bears the king two sons.

In an e-mail interview, Gillian Bagwell recounts the reception of *The Darling Strumpet* by the US romance writers community:

> It was nominated for a Romance Writers of America RITA award in the category of Novel with Strong Romantic Elements, and was a finalist in the category of Best First Book. But at least some reviews by romance fans were harsh about it not being a romance. A reviewer who was covering all the RITA finalists graded it A- as a novel and D as a romance […]. (Bagwell e-mail interview)

The same can be said of Haeger's and Holloway Scott's books: they participate in, rather than belong to, the romance genre. Although their proximity to historical romance is conspicuous in many respects, their adherence to biographical facts and, consequently, their obvious departure from the structural premises of the genre means that they ultimately fail as romance novels.

And yet, all three Nell Gwyn novels have successfully entered the book market. Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet* has sold well in English and has been translated into four foreign languages (Bagwell e-mail interview); similarly, Haeger's fictional biographies[10] have each been translated into 15 to 20 different languages (Haeger e-mail interview). When I had a conversation about *The Perfect Royal Mistress* with a friend who happens to be a prolific reader of romance novels, she declared herself extremely disappointed with the ending, adding that as a romance the book did not work for her at all, but that she was interested nevertheless and finished it because it was based on a real/historical person. When I asked a student of mine, who claimed she *never* reads romance novels, about her response to Haeger's book, she wrote, "I liked it *despite* the genre (romance novel) because I learned so much about history" (emphasis added). Thus, for enthusiasts and detractors of romantic fiction alike, Haeger's "failed romance" is apparently saved by its close relation to history and biography. Such dual responses can be understood as symptomatic of the double life of fictional biographies as biographical texts *and* works of fiction, and of the twofold evaluations they habitually provoke. From critics, the authors of the Gwyn novels have also repeatedly garnered praise for their meticulous research (Martin), for their extensive "knowledge of the city of London" (Posney, "The Darling Strumpet"), and for being "an expert of the court of King Charles II" (Posney, "The King's Favorite"). "Readers like to read about real people," Gillian Bagwell (e-mail interview) states, thus endorsing Martin Middeke's proposition of a "biographical desire essential to all human beings" (Middeke 5), which biofiction caters to no less than "straight" biography.

This is a postprint!
The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in
Contemporary Women's Writing 8.3 (Oxford UP, Nov 2014): 373-390. doi: 10.1093/cww/vpu007.

"Capturing the Heart of the King": A Biography 'Romanticized'

It is time to revisit the question what effect the romance elements have on the biographical representations of Nell Gwyn, especially with regard to the gender-specific images of Gwyn emerging from the three novels. For this purpose, it should be noted that the HEA ending of romantic fiction, together with the typical characterization of hero and heroine, have been at the heart of an on-going debate about the ideological thrust of romance novels and their conservative or subversive potential with regard to gender roles. Romance writers such as Ann Maxwell and Jayne Krentz have argued that romance narratives are essentially "tales of strong women taming and gentling that most dangerous of creatures on earth, the human male" (Maxwell and Krentz 351), and that, in this sense, they are stories of "female empowerment, . . . of women who win, who get what they want" and thus "invert the traditional patriarchal, male-dominated order" (Ramsdell 20). For feminist or Marxist critics, however, the genre's iterable structure marks its allegiance to patriarchy, as the heroine sacrifices her independence for romantic love (Fuchs 126; see also Hughes 129), or, as Roach has pointed out, the romance ending ultimately affirms a patriarchal social order in that it

> is the foundational premise of hetero-normative masculinist culture: that a woman must be under the protection of a man, yoked to him and to at least some extent in his control. . . . This premise is foundational as well to much female fantasy life: that a woman will be protected, yet also pleasured, by the perfect love of a good man. (Roach 6)

Thus, the heroine must be regarded as simply lucky to find a "good man" who cherishes and respects her in a patriarchal society that systematically relegates women to a subordinate position. Her success and "victory," her "taming and gentling" of the hero, are always granted her within the limits of a patriarchal order, which is consequently reinforced.

Now one might be tempted to ask whether the three Gwyn novels, which signal their association with historical romantic fiction, but then, for obvious reasons, dispense with the generic HEA ending, could not be read as subverting the genre and thus its ideological foundations. In other words, could the novels perhaps be read as feminist representations of Nell Gwyn that make short shrift of patriarchal societal patterns? The answer is an emphatic "No." It is true that the novels bring to light the precarious social and economic position of the king's actress-mistress, her dependence not only on his purse, but also on his continuous affection for and erotic interest in her, which could be interpreted as an implicit critique of a social order so utterly dominated by men. However, the cover of Bagwell's *The Darling Strumpet* features the sub-titles "A Novel of Nell Gwynn" and "She captured the heart of the king," drawing attention to the romantic elements of the plot. Haeger's novel ends on the words: "She may not have been the queen, nor even his only mistress – far from that – but she knew with every fiber of her being, and so did their son, that she had been his only love" (399). In a similar vein, Holloway Scott's *The King's Favorite* concludes with the following scene:

> He laughed again, drawing me closer. "Ah, Nelly, Nelly. Whatever would I do without you, eh?"
> "Not laugh half so much," I said promptly, "nor so well."

> My king then smiled so warmly at me, I could have melted from it. "Without you, I wouldn't have much worth laughing about."
> "No, sir, you wouldn't," I said, and winked as I stood up on my toes to kiss him. "And where, I ask you, would be the joy in that?" (419)

This scene of romantic domestic bliss, which presents a patronizing hero with his infantilized mistress, is what Holloway Scott's novel moves towards, just as Haeger's *The Perfect Royal Mistress* concludes with a protestation of romantic fulfilment. Thus, all three novels strongly emphasize the romantic elements of their story, their departure from the HEA ending seeming a necessary evil rather than a welcome chance to utter a feminist critique of 17th-century England.

This focus on romantic love in a biographical text is significant in other respects, too. Gender-sensitive approaches to biography have shed light on the different strategies that legitimize biographical subjects as such. Some feminist critics have taken issue with the factor of "greatness" – which has traditionally skewed biography towards male subjects, as women have for a long time been structurally barred from areas in which "greatness" could be attained – and with the concomitant "spotlight approach" to biography as a narrative strategy that decontextualizes and essentializes the subject (Stanley 6, 214). Others see an insistence on a relational approach, which depicts the biographee as one constituent within his or her social and professional network, as posing a danger that the female subject be reduced to the inferior status that history has always assigned her (Ní Dhúill 213-4). Pictured merely in relation to others, a woman is once again represented only in her role of mother, daughter, wife, sister, muse – or mistress – of some famous man, who thus comes to dominate "her" narrative (see Kramer 319).

Thus, if we bear with the notion of biography as recounting lives that are somehow "great," "special," "memorable" etc. and ask what it is that makes Nell Gwyn a subject worthy of biography, the answer that the three Gwyn novels unanimously give is, "she was the King's mistress." Gwyn may have had an interesting acting career, she may have been a key figure in English theater (and literary) history, but it is her relationship with Charles Stuart that makes her life truly memorable, the novels suggest. Accordingly, they feature her theatrical career as a lead-up to, and training for, Gwyn's life at court. When Bagwell's Nell, for instance, becomes interested in Lord Buckhurst, she strategically refuses his invitation to dine with him and is then said to be "shaking with the effort of the part she had just played" (178). To fellow actress Betsy Knepp she says, "I must consider what to do. I've sent him away" (179), provoking her colleague to exclaim, "Well played, Nell. Excellently well played" (179). The scene suggests that the acting skills Nell acquires are key in her dealings with the noble and wealthy. In *The King's Favorite*, a backstage repartee between Nell and the Duke of Buckingham fulfils much the same function:

> "Words seem to spill from her lips like the waters in a brook."
> "Why, how handsomely you turned that, Y'Grace!" I exclaimed with droll amazement. "You could be a player on the boards, too, Y'Grace, indeed you could."
> He smiled, surprised, I think, that I'd a wit to match my tits. "And you, my dear," he said, "could be a courtier at Whitehall." (89)

This is a postprint!
The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in
Contemporary Women's Writing 8.3 (Oxford UP, Nov 2014): 373-390. doi: 10.1093/cww/vpu007.

Haeger's *The Perfect Royal Mistress* makes this connection even more explicit. When Nell and Lord Buckhurst find themselves in the king's company after a horse race, Nell successfully hides her interest in the monarch:

> "There is the king," Buckhurst said offhandedly as he drew out a flask from his pocket and began to open it.
> "Oh? Where?" asked Nell, feigning boredom herself, using the acting skills that had taken her to this unbelievable zenith. (129)

Later in the novel, Nell is preparing to meet the king and her rival Louise de Kéroualle after a performance:

> She stood, glanced at her own reflection, forced an even more carefree smile, then prepared to receive him. Perhaps he believed she did not know about Carwell's presence. That was how she intended to proceed. *"You are an actress, now act."* (Haeger 320)

All three novels feature Nell's professional life in the theater as primarily a stepping stone to life at court. The novels' plot arcs can be summarized as centering on the questions "will Nell be able to catch the king?", and subsequently, "how will she be able to keep him?", and that is where these biographical narratives' greatest concession to romance lies. This romanticized trajectory of Gwyn's life makes the king's favor her absolute goal and pictures her life entirely in relation to the monarch. Her relational representation results in the historical biographee's entrapment in what Carolyn Heilbrun sarcastically identified as "the only narrative available to [woman]: the conventional marriage or erotic plot" (48).

Conclusion

To conclude, in all three Nell Gwyn novels discussed, a tension is palpable between "factual" biography and the generic requirements of the historical romance novel, a genre in which all three novels clearly participate. The historical romance hinges on a set of heavily conventionalized narrative strategies that are recognizable across individual works and ultimately lead to a de-individualisation of the central characters, whose representation must make concessions to the demands of the genre. While it is not difficult to cast Gwyn as the strong-willed, good-looking and "natural" romantic heroine vis-à-vis rival mistresses, there are other biographical facts that must be ignored, twisted, or explained away to make her person conform to the generic model. Charles II, though easily pictured as the powerful alpha male of romantic fiction, turns out to be even more problematic as a romantic hero, refusing monogamy and failing to bring about Gwyn's permanent social ascent. Consequently, the novels fail as romance, or represent at best imperfect specimens of the genre, as biographical fact prevents them from delivering the obligatory "Happily Ever After" ending. Conversely, the novels' insistence on their romantic elements leads to a version of Gwyn's life in which her theatrical career features primarily as a preamble to her life at court as a long-term lover to Charles II. They thus perpetuate the popular image of Gwyn as "royal mistress," whose life is of interest or value only in relation to the king's.

Biography theorists have often pointed to the function of life-writing as an "act" in the world (see, for example, Fetz 33). Biographies – and this includes the fictionalized variety – do not only serve as instruments of canonization, extending a

This is a postprint!
The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in
Contemporary Women's Writing 8.3 (Oxford UP, Nov 2014): 373-390. doi: 10.1093/cww/vpu007.

person's "afterlife" by adding their stories to a society's cultural memory, but also provide patterns of behavior and models of female achievement for their readers. They can thus have an impact on the construction of gender identity beyond the biographee's life span. Nell Gwyn offers her biographers a colorful life with a remarkable career. Yet, when we ask of Haeger's, Bagwell's and Holloway Scott's biofictions what it means to 'make it' as a woman, the answer seems to be: to catch a rich and powerful lover and manage to remain in his favor. It is to be hoped that their readers take this message with a large twenty-first century pinch of salt.[11]

***

This paper is part of the project 'Portrait of the Woman Artist: Gender and Genre in Biofiction,' supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): T 589-G23.

University of Vienna, Austria
Julia.Lajta-Novak@univie.ac.at

This is a postprint!
The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Contemporary Women's Writing* 8.3 (Oxford UP, Nov 2014): 373-390. doi: 10.1093/cww/vpu007.

NOTES

[1] The King's Company was one of two theater companies to receive a patent for mounting theatrical productions in London after the restoration of Charles II to the English throne. It was headed by Thomas Killigrew, while the Duke's Company (whose patron was the King's brother James Stuart, Duke of York) was managed by Sir William Davenant (cf. Love 109).

[2] Or "gay couple" plays; these feature spirited women who engage in duels of wit with their lovers, such as Mirida in James Howard's *All Mistaken, or The Mad Couple*, and Dryden's *Secret Love, or The Maiden Queen*.

[3] Charles de Vere Beauclerk, Earl of Burford (*1965), is the heir apparent of the 14th Duke of St Albans and a direct descendent of Charles II and Nell Gwyn. He is a writer, lecturer and historian, specializing in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature and history. His ancestry may well explain the frequently partial tone of his biography *Nell Gwyn: Mistress to a King* (2005).

[4] In satires of her day, Nell Gwyn was frequently derided as a common prostitute "Rais'd from a Dunghill" ("The Lady of Pleasure"), who was distracting the king from his duties (see, for example, Andrew Marvell's "Further Advice to a Painter") and, like his other mistresses, squandered public funds (see, for example, "On the Prorogation").

[5] In her article on representations of Nell Gwyn and Charles II in history plays since the 19th century, Dorothea Flothow identifies a similar tendency to depict Gwyn in a thoroughly positive light and smooth over her more problematic traits, which is mostly also the case for stage representations of Charles II; see Flothow 31-52.

[6] An offence that amounted to treason, as casting the king's horoscope implied contemplating his death. Accordingly, a warrant for the duke's arrest was issued on 25 February 1667 (cf. Yardley) and he was temporarily lodged in the Tower in June that year.

[7] Apparently, the historical Nell Gwyn was advised in just such a manner by the Earl of Rochester: "take your measure just contrary to your rivals, live in peace with all the world, and easily with the King. Never be so ill-natured as to stir up his anger against others, but let him forget the use of a passion, which is never to do you good" (qtd. in Parker 147).

[8] While in the novels the King's relationship with Nell is made to stand out from his other affairs, Gwyn biographer Derek Parker speculates that Queen Catherine was "perhaps the only real love of his life" (xi), thus questioning the Cinderella myth surrounding Nell Gwyn's liaison with the monarch.

[9] Priya Parmar, the author of yet another Nell Gwyn novel entitled *Exit the Actress* (Simon & Schuster Ome, 2011), resorted to a different strategy as regards the depiction of the Gwyn-Stuart liaison: Parmar's Nell becomes romantically involved with the King at a time when Barbara Palmer is "on her way out," and Parmar's narrative ends just before the point where the historical King would take up with Gwyn's great rival Louise de Kéroualle. In that way, Charles Stuart can be depicted as a sincere, faithful and monogamous lover, which brings her novel considerably closer to the classic HEA ending.

[10] Diane Haeger has also fictionalised the lives of Jane Seymour (*I, Jane*), Elizabeth Blount (*The Queen's Rival*), Catherine Howard (*The Queen's Mistake*), Mary Tudor (*The Secret Bride*), Margherita Luti (*The Ruby Ring*), Cecelia Stovall (*My Dearest Cecelia*), Maria Fitzherbert (*The Secret Wife of King George IV*), and Diane de Poitiers (*Courtesan*).

[11] I am indebted to my sister Theresa for sharing her extensive knowledge of the historical romance genre with me.

Works Cited:

Bagwell, Gillian. *The Darling Strumpet*. London: Avon, 2011. Print.
---. E-mail interview. 27 Aug 2013.

Beauclerk, Charles. *Nell Gwyn: Mistress to a King*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005. Print.

"Diane Haeger." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2008. Literature Resource Center. Web. 16 Apr. 2013.

Fetz, Bernhard. "Die vielen Leben der Biographie." Die Biographie –Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie. Ed. Bernhard Fetz. Berlin: deGruyter, 2009. 3-66. Print.

Flothow, Dorothea. "Transferring the King and the Actress to the Stage: Representations of Charles II and Nell Gwynne in Selected History Plays." *Transfer in English Studies*. Austrian Studies in English 100. Ed. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, Manfred Markus, and Herbert Schendl. Wien: Braumüller, 2012. 31-52. Print.

Frow, John. *Genre*. The New Critical Idiom. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Fuchs, Barbara. *Romance*. The New Critical Idiom. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Haeger, Diane. *The Perfect Royal Mistress*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007. Print.

Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Writing a Woman's Life*. London: The Women's Press, 1989. Print.

Holloway Scott, Susan. *The King's Favorite*. New York: New American Library, 2008. Print.

Hughes, Helen. *The Historical Romance*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Kramer, Stephanie. "Lebensspuren: Alternative Lebensentwürfe von Dichterinnen und die Problematik weiblicher Autorschaft im englischsprachigen Gegenwartsdrama." *Fakten und Fiktionen: Strategien fiktionalbiographischer Dichterdarstellungen in Roman, Drama und Film seit 1970*. Ed. Christian v. Zimmermann. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2000. 319-333. Print.

Love, Harold. "Restoration and Early Eighteenth-Century Drama." *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660-1780*. Ed. John Richetti. Cambridge: CUP, 2005. 109-131. Print.

Martin, Cesca. Book Review "The Darling Strumpet by Gillian Bagwell." *Novelicious.com* 18 Aug 2011. Web. 01 Sept 2013.

Marvell, Andrew. "Further Advice to a Painter." *Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714*. Vol I. Ed. George de Forest Lord. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963. 164-5. Print.

Maxwell, Ann, and Jayne Ann Krentz. "The Wellsprings of Romance (1989)." *Women and Romance: A Reader*. Ed. Susan Ostrov Weisser. New York: NY University Press, 2001. 347-352. Print.

Middeke, Martin. "Introduction." *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*. Ed. Martin Middeke & Werner Huber. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 1999. 1-25. Print.

Ní Dhúill, Caitríona. "Biographie von ‚er„ bis ‚sie„: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen relationaler Biographik." *Die Biographie – Zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie*. Ed. Bernhard Fetz. Berlin: deGruyter, 2009. 199-226. Print.

Norfolk, Pam. Book Review "The Darling Strumpet by Gillian Bagwell." *Lytham St Annes Express* 25 Aug 2011. Web. 01 Sept 2013.

"On the Prorogation." *Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714*. Vol I. Ed. George de Forest Lord. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963. 179-184. Print.

Parker, Derek. *Nell Gwyn*. Stroud: Sutton, 2000. Print.

Pepys, Samuel. *THE DIARY OF SAMUEL PEPYS M.A. F.R.S., CLERK OF THE ACTS AND SECRETARY TO THE ADMIRALTY, TRANSCRIBED FROM THE SHORTHAND MANUSCRIPT IN THE PEPYSIAN LIBRARY, MAGDALENE COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE BY THE REV. MYNORS BRIGHT M.A. LATE FELLOW AND PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE. WITH LORD BRAYBROOKE'S NOTES.* 1663. Edited With Additions By Henry B. Wheatley F.S.A. LONDON, GEORGE BELL & SONS YORK ST. COVENT GARDEN. CAMBRIDGE DEIGHTON BELL & CO. 1893. *Projekt Gutenberg.* Web. 1 Oct 2013.

Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse, 1660-1714. Vol. I. Ed. George deForest Lord. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963. Print.

Posney, Kayla. Book Review "The Darling Strumpet by Gillian Bagwell." *Examiner.com* 21 Jan 2011. Web. 1 Sept 2013.

---. Book Review "The King's Favorite by Susan Holloway Scott." *Examiner.com* 2 Feb 2010. Web. 01 Sept 2013.

Ramsdell, Kristin. *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*. Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1999. Print.

Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Print.

Rice, Lynette. Book Review "The Perfect Royal Mistress (2007)". *Entertainment Weekly*. 23 Feb 2007. Web. 10 Oct 2013.

Roach, Catherine. "Getting a Good Man to Love: Popular Romance Fiction and the Problem of Patriarchy." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 1.1 (2010): 1-15. Web. 5 July 2013.

Roberts, Andrew. "Royal Mistress Nell Gwyn's Expenses Would Shame our MPs But She Was Worth Every Penny." *Daily Mail* 24 June 2008. Web. 15 Jan 2013.

Stanley, Liz. *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992. Print.

"The Lady of Pleasure." *The Works of His Grace, George Villiers: Late Duke of Buckingham*. 4th ed. Vol I. London: printed for Sam. Briscoe, and sold by Fardinando Burleigh, 1715. Print.

Yardley, Bruce. "Villiers, George." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, 2013. Web. 28 Oct 2013.