

Delarivier Manley (c. 1663-1724)*
by Ros Ballaster

‘[S]he is the decayed soubrette in a cheap music-hall, trying to achieve by lewdness what she is unable to win by charm.’[1] Thus Bridget MacCarthy described Delarivier Manley, the best known author of scandal fiction in the first two decades of the eighteenth century in England. MacCarthy’s judgmental style of criticism is no longer in fashion but the image of Manley as a stage performer with an inflated view of her own magnetism is one that would have been familiar to her contemporaries and may, obliquely, illuminate our own efforts to assess and understand her significance as a writer of prose, drama and poetry.

An anonymous satirical play called *The Female Wits* of 1696, performed at Lincoln’s Inns Fields two years after her first two plays (*The Lost Lover* and *The Royal Mischief*) had been staged, presents Manley as a ‘poetess that admires her own works, and a great lover of flattery.’[2] Her maid Patience, when putting on her mistress’s necklace exclaims: ‘Here’s a neck! Such a shape! Such a skin!.... Oh! if I were a man, I should run mad!’ (Act 1, Scene 1, p. 393). The slippage between textual and physical corpus is one that Manley positively encouraged in her writing. The quickness and allusiveness of Manley’s intelligence is also demonstrated by the fact that her own (auto) biography, *The Adventures of Rivella* (1714), repeatedly quotes and subverts the representation of her found in *The Female Wits*. The opening paragraph of the history of Rivella has the male narrator, Sir Charles Lovemore, assert that ‘I have often heard her say, if she had been a man, she had been without fault.’[3] Yet, by the end of his narrative he concludes that her sex is her biggest asset: ‘it would have been a fault in her, not to have been faulty’ (p. 114). Given that Manley produced her own account of her life under pressure of blackmail from the publisher Edmund Curll, who had written to tell her that the first two pages of a biography by Charles Gildon were coming off the press, the play in the text on the idea of male speakers presenting images of the female author that titillate and seduce (Sir Charles is telling her life history to a young French Chevalier called, of course ‘D’Aumont’) starts to look like a pointed riposte.

Throughout her writing career, Manley was interested in regaining the representational high ground from men. Her writings repetitively renarrate the story of the exchange of a commodified feminine body between exploitative profiteering men. Her self-representations are carefully framed to point to the appropriative nature of men’s discourse on women; they remind us that the image you see is one marketed by men who deploy women for their own purposes. Manley’s response is not so much to insist on the authenticity of women’s representation of themselves but rather to point out the constraints on women’s access to self-representation and the difficulties of avoiding (mis)interpretation by masculine commentators. Her own biography often provided the material for a demonstration of such constraint and the attempt to reappropriate representation on the part of the woman writer. Manley’s versions of her life history stress the exploitation and appropriation she suffered, largely at the hands of men. The principal source for Delarivier’s biography is her own account in the 1714 *Adventures of Rivella*; a brief account is also provided by Manley in her most successful work of

scandal fiction, the *New Atalantis* (1709) in the first-person narrative of Delia given in the second volume.[4] Manley also published some letters relating to her private life (if it can be so-called) with a series of letters related to contemporary scandals; it appeared in two parts as *The Lady's Paquet of Letters taken from her by a French privateer in her passage to Holland, or the Lady's Paquet Broke Open bound with Marie d'Aulnoy's Memoirs of the Court of England* (January 1707) and *Memories of the Earl of Warwick* (November 1707). This collection of letters was republished in 1711 under the title *Court Intrigues in a Collection of Original Letters from the Island of the New Atalantis & c.*, which Manley disclaimed as a pirated edition in a number of the *Examiner* on 14 June 1711.

These autobiographical materials detail her successive disappointments at the hands of male lovers and potential patrons. On the death of her father, Roger Manley, a Cavalier soldier and writer (Manley claims he was 'the genuine author of the first volume' of *The Turkish Spy in Rivella* (p.51)), Delarivier and Cornelia, her younger sister, fell to the sole care of John Manley, their cousin. John Manley (1654-1713) was a Tory lawyer who later became a successful MP. He married a Cornish orphaned heiress, Anne Grosse, at Westminster Abbey on 19 January 1679, but succeeded in persuading Delarivier (whether she knew the liaison was bigamous or not) to marry him; she bore him at least one son, John, born on 24 June 1691 and christened on 13 July 1691 in the parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Westminster as the child of 'John and Dela Manley'. In January 1694, under the protection of Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland and long-term mistress to Charles II, Delarivier either left or was left by her bigamous husband, but only six months later was expelled from the Duchess's house in Arlington Street on the grounds of a flirtation with the Grace's son.

From 1694 to 1696, Delarivier Manley travelled around the south-west of England; a series of eight letters composed during these travels to one 'J.H.' (possibly James Hargreaves or John Manley) were published without her permission as *Letters by Mrs Manley* to coincide with the production of her first play, a comedy called *The Lost Lover, or the Jealous Husband* (1696). It is possible that Manley was travelling with her 'husband', John Manley, who was inspecting Pendennis Castle to determine rents due to its owner in the summer of 1694; Manley's biographer, Dolores Diane Clark Duff, speculates that a son, Francis, baptised on 9 August 1694 at the church of St. Mary, Truro, as the child of Anne and John Manley and buried in December 1694, may have been Dela's also, given the fourteen year gap between this and the birth of his last child by his first wife.[5] Manley had the letters withdrawn from publication and they were not reissued until after her death in 1725, when Edmund Curll produced them under the title *a Stagecoach Journey to Exeter*.

In December 1696, her fellow female author Catherine Trotter asked her to assist her in securing the freedom of John Tilly, Governor of the Prison at the Fleet who was under investigation for corruption and taking bribes by a committee of the House of Commons of which Delarivier's 'husband', John Manley was a member; this introduction resulted in a six-year affair between Manley and Tilly. *Rivella* informs us that when Tilly's first wife died in December 1702, Delarivier nobly sacrificed her love to allow him to marry a

widowed heiress, Margaret Smith (née Resesby), and repair his fortunes. Letter 33 of *A Lady's Paquet Broke Open* (1707) renarrates the same sacrifice. Over this period, Manley made the acquaintance of Richard Steele when he was a young soldier; she assisted him in procuring a midwife for the delivery of his illegitimate daughter and dabbled in alchemical ventures. Letters 12 to 24 and 34 to 37 of *The Lady's Paquet* give their correspondence and volume one of the *New Atalantis* provides a narrative account of their friendship between 1696 and 1702 (pp. 100-4), which was abruptly severed when Steele refused to assist Manley with money to enable her to travel to the country after Tilly's marriage. Manley and Steele were to be inveterate and public enemies, a conflict exacerbated by their political differences, until 1717 when the preface to Manley's last performed play, *Lucius, the First Christian King of Britain* details a reconciliation, sweetened by Steele's payment of £600 for the play's production by his Drury Lane Company.

By the turn of the eighteenth century it became necessary for Delarivier Manley to return to writing to secure her living, and she embarked on her most successful venture as a writer: the production of an anti-Whig satire veiled as romance. *The Secret History of Queen Zarah and the Zarazians* (1705) is typical of the prose fiction in which she was to become adept, providing a stinging accurate, if scandalous, account of Whig political machination. In all her fiction, but especially in this first work, John and Sarah Churchill are major targets, their dominance over Queen Anne a source of anxiety and rancour for the Tory ideals and ambitions of Manley and other authors of her persuasion. A second part exploiting the popularity of the first appeared in the same year. A second tragedy, *Almyna; or the Arabian Vow* was performed in December 1706 at the new Haymarket theatre, an early example of her tendency to cryptic self-referentiality in the anagrammatical use of her own name for its powerful heroine, derived from Scheherezade in the popular *Arabian Nights Entertainment*.

Manley was taken into custody nine days after the publication of the second volume of *Secret Memories and Manners of several Persons of Quality of Both Sexes, from the New Atalantis, an island in the Mediterranean* on 29 October 1709. Manley apparently surrendered herself after a secretary John Morphew and John Woodward and printer John Barber had been detained. Four days later the latter were discharged, but Manley remained in custody until 5 November when she was released on bail. After several continuations of the case, she was tried and discharged on 13 February 1710. Rivella provides the only account of the case itself in which Manley claims she defended herself on grounds that her information came by 'inspiration' and rebuked her judges for bringing 'w woman to her trial for writing a few amorous trifles' (pp. 110-11). This and the first volume which appeared in May 1709 were *romans a clef* with separately printed keys. Each offered a succession of narratives of seduction and betrayal by notorious Whig grandees to Astrea, an allegorical figure of justice, by largely female narrators, including an allegorical figure of Intelligence and a midwife. In *Rivella*, Manley claims that her trial led her to conclude that 'politics is not the business of a woman' (p. 112) and that thereafter she turned exclusively to stories of love. In fact, the two volume *Memories of Europe, towards the close of the eighth century, written by Eginardus, secretary and favourite to Charlemagne*, of May and November 1710, continued to work

of propaganda for the Tory party and went on to be published as the third and fourth volumes of the *New Atalantis*. These volumes used male narrative voices more extensively; the first volume was addressed to Lord Peterborough on the strength of which Delarivier Manley sought, with Swift's support, a pension from Peterborough in July 1711.[6] The second volume was more concerned with stories of love than politics, but the satirical purpose of exposing Whig corruption through the analogy of sexual depravity remained evident. The author also sought assistance on several occasions from Robert Harley, sending him a copy of the first volume of *Memoirs of Europe* on 12 May 1710. Her patient solicitations (HMC Portland vol. 5, pp. 95-6; 453-4) found results in fifty pounds from Harley, which she records in her letter of thanks to him of 14 June 1714 (HMC Portland, vol. 5 p. 458), the only remuneration we know her to have received for her partisan services.

Manley's liaison with the Jacobite printer and alderman of the City of London John Barber (1675-1741) may have begun as early as 1705 when he published her *Queen Zarah*. In any case, by spring 1714 she and her sister Cornelia were living at his residence and printing house on the corner of Old Fish Street and Lambeth Hill in London. Her last performed play, *Lucius, the first Christian King of Britain* at Drury Lane in 1717, a work of fervent nationalism, puts centre stage (like her other plays) a powerful woman, Rosalind, Queen of Britain. *The Power of Love in Seven Novels* (1720) reworked five tales from William Painter's 1566 versions of Italian and French novels entitled the *Palace of Pleasure*, and drew on a contemporary scandal and, apparently, invention, for the remaining two. According to Edmund Curll, Barber's tyrannous behaviour toward her and his infidelity with the maid he had engaged for her, one Sarah Dovekin or Dufkin, impeded Manley's completion of a second volume of novels, presumably also from Painter, before her death.[7] Delarivier Manley died at Barber's house on 11 July 1724 of a 'cholic' (*Impartial History*, p.44) and was buried at her request in her will (6 October 1723 and proved 28 September 1724) under a white marble stone at the church of St. Benet's, Paul's Wharf. In her will she mentions two plays, now lost - a tragedy called *The Duke of Somerset* and a comedy called *The Double Mistress* - which might turn a profit on publication, but asks for all her other manuscripts to be destroyed so that 'none Ghost-like may walk after my decease' (PROB 11/599/194-5); the same instructions held for any correspondence.

Delarivier Manley appears to have had a winning personality (she did have the 'charm' MacCarthy considers her to have lacked), although she and others admitted that she was not a remarkable beauty. In his *Journal to Stella* on 28 January 1712, Jonathan Swift described her as having 'very generous principles for one of her sort; and a great deal of sense and invention; she is about forty, very homely, and very fat' (Letter 40, 2.474) Delarivier herself endorsed this impression, describing herself as 'from her youth ... inclined to fat' and complaining that her appearance had been spoilt by small-pox; but 'considering her disadvantage, she has the most easy air that one can have; her hair is a pale ash-colour, fine, and in a large quantity' and moreover 'none that became acquainted with her, could refrain from loving her' (*Rivella*, p.47).

Biographers and critics, myself included, have tended to concentrate on the more obviously biographical passages in Manley's prose fiction in order to understand her own self-representation. I would like to call attention here to the figure of Almyra in *The Arabian Vow*, whose name is an approximate anagram of her author's surname. It is perhaps striking that the heroine who carries a version of her paternal name is provided with a more subversive and challenging combination of gender characteristics and a more positive representation as a speaking agent than the Delia and Rivella (variants of her Christian name) in the prose fiction.[8] To return to that opening image of Manley as a stage performer, identification with the performative qualities of the dramatic role, as opposed to the character in a prose fiction, seems to have liberated a more celebratory, if more fantastic, version of the writing self. The slightly self-mocking vanity is still there. Almyra, daughter of the vizier, is a great beauty with whom both the sultan Almanzor and his brother-heir, Abdalla, are violently enamoured. Unlike her model, Scheherazade, and her creator, Manley, Almyra is not a spinner of fictions but rather a learned woman, who deters her tyrannous husband, Almanzor, from his determination to execute each new wife the morning after the nuptial night by proving to him in argument and through her own heroism that women do have souls (it was a common early misconception in the west that Muslims believed women not to have souls). Masculine tyranny is thus averted by that combination of persuasive female speech and seductive female presence that Manley so often presented as peculiar to her own 'charm'. This play also points to the serious side to Manley's understanding of her role as 'fiction' writer, particularly of scandal fiction. This form of prose was one of the few print media in which women could assert political instrumentality, debarred as they were from public office and mechanisms of advancement through patronage. Other forms in which women engaged, such as the periodical, the broad-side ballad or the prophecy, were often written in 'gender neutral' tones, whereas the scandal fiction was specifically associated with feminine forms of expression and consumption: romance narrative, stories of love and intrigue, the voice of the gossip.

Manley often plays with the idea of gender transgression in her writing. In her *romans a clef*, real historical figures were given fictional identities of an opposite sex from their own: cross-dressing is a common practice in her prose fiction. She presents herself as a combination of 'manl(e)y' and 'feminine' characteristics. These tactics can be understood as part of a larger strategy whereby she consistently seeks to reappropriate the female figure from the masculine 'authority' which exploits it. Of Almyra, for instance, we are told:

Whatever Greek or Roman Eloquence,
Egyptian Learning, and Philosophy can teach;
She has, by Application, made her own.

Like her creator, Almyra appropriates masculine discourse and makes it her own in order to avert her own exploitation and suffering, itself representative of the condition of all women, at the hands of the male despot.

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? The attribution of this text is uncertain.

1 Bridget MacCarthy, *Women Writers: Their Contribution to the English Novel 1621-1744* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), p. 222.

2 Fidelis Morgan, ed., *The Female Wits, Women Playwrights of the Restoration* (London: Virago, 1981) pp. 390-433, p. 392.

3 Delarivier Manley, *The Adventures of Rivella*, ed. Katherine Zelinsky (Peterborough

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4 Delarivier Manley, *The New Atalantis* (Hammersmith: Penguin, 1992), pp. 222-28.

5 Dolores Diane Clark Duff, 'Materials Toward a Biography of Mary Delarivier Manley' PhD diss. Indiana University, 1965, p.47.

6 Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella*, ed. by Harold Williams (Oxford: Clarendon, 1948), Letter 26, 3 July 1711, II, p. 306.

7 Edmund Curll, *Impartial History of the Life... of John Barber* (London, 1741), p. 47.

8 For the definitive discussion of the vexed issue of Manley's Christian name, see Patricia Köster, 'Delarivier Manley and the and the DNB: A Cautionary Tale About Following Black Sheep with a Challenge to the Cataloguers,' *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 3 (1977), pp. 106-111.

9 Delarivier Manley, *Almyna; or, the Arabian Vow* (London, 1707), p. 10.