

# The Merrie Lawes of 1646: The Parliament of Women as Lampoon and Subversion\*

Andrew Monnickendam

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

## THE MERRIE LAWES OF 1646

To claim that the events which took place in the middle of the seventeenth-century in England were likened to turning the world upside-down is possibly an over-reaction to another, and, this time, overtly academic generalisation-cum-globalisation, namely Tillyard's Elizabethan world view. We should identify his polarity as exactly that, a polarity, an assertion that the only way of looking at events is from an *either...or* approach. Despite the impact of modern critical theory and the associated belief that binary oppositions are limiting and limited interpretative tools, key texts of the time, such as *Oronooko*, or its more modern offspring, *Heart of Darkness*, are read as either colonial or anti-colonial, either progressive or reactionary texts. The weakness of such reductionist interpretations only becomes evident when the question of sexual desire, female in the former, male in the latter, is analysed. In addition, the world upside-down is a geometrical figure of more complexity than it appears. For example, if we take a standard statement aiming to contextualise *Oronooko*, such as Dale Spender's, "[w]hen one year the king rules by divine right and the next the common man is judged to be better-fitted to the task, considerable mental adjustment has to be made," (Spender 1986: 47) we have to realise that the Restoration makes further adjustment necessary. On the face of it, *Restoration* implies the culmination of a process which left things the right way up. Undoubtedly this is what Royalists would like to have us believe, but surely it would be ingenuous to argue that the mid-century can be accommodated within such symmetrical neatness. For surely part of the "further adjustment" is the realisation that if the signifier - the monarchy - is the same, its signification after 1660 has altered, and part of the relative stability of Charles II's reign is put down to his ability to accept that if the world had now been set to rights, it was a brave new world unlike its absolutist predecessor. In addition, any belief in world views has to confront the convincing hypothesis articulated by Lukács in his analysis of the historical novel:

Scott the great realist, recognises that no civil war in history has been so violent as to turn the entire population without exception into fanatical partisans of one or other of the contending camps. Large sections of people have always stood between the camps

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with fluctuating sympathies now for this side, now for the other.  
(Lúkacs 1981: 37-38)

This statement, it should be emphasised, comes from the pen of mainstream, orthodox Marxist critic, and becomes, unexpectedly, the corrective measure that we may apply to Tillyardans and anti-Tillyardans alike.

The text I will go on to discuss, the anonymous “The Parliament of Women. With the merrie lawes by them newly enacted. To live in more ease, pomp, pride, and wantonnesse: but especially that they might have superiority and domineere over their husbands: with a new way found out by them to cure an old or new cuckolds, and how both parties may recover their credit and honesty again” (1646), requires this preliminary analysis. This is because the pitfalls of “either...or” reading are clearly evident in the three brief references of the text which I have found. Lois G. Schwoerer argues

... in the 1640's, critics of the very idea of public opinion used a derogatory image of a female to symbolize the popular press... The notorious “Parliament of Women” tracts satirized women’s imaginary election to a parliament ... and derided their complaints as centering on men’s poor sexual service. (Smith 1988: 60)

Similarly, Joy Wiltenberg states that the text

shows a motley congress of women arguing over proposed legislation on marriage. In describing the ridiculous results, the royalist author lampoons both unruly women and the parliamentarians who similarly upset the established order. (Wiltenburg 1992: 151)

Both critics believe that as the text is Royalist, the satire on unruly women belittles both the English revolution and women, revealing strong determination to return to absolutism, both at court and in the home. Roger Thompson gives the date of publication of the tract as 1640, six years earlier than the British Library copy, adding that it was “reprinted during restoration.”(Thompson 1979: 107) Its general bawdy tone does indeed recall *The Country Wife* and raucous Restoration comedy.

It is ... derived from the *Ecclesiazudsai* of Aristophanes, about the rumour that the Senate had decreed that men in Rome could have two wives. The women gather together to discuss this outrage, and quickly come to the conclusion that it is they who should have ‘two strings to their bow ... keeping one for delight and the other for drudgery.’ But this needs some justification, and so a queue of tradesmen’s wives forms up to catalogue the sexual shortcomings of their husbands...The sexual puns are outrageous and bawdy...

As Thompson’s book *Unfit for Modest Ears* is a study of pornography, it is logical that he emphasises themes of sexuality above class difference, thus the “queue of tradesmen’s wives” illustrates to what extent the binding factor is sexuality rather than class (they are tradesmen’s wives). In contrast, both Wiltenberg and Schroeder emphasise the political and gender orientation of the tract, that is to say, the pairing of parliamentary and female presence as essentially disruptive to what should be the established order.

However all three critics display one important failing. Although they recognise the text attempts to be humorous, it is either interpreted as a lampoon or a bawdy text. In both cases, there is no awareness, or at least no affirmative statement of awareness, that the text is highly ironical, and that it is precisely irony which modifies our interpretation of the text as either scornful - a lampoon - or *risqué*, that is bawdy. The setting is Rome, and clearly one cannot pass over this without comment. Which Rome is being referred to here? Is this Rome, representative of Republicanism or Empires? Is this the Rome of Catholicism and by extension absolutism? Is this the Rome of great leaders, Julius Caesar or Coriolanus, who are betrayed and murdered by men of lesser talent? If the text is a Royalist lampoon then, inevitably, the setting for a member of the Church of England requires further consideration. Such questions might appear to magnify the ideological significance of a humorous text. After all, the text draws attention to its own textuality, by giving the Senator the name of Papius Praetextus, in other words, the document is little else than a pretext for printed mirth. To counter this line of argument, I would point out the tract is sometimes subtle and frequently ironic. The women have no place to meet, and therefore “a great *Parlour*...[serves] for a *Parliament House*”(Anonymous 1646: 2)<sup>1</sup>. The rhyme Parlour/Parliament is emphasised by the use of italics, but for what purpose? It might suggest that women should be excluded from public life, that the parlour is the rightful place for women to meet. At the same time, it is equally coherent to argue that the parlour is their meeting place because they have been wrongly excluded from public life. Thus we have two different interpretations of the importance of the debate’s location. In addition, the Parliament/Parlour question is one of many details which identify the text’s concern with contemporary politics, preceded, as it is, by the following allusion:

A great many of Tradesm<sub>s</sub> wives ... alleading withal, that though the Matrons were noble, and they but Mechanicks, & poor Tradesmens wives, yet no Parliament could be held, but there must be a lower House as well as a higher, & Speakers for both; and further, that nothing could be concluded in the higher, but it must first be debated in the lower... (Anonymous 1646: 2)

One of the most conflictive areas of policy in the Commonwealth is being referred to here, namely, the function of the House of Lords. Cromwell abolished it in 1649, and it was not restored till 1657. It is not tenable to argue that the text is either simply bawdy or a Royalist lampoon, if it immediately strikes at the centre of Commonwealth political debate, as the text’s irony - in what is admittedly a peculiar rhetorical device - correlates the fate of the House of Lords with the events of the Parlour.

Apart from the abovementioned ladies, the parliament consists of a motley crew of gossips. After the first speech by Papius’s mother, comes Mistress Rattle, “a taylor’s wife”, “Franke Fall-downe...a Felt-maker’s wife” follows, then Harebrain, “the Horse courser’s wife”, “Grace the Gold-smiths’s wife, Sarah the Silke-man’s, Kate the Comfit-maker’s, Beatrice the Brasiers” and so on. All share the same grievances, and each is able to fully commiserate with the others. The problem is that their men are not up to it; they have passed their sexual prime. Take, for example, Mistress Rattle:

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<sup>1</sup> The manuscript, held in the British Library ({E.1150. (5.)} has no page numbers, so I have simply added them to enable easier location and reading. I have left the original spelling in all cases.

he hath no more mettle in him then a mouse; he works altogether with hot needle, and burnt thread ... he sits crosse leg'd on his shop board, like a dead Hare on a Poulterer stall, and no good work can be done that way. If at any time he make me a new peticoate, he will threaten to sit upon my skirts and that's all: He will sow and sow, and yet when he hath done all hee can, it proves but so and so, and with that, she put her finger in the eye and wept. (Anonymous 1646: 4)

This is an openly bawdy passage, where the instrument of work, the “hot needle” is compared to a penis, but whereas the instrument of work works, the instrument of pleasure does not. To say the passage is bawdy does not mean it is not skilfully written. The image of the dead hare and the squatting tailor is not very congruent in its comparison of postures, but the “sow and sow” and homophonic “so and so” wittily communicates the effort needed for sexual arousal, and the mundane, so and so, results. The final image of the finger in the eye, consciously or unconsciously, is another phallic image, replacing pleasure with pain, and orgasm with tears. Men are portrayed as simple, gullible human beings. Thus, Mrs. Rachel Rattleboy, in an image of premature ejaculation, informs us that “a fooles bolt (like my husbads) is soon shot”(13) and dedicates her life to getting her way by pretending to be sick. When she tells her husband, she is ill, “the fond coxcomb bid me speak for any thing I had a minde unto” and she takes him at his word. The Wife of Bath is alive and well, as the following lady, Mistriss Eleanor Ever-Crosse explains:

My husband said she, in anger said, he would thump me, to whom I answered; thump me? where wilt thou thump me? thump me but where thou shouldst th\_p me, or Ile make it the dearest thumping that ever thou didst thumpe in thy life: and I thinke I hit him home, which was more than ever he did to me (Anonymous 1646: 10)

The parliament therefore moves “that no woman should suffer her self to be thumpt, but as she ought to be; to wh\_ the whole Court willingly condescended.”(Anonymous 1646: 11) The brutal image of sexuality as thumping is purposefully crude, but arguably very graphic, however, the phrase “no woman should suffer her self to be thumpt, but as she ought to be”, to a modern sensibility, suggests that instead of sexual pleasure, what the female desires, she only receives male brutality, thumping of another sort.

There is possibly little that is original in the debate, yet what deserves attention as much as the subject matter itself, is the form it takes. First, it is made clear that the grievance is common to all womankind. Second, there is a witty parody of legal disputation. Here the deputies are arguing about the vow of fidelity taken during the marriage ceremony, as this would make the possibility of having two husbands legally impossible.

By our Lady that is true said they, what must be our plea for that? Ile tell you said Maestris *Tatle-well*. Let us answer thus much in that behalfe; that we had amentall reservation when the wisest of us said so; for though our husbands expect it at our hands all our life time, we must say that we ment it only for that day, and the first night, an no longer; and therefore by this meanes we may

wave the businesse, and repeale that Law: whereupon they all agree unto it by agenerall consent. (Anonymous 1646: 9)

To some readers, the logic is extremely leaky, and would increase the possibility of the tract being a Royalist lampoon, mocking parliamentary procedure and pouring scorn on any attempt to persuade us that women have rights or are intelligent beings. To others, the plea for mental reservation is a legally valid one, in the sense that the vow was taken under certain duress. In addition the validity of the women's argument is enhanced by the fact they plea for equality. Just as the vow is not binding on their husbands, equality before the law means it should not be binding on them.

The parody of the language of government is present at all moments and, consequently, a few, brief extracts will be sufficient to illustrate this. Although we have been told that this debate is held in a parlour, this term is replaced several times by the word "Court." If this was simply a Royalist lampoon, this is exactly the place where you would not place your opponents; in addition, it becomes less of a hen party when the narrator informs us that - sometimes - "while good orders and a general silence was observed", (Anonymous 1646: 16) even though only briefly. The matron uses the expression "abrogate the law"; (Anonymous 1646: 2) the eloquent Tattle-well begins one part of her speech with the legalistic phrase, "I put the case to you" (Anonymous 1646: 7); she has complete command of the orator's strategy of rhetorical questions, and even the less talented Prudence Prate-all starts her argument with "let it be likewise enacted". (Anonymous 1646: 9)

The two basic interpretations of this tract, either it is bawdy and harmless, or else a lampoon and harmful, rely heavily on author function analysis; that is, that language demonstrates what its creator meant it to be. Nevertheless, by emphasising a more open interpretation, I hope to avoid such restrictive reading precisely at the key moment, when we look at the major proposals. It has to be said that they are delivered with great passion; of all the many arguments, two stand out, one for its astonishing use of legalistic wrangling, and the other because of its new stance on cuckoldry. The women have heard that the senators are proposing that in future they could each have two wives, whereas the wives argue that this is plainly ridiculous, as the circumstances of modern life require that it is women who need, not simply want, two husbands. Tattle-well, the major spokesperson, declaims:

For said shee, was not every woman born with two legges, two hands, two eyes two eares: and every deep Well ought to have two Buckets, while one is comming up, the other going down? Have not great houses two doores? ... hath not every stoole or chaire three or four legges, and every bed-head two posts ... herefore in conscience every Woman may have two husbands: for have not we women six Sences, and men but five? ... for wee have nothing to offend and defend our selves but our tongues...the tongue ought to be the sixth Sence, which we must maintain for our own safety: though woman was taken out of the side of man, yet let men know, that they cannot, nor shall not alwayes keepe us under. (Anonymous 1646: 6-7)

There is plenty of bawdy here: in the image of the buckets, the doors, the need for stools and chairs to have firm legs, which could make the final image solely sexual and therefore the whole argument bathetic and ridiculous. At the same time, I

believe that this passage is possibly a parody of Shylock's address ("Hath not a Jew eyes") to the court in the third act of *The Merchant of Venice*, and if this is the case, then her rhetoric ensures that the conclusive argument goes way beyond the simply physical and should be attended to as a political reinvigoration. Indeed, even if Shakespeare is not the reference here, it does not detract from the effectiveness of her argument. The rest of Tattle-well's speech throws up interesting reasons for the need for two husbands:

suppose a handsome Lasse marries a Sea-faring man, perchance his occasions call him to goe a long voyage to SEA, as to the East or West Indies, or to the straights of *Magellan*, the Reed or Red SEA, or to the *Persian Gulfe*: he is bound to stay a yeare, two or three, before he can returne: doe you (nay prethee good sister, let me not bee interrupted in my speech: pray silence, or I wil say no more, for I now speak to the purpose) as I have said, doe you think it convenient such a prettie soule should lye alone, having been wedded so short a time, and only tasted of you know what, and having been a fellow-feeler, and helper in most case, for the Commonwealths good, that she can be content to lye alone tumbling and tossing in a good featherbed sometimes to the Wall, sometimes to the doore...or tearing the sheets, and by that meanes ease her oppressed body and mind: nay, I should not say oppressed bodie for there I was mistaken, there my tongue went to fast, I should have said her troubled and perplexed spirit and heart, or what you terme it, Ought not, I say, such women to have two or three husbands? (Anonymous 1646: 7-8)

Briefly, we notice her skill in building up tension through a long string of ideas which finalises with the assertion the female body is oppressed. Her subsequent denial that she actually meant something other than body, by its mere repetition, reinforces the persuasiveness of her reasoning, as the alternatives, heart or spirit, now appear to be rather weak concepts used to cover up the fact that it is precisely desire which is the problem. In other words, she pleads for frankness and understanding. Her use of "the Commonwealths good", words which appear several times in this tract, are meant to mock the Puritans. However, I believe that the women's argument that they need two husbands not only to fulfil their desires but also as a measure to prevent cuckoldry has a most interesting context. We may recall that the tailor is worn out by work, and can only use one kind of hot needle. If to this, we add the fact that the reason why the lass is left alone is because her husband is away on some expansionist expedition, it is crystal clear that here we have a peculiar re-reading of Puritanism and the work ethic. It is not the concept of sinfulness that creates despair, but simply the fact that modern life, with its divisions of gender and labour, exacerbated by incipient colonialism, separates and hinders the possibility of marital happiness. By marital happiness, Mistress Tattle-well is surprisingly close in her emphasis on sexual pleasure, to Milton's later elegiac description of physical fulfilment in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost*.

After this rhetorical brilliance, the story of a wife gaining revenge on her husband returns us to the bawdy, with perhaps Chaucer's miller and his wife in the back of the narrator's mind. A drunk husband returns home after a riotous evening and "hid himself in the house of special Office". (Anonymous 1646: 17) Disaster follows:

hee thrusts his head into the hole; and whether it was his large Asses eares, or his Bul necke, I cannot telle, but he could not get his necke out again, but needs must pull up the seate about his necke, so that he looked as if he had been on the Pillorie. Upon which relation they all fell into a great laughter, and withall concluded that it was his Hornes. For *Actaeon* said they, put his head out of the window well enough, but could not get it back again, which was long of his Horns, this said they, is your husbands Case. (Anonymous 1646: 17)

The wife, Dorothy Do-little, asks Tattle-well what should be done. She prescribes a long course of penance, starting from the premise that “he must conceit himself a Batchelour”, (Anonymous 1646: 19) in which the husband has to beg forgiveness, court his wife and eventually ask - again - for her hand in marriage. If, after this second marriage, anyone accuses her of having cuckolded him, the husband’s duty is sue that person for libel. This is a puzzling series of events. Legally, if they have re-married, and they have kept their vows longer than the first night, then cuckoldry cannot exist. That being said, it casts a strange reflection on earlier events. First, it suggests that adultery was common practice, and therefore no one, no woman, felt the slightest remorse about making the joke about Actaeon. This links up with the definition, more precisely, the re-definition of marriage. Second, it seems to suggest that the wife is right to extract penance, which either illustrates a belief in ethical justice, or, more damningly, that this is a misogynist text which goes out of its way to show that women are, if not the Devil, Viragos. However convincing that argument is, I will provide two significant answers. First, if penance is an attempt to put relationships on an equal footing, penance rather than thumping, to judge it simply as female aggression implies that equality is a right, but a right only for misdemeaning husbands. Second, as well as emphasising the sexual frustration of the lass married to a seaman, the text has no qualms about using the term virago. Earlier in the debate, an angry woman gets up and speaks:

Where be those magnanimous and Masculine spirited Matrons?  
Those valiant Viragoes? Those lusty Ladies? Those daring  
*Amazonian* Damsels, *Orithena*, *Penthsileae*, *Thaltestres*, and the  
rest? who made Coxecombes of *Keysars*, Puppets of Princes,  
Captives of Captains, Fooles of Philosophers, and Henchmen of  
their husbands? But though we want weapons, and are abridged of  
their armes, yet they shall know that we have the Law in our owne  
hands, and in our own cases we will be our own Lawyers and  
plead our own rights. For wee have tongues... (Anonymous 1646:  
3-4)

This harangue, this war-cry, calls for action, and displays a pride in being considered an active Virago rather than a timid woman supporting the drunken bouts of her vile husband. In a most effective way, it conflates Virago and lawyer. In other words, if women possess a whiplash tongue, they could and should become perfect lawyers and/or parliamentarians. The phrase “we have the Law in our owne hands” might suggest that they have the right to dispose of their body according to their desires, but it shows quite clearly that, following, or contradicting the narrator’s intentions, the case that women are skilful politicians and wonderful orators has been convincingly proven. Most conclusively of all, the choice of Amazons renders the attempt at belittlement useless. Penthsilea was one of the greatest warriors of the

Trojan Wars, only smitten by Achilles. Josine H. Blok emphasises the importance of Thatlestris:

In the Hellenistic story of Thatlestris' proposal [to produce a matchless offspring] to Alexandros the Great, the question of the sexual desires of the Amazons and their perpetuation has been taken as far as it can go: the Amazon queen herself takes the initiative toward the only man whom she can regard as her equal. (Blok 1995:262-3)

At this precise point, the disruptive nature of the text is at its greatest and cannot be tied down either by the classification of mere lampoon or simply bawdy. But, unfortunately, the one place where brilliance is lacking is in the laws which the women draw up and which bring the tract to a close. Women, we are told should have two husbands, because they, women, are "the stronger and greater vessell."(Anonymous 1646: 21) But the second law, "women might vex, perplex, and any way torment their husbands", and the third, "woman may twange it as well as their husbands"(Anonymous 1646: 21) appear crude and nothing short of a major let-down. The final law, "[t]hat if any Jesuit returne into our Land, againe, being once banished, that he shall gelt or libb'd, to avoid jealousies of our husbands"(Anonymous 1646: 21) seems irrelevant to a tract that has concentrated on the tensions existent in marriage.

To conclude, I have demonstrated that this text displays humour, intelligence and above all a certain sympathy for seventeenth-century women; furthermore, it is feasible to argue that its references to Amazons make it potentially subversive. Such a conclusion is therefore at odds with the reading of it as either a Royalist lampoon or else a latter-day bawdy text. Of the several similar titled texts of this period, this one stands out for its wit, a quality lacking in the moralising, pedestrian pamphlets to which I will turn to in due course.

## References

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