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The political import of Dryden's *Marriage à la Mode* has been infrequently grasped. Critics of the play have understandably fixated on the relationship between its heroic and comic plots, regularly ignoring or misconstruing the dual engagement of those plots with the ongoing conceptual crises that mark the Restoration political milieu.[1] Recently, for instance, David B. Haley has noted the "political insouciance" of Dryden's comedies (this one in particular), suggesting that "audiences would not have taken very seriously their protean heroes and sovereigns" (195).[2] Those critics who register the play's political dimension seem generally to see Dryden as making relatively conservative gestures, like Duane Coltharp, who associates it with a "breezy royalism" (430).[3] My own inclination is to concur with Richard Kroll, for whom the text is "a meditation on the conditions and limitations of Stuart power" (*Restoration Drama* 253). I suggest, more specifically, that Dryden stages this political critique by means of a figural pattern that has gone without sufficient explanation. Throughout *Marriage à la Mode*, the characters make obsessive reference to issues of time and timing. As they attempt to gain the various objects of their desires in the linked spheres of erotic and political activity, they encounter a set of coordination problems. When one character attains marriageable nobility, another one loses it; when one lover is about to cuckhold another, his wife chooses the same place for her "assignation," and so forth.

By stressing the fundamental antipathy between time and stable human meanings, Dryden engineers a delicate critique of Stuart ideology, reminding us of the degree to which the institution of the monarchy tends to suppress awareness of the contingent and circumstantial nature of its authority and to foreground instead images of symbolic and atemporal repletion. In this sense, Dryden's play is engaged in a vital skeptical debate about the relationship be-

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tween temporality and human institutions. At the local, historical level, his play considers the Restoration's inevitable tendency toward a species of historical distortion; Jessica Munns reminds us that the Carolean court favored notions of history that effectively "buried the inconvenient years of commonwealth and Protectorate," while foregrounding the "dynastic and eternal" (110-111). This is a predictable impulse given that writers on statecraft from antiquity to Pocock have emphasized the anxious relation between institutions and diachronic temporality. As Pocock sees it, early modern political theorists understood the fragility of the state to center on the difficulty of "maintaining a particular existence" within time, understood as "the dimension of instability" (75). J. R. Jones also registers the particular Restoration expression of this dilemma, noting the royalist impulse to expunge the recent past; this is as much as to say that ideology, at such a historical juncture, requires an artificial rearrangement or elision of time—a willed suppression of the contingency that Pocock understands as the hallmark of temporal experience.[4]

The plot and general structure of the play emphasize the difficulty of constructing the temporal fictions that underlie univocal assertions of meaning. The characters strive for two (constantly analogized) sorts of imagined fulfillment: serene political order and perfect erotic reciprocality.[5] Achievement of these goals depends on the extraordinarily difficult task of creating moments of simultaneity. The low plot's tendency to interrupt assignations and deny sexual satisfaction undercuts the suspensions of time required to establish a modicum of political stability in the high plot; at the same time, the high plot is itself reflexive and overtly reliant on contrivance. The two plots, in this sense, are of course individually and cumulatively dialectical. In both, I argue, interpretive stability can only be achieved by means of a forced temporal hiatus. In this sense, Dryden is out to dramatize the collision between iconic habits of thinking that construe the symbolic as the real by freezing time and glossing over mutability, and (on the other hand) the shifting, locally and temporally variable sorts of meaning that are constitutive of what minimal political order we can attain. The former mode requires, for even temporary sustenance, the repulsion of time. The latter can subsist in a state of temporal flux. Given this focus on timing, I suggest that the play as a whole is a sort of two-hour, dramatically conceived imperfect enjoyment poem, hence the incessant (and deeply related) language of death and dying. An important consequence of this reading is a full explanation for the recurring presence of rushing and delaying, earliness and lateness, culminating in the little-discussed Act IV song.[6]

Premiering (probably) in November of 1671, *Marriage à la Mode* has two plots, which the poet himself described as "not depending on one another."[7] The play is structured around their careful and regular alteration: A heroic

scene of nearly equal length follows on the heels of each comic scene until the fifth act where, as Rodes notes, the comic "overbalances" the heroic (478). In the low plot, Palamede, a courtier returning from abroad to marry a woman his father has chosen for him, meets and attempts to begin an intrigue with Doralice.[8] Rhodophil, her husband, is already pursuing Melantha, who turns out to be Palamede's betrothed. Though the eventual attempts at cuckoldry wind up cut short or frustrated, this open sexual aggression almost erupts in violence in Act V only to be suppressed by an eventual truce. The two men, after momentarily contemplating "a blessed community betwixt us four…Wife and Husband for the standing Dish, and Mistris and Gallant for the Desert," agree, more conventionally, to "make a firm League, not to invade each others propriety" (V.i.351-60).[9]

While the low plot deals primarily with the legitimacy of sexual conduct, the high plot turns on questions of political legitimacy. Polydamas has gained the throne falsely. The rightful king, killed in battle long before the play's opening, entrusted Polydamas with the queen and his son. When word got out that he planned to betray that trust and seize the throne, Polydamas's own pregnant wife, the widowed queen, and the young prince all fled. Polydamas has two favorites at court, the proud, vengeful Argaleon and his noble and self-sacrificing sister Amalthea. The plot's elaborate turns revolve around the confusion that ensues when the two lost children, Leonidas and Palmyra (now grown), appear. They are in love with one another, no one can quite resolve the question of who is Polydamas's child, and whoever is believed to be his legitimate heir is expected to marry either Argaleon or Amalthea, whomever is sexually appropriate. After multiple reversals, we learn that Leonidas is actually Theagenes, the rightful heir, and in Act V he manages to secure power and marry Palmyra, who is Polydamas's daughter, thus resolving the discrepancy between the two contending parties for the throne. No blood is shed, the comic characters are involved in so far as Rhodophil and Palamede aid Leonidas in his seizure of power, and the only loose end is Amalthea, who has fallen in love with Leonidas and cannot be requited. My summary may serve to suggest the function of time in the play already, for in both plots a sort of rhythmic alteration is the engine behind a series of punctuated changes with regard to who is in control, who is in the dark, who is misleading, who misled. That is, genuine legitimacy is shown to be relational and contingent—even potentially arbitrary. In my discussion I move freely between the two plots partly to stress their mirroring of one another in language and situation. I begin with a consideration of temporality as it affects human behavior within and without the play's political sphere.

Time and Appetite

That time is of the essence in *Marriage à la Mode* should be immediately apparent, for it is on questions of timing that Doralice's opening song turns:

> *Why should a foolish Marriage Vow*
> *Which long ago was made,*
> *Oblige us to each other now*
> *When Passion is decay'd?*
> *We lov'd, and we lov'd, as long as we cou'd,*
> *Till our love was lov'd out in us both:*
> *But our Marriage is dead, when the Pleasure is fled:*
> *'Twas Pleasure first made it an Oath.* (I.i.3-10)

The idea of temporal distance impinges upon the legitimacy of any claim, in this case *the* claim—the marriage contract itself, the contract, that is, which cements resolution in the comic genre (and assures the legitimate perpetuation of monarchy in England itself and the play's rather English Sicily). Despite the skipping rhythm created by the alteration of tetrameter and trimeter lines, the point here is terribly serious. The passage of time seems to create nothing more than empty repetition, hence the redundant fifth and sixth lines of the song, where the word "love" seems hollowed out by repetition. What is worse, accompanying this emptying out is a corresponding storing up. That is, the expenditure of love in the lines just quoted, which leaves erotic accounts bankrupt, accompanies a build-up, the "*farther love in store*," in the second stanza of the song which requires an extramarital outlet. Dryden seems to picture love as a sort of irreconcilable account book, first bankrupted by constant loving, then restocked, then vitiated by an inability to disseminate that love because of a contractual bond that obtrudes itself out of the past.[10] Time, in this odd little song, has a powerful nullifying quality to it. Leonidas will insist, later in the play, that love is the quintessential absolute: "Love either finds equality, or makes it: / Like death, he knows no difference in degrees, / But plains, and levels all" (III.i.279-81). We can already tell that time will tend to undercut such a vision, for its passage renders one kind of love empty and another irrelevant, thus disrupting such totalizing claims. Despite his hyperbolic remark, Leonidas's own love does know a difference in degree, for changes in his and Palmyra's social status create serious wrinkles in both the expression and the character of their affections.[11] The critical connection between love and death that is at the heart of Leonidas's remark and which pervades the entire drama is of course already present in the opening song, where the absence of love leads to the death of the institution predicated thereon.

Once the song has alerted us to the temporal fragility of love, the play goes on to question the display of affection in language. Doralice figures that her "new servant," Palamede, can only express love for so long and in so many ways, the expression of new love being prone to roughly the same exigencies as marital relations. After Palamede interrupts the song and begins courting Doralice, the two disagree as to what constitutes sufficient declamation of one's affections. Doralice seems to suggest, again, that time only exposes falsity. She first asks for a repetition of his compliments that is always different, that seeks the sort of continual profusion the possibility of which her song has just denied: "And how many of these fine things can you say to me?" (I.i.28-29). Palamede's hesitation to continue prompts Doralice to mock recycled erotic language in a manner which resonates throughout the play in several ways:

> This will not give you the reputation of a Wit with me: you traveling Monsieurs live upon the stock you have got abroad, for the first day or two: to repeat with a good memory, and apply with a good grace, is all your wit. And, commonly, your Gullets are sew'd up, like Cormorants: When you have regorg'd what you have taken in, you are the leanest things in Nature. (I.i.33-39)

The terrible linguistic deficit Doralice describes is of course precisely what will plague Melantha later in the play, as she waits for new supplies of French words, without which she lacks all confidence in her own efficacy. A courtier such as Palamede tends toward the same problem for he has a limited "stock" of phrases and after "some hours longer" he will have little left to say, like the lovers who ran out of love. The only solution to such a painful inability to continue anything, whether conversational or relational, is the rather empty and temporary one that Palamede offers. He will expel what he has regorged in some "two or three days," glossing over the repetitive triviality of human affection by *hurrying* in the manner of "the hot Countreys, where men come to the point immediately" (I.i.49-50). Time is something, for this pair of lovers, that may as well pass quickly, for the longer it lingers the more obvious becomes the incommensurability of their affection, the more pronounced the comical inefficacy of working within the three-day window before Palamede's pending marriage. The image of the cormorant (used for fishing with its throat tied shut) points up the perennial lack of satisfaction that such a dilemma implies. Lovers in *Marriage à la Mode* are of course precisely like cormorants, never able to gain genuine sustenance, sexual or emotional, from what they have caught or nearly caught, a notion pointed up by the linkage between sex and sustenance at other junctures in the play.[12] The political analogue would be the almost preposterous difficulty of establishing legitimacy and authority within

the shifting plot structures.

This preoccupation with time and the lack of sexual satisfaction to which it leads seems to produce another poetic register in the play—that of fractions, of dividing and subtracting time. After Doralice's departure, Palamede and Rhodophil discuss the problem with Rhodophil's marriage. It becomes apparent that there is nothing whatsoever wrong with either husband or wife—other than the fact that they are married. The problem, as Rhodophil notes, is simply a satiety brought about by the passage of time:

> Ask those, who have smelt to a strong perfume two years together, what's the scent.… All that I know of her perfections now is only by memory; I remember, indeed, that about two years ago I lov'd her passionately; but those golden days are gone, *Palamede*: Yet I lov'd her a whole half year, double the natural term of any Mistress, and think in my conscience I could have held out another quarter …. At last, we arriv'd at that point, that there was nothing left in us to make us new to one another. (I.i.137-52)

The language of division and addition is crucial here, particularly the oxymoronic "whole half year," which stresses the problem of time in the play nicely. The temporal unit is at once cut in half, emblematic of the failure of the relationship, and stretched out, as if the time could not have passed more slowly. The time spent with Doralice then appears not only as entire but double, a seemingly interminable expanse that is, if you will, unpunctuated, undifferentiated. It is this sort of unpalatable temporal segment that Palmyra wishes to avoid in the high plot when she asks for time to adjust itself to her wishes a few pages later:

> Fly swift, you hours, you measure time for me in vain,
> Till you bring back *Leonidas* again.
> Be shorter now; and to redeem that wrong,
> When he and I are met, be twice as long. (I.i.460-64)

In *All for Love*, Ventidius accuses Antony of having "robbed from nature to supply desire," of expecting a surplus at one moment to cancel a deficit at another (III.196). Like Antony, and like Palmyra, the characters in both plots are after a remedy for the problem Doralice's song diagnoses, all of them wishing constantly that repetitive and constraining segments of time were self-differentiating, plastic expanses.

Political Time

If time is something which is utterly vitiating to affection, and if its passage is something indistinct that only these awkward quasi-mathematical distinctions can pretend to alter, then its effect in the political sphere will be powerful as well. When the usurper Polydamas greets Palamede, we should note the rather anxious and guarded nature of the exchange:

> *Poly*. You're welcome.
> I knew your father well; he was both brave
> And honest; we two once were fellow soldiers
> In the last Civil Wars.
> *Pala*. I bring the same unquestion'd honesty
> And zeal to serve your Majesty; the courage
> You were pleased to praise in him,
> Your Royal prudence, and your Peoples love,
> Will never give me leave to try like him
> In Civil Wars, I hope it may in Foreign. (I.i.317-26)

It is no accident that Palamede's sentence is grammatically unwieldy. Responding to the acknowledgment of his father's virtues, he asserts his own comparable "zeal to serve," only he notices the fact that the "Majesty" he serves is also a usurper his father seems to have aided. The next phrase, "the courage / You were pleased to praise in him," might be a subject without a predicate. One could imagine Palamede completing the thought: "the courage you were pleased to praise in him I also possess." The phrase never seems to be properly integrated into the sentence except perhaps as the first item in a series: Palamede's courage, the King's prudence, and the people's love will assure that Palamede will never take up arms against the King, but the first item in the series feels illogical. Essentially, Palamede cannot integrate the chief virtue of his father into another time frame—the courage that suited the bold endeavor of the "fellow soldiers" would not be conducive to future civil order. To paraphrase then, Palamede assures the King he will not do the bad things the King did (which are retroactively good because the King did them) but would now be insupportable because the King would be their object. I belabor this point to stress the fact that the political simultaneity the King describes—we two *once* were fellow soldiers—seems to be a fleeting thing indeed; not unlike Rhodophil's "golden days," such an alliance lasted only a fractional period, the word "once" suggesting something both past and singular. For Palamede to align himself and the King takes some measure of verbal sleight of hand. My proposition, then, is that stable politics are confined to odd time windows very much like stable relationships. As Doralice puts it to Palamede earlier, "My

servant you are onely till you are marry'd" (I.i.76-77).

If time at court operates in this fickle, arbitrary, and abrupt fashion, it is no surprise that the characters in Dryden's play are constantly trying to stretch time in an effort to create the appearance of stability. The most extended exhibition of this idea of trying to circumvent or outpace time occurs in the elaborately artificial love dialogue between Leonidas and Palmyra with Argaleon spying in the wings:

> *Leon*. How precious are the hours of Love in Courts!
> In Cottages, where Love has all the day,
> Full, and at ease, he throws it half away.
> Time gives himself, and is not valu'd, there;
> But sells, at mighty rates, each minute, here.
> There, he is lazy, unemploy'd, and slow;
> Here, he's more swift; and yet has more to do.
> So many of his hours in publick move,
> That few are left for privacy, and Love.
> *Palm*. The Sun, methinks, shines faint and dimly, here;
> Light is not half so long, nor half so clear.
> But, Oh! when every day was yours and mine,
> How early up! what haste he made to shine!
> *Leon*. Such golden days no Prince must hope to see;
> Whose ev'ry Subject is more bless'd than he. (II.i.406-20)

This is densely packed with echoes of the play's fractional units of time, imagined "golden days," and the like. I have quoted at length to demonstrate how the speech picks up as it moves along. Leonidas's couplets don't begin until the second line. The first couplet is strong but the next three are slant rhymes. When Palmyra joins in, the rhymes become more emphatic (line 415). Dryden seems to be drawing attention to the fact that this image of a different and better sense of time away from the corruption of the court is something that the two have to generate, that must be built up or artificially formed. Their ultimate effort in creating this erotic simultaneity involves an attempted suspension of time, at which point one couplet stretches into a triplet:

> *Leon*. I felt, the while, a pleasing kind of smart;
> The kiss went, tingling, to my very heart.
> When it was gone, the sense of it did stay;
> The sweetness cling'd upon my lips all day,
> Like drops of Honey, loath to fall away. (II.i.445-49)

Such a moment, the rest of the play implies, is rather difficult to maintain—

that effort comes out in the stretching of the rhyme—and Dryden reminds us when the scene closes that they only reinhabit that moment by indulging in a dangerous insularity. The image of honey attempts to naturalize the moment; in its color, honey reminds us of "golden days"; it is also an emblem of our harmony with the natural world, something collected from nature that (not incidentally) does not spoil. This is an erotic moment, a sort of perfect enjoyment. In context, however, it is utterly artificial and fraught with peril. As Argaleon watches, and as the still-changing political plot threatens to separate the prince and princess anyway, the lovers' "souls sit close and silently within, / And their own web from their own entrails spin" (II.499-500).[13] In Bacon's scientific analogy from *Novum Organum*, Leonidas and Palmyra would be untrustworthy Rationalists, "spinning webs out of themselves." "The middle way," amusingly, "is that of the bee," the creature who "transforms and digests," its honey a stable product of genuine synthesis (105).

There are numerous other elements in the scene that alert us to its peculiarly strained quality. Just as Leonidas and Palmyra are about to be left putatively alone, Leonidas and his rival Argaleon confront one another:

> *Leon*. What? a disputing Subject?
> Hence; or my sword shall do me justice, on thee.
> *Arga*. Yet I may find a time— [*Going*.
> *Leon*. What's that you mutter,
> To find a time? [*Going after him*.
> *Arga*. —To wait on you again—
> (*Softly*) In the mean while I'll watch you. (II.i.401-5)

This exchange would seem to function as an illustrative contrast, pointing up the unrealistically languid quality of the past that Leonidas and Palmyra construct for themselves. The world of the court is all about finding time (understood as if it were a commodity in dangerously short supply). Argaleon will have to work vengeance into his schedule. Suggestively, the pastoral exchange is fraught with comparisons—comparisons that seem to imply the difficulty of conceiving temporal frames by any other means than the sort of contrast lines 411 and 412 enact poetically: "There he is lazy, unemployed, and slow; / Here, he's more swift; and yet has more to do." Where the former line moves slowly, the latter scampers along in a clipped manner; the slant rhyme also points up the contrast. The two lines (as the two modes) are mutually dependant. This comparative mode leaves the lovers trying awkwardly to identify what precisely distinguishes their lost temporal innocence, hence also the mathematical comparatives which echo the low plot: "here; / Light is not half so long, nor half so clear" (II.i.415-16). But the price of longer daylight in the country is the

"haste" the sun must make to shine in line 418. Haste, of course, is the hallmark of court time; suddenly the term has slipped in, contaminating the pastoral vision, for if time were indeed so languid, why must the sun rush? As *otium* and *negotium* are mutually dependent, so the pastoral temporality Leonidas and Palmyra craft is only made viable by willful opposition and exclusion.

The other loss on which the lovers reflect is their own loss of erotic simultaneity, their sense that they existed solely for one another. They are now being denied that reciprocal engagement by court time, by political alterations, and by the vagaries of the gradual revelation of their identities. Trying to construe the origin of this perfect connection they are memorializing, Leonidas finds himself at a loss:

> When Love did of my heart possession take,
> I was so young, my soul was scarce awake:
> I cannot tell when first I thought you fair;
> But suck'd in Love, insensibly as Ayre. (II.i.427-30)

This is a sort of infantile love, marked by a connectedness and mutuality that is pre-memorial. For the first time in the scene, though, we see a division in the couple, for Palmyra apparently has a better memory:

> I know too well when first my love began,
> When, at our Wake, you for the Chaplet ran:
> Then I was made the Lady of the May,
> And, with the Garland, at the Goal did stay:
> Still, as you ran, I kept you full in view;
> I hop'd, and wish'd, and ran, methought, for you.
> As you came near, I hastily did rise,
> And stretch'd my arm out-right, that held the prize.
> The custom was to kiss whom I should crown:
> You kneel'd; and, in my lap, your head laid down.
> I blush'd, and blush'd, and did the kiss delay:
> At last, my Subjects forc'd me to obey;
> But, when I gave the Crown, and then the kiss,
> I scarce had breath to say, Take that—and this. (II.i.431-44)

It is this passage that precedes Leonidas's image of a suspended time—the honey-like kiss. What is worth noticing again is that suspended time is bought at the price of rushing. In a space in which time is supposed almost not to exist, the lovers run a race; the prize for victory is the moment of erotic delay that cannot otherwise be caught.[14] Their pastoral refuge, then, is a place of utter paradox which they can hardly sustain—a moment later Palmyra demands

that Leonidas "speak quickly."

Interlude: *Repartee à la Melantha*

If a desperately maintained insularity such as I have just sketched is one attempted solution to the problem of attaining erotic or political harmony, Melantha represents a particularly dramatic case in point.[15] No character is more desperately undercut in her social and romantic attachments, her use of language, and her time management. Though she exists on the margins of the court, she is the ultimate exemplar of the irregularities of court time as she moves rapidly from place to place, from assignation to assignation, in pursuit of the sense of repletion with which noble association putatively provides her. Before we have met her, Rhodophil describes Melantha in terms that connect her with the language of time and the sun in Leonidas and Palmyra's pastoral interlude: "besides the Court, she's the most eternal Visiter of the Town: and yet manages her time so well, that she seems ubiquitary. For my part, I can compare her to nothing but the Sun; for, like him, she takes no rest, nor ever sets in one place, but to rise in another" (I.i.190-94). The description playfully perverts lyric tropes, turning the mistress's resemblance to the sun from an image of beauty into a description of her irritating omnipresence. Notably, she achieves this ubiquity only through constant rushing (amply demonstrated by the stage directions).

In III.i. she stops running about for a moment of odd self-engagement as she imagines an impending assignation with Rhodophil. If every encounter she has, whether with Rhodophil or Palamede or one noble or another, feels rushed and ill-timed, this encounter suggests that simultaneity is most easily found with oneself:

> Now you go away, *Philotis*; it imports me to practice what I shall say to my Servant when I meet him.
> [*Exit* Philotis.] *Rhodophil*, you'll wonder at my assurance to meet you here; let me die, I am so out of breath with coming, that I can render you no reason of it. Then he will make this *repartee*; Madam, I have no reason to accuse you for that which is so great a favour to me. Then I reply, But why have you drawn me to this solitary place? let me die but I am apprehensive of some violence from you. Then, says he; Solitude, Madam, is most fit for Lovers; but by this fair hand—Nay, now I vow you're rude. Sir. O fie, fie, fie; I hope you'l be honorable?—You'd laugh at me if I should, Madam—What do you mean to throw me down thus? Ah me! ah, ah, ah. (III.i.246-58)

Polydamas, Leonidas, and some guards then enter and Melantha runs off

mortified, but what she has had for a moment is a "*repartee*" of one. This is virtually the only time anyone is entirely alone on stage in the play, and it works to great effect as we see another attempted solution to erotic uncertainty.[16] Melantha's attempt at practicing her assignation is self-evidently masturbatory in quality, as she tries to provide the satisfaction the exigencies of the plot deny her.[17] And even this already undermined moment of imagined simultaneity is interrupted by other characters. "*Repartee,*" a word on which she dwells at length, is a verbal, a combative, and a sexual notion the challenge of which is the perfect counter, the thrust being nothing without the parry. Melantha can only imagine and stage both challenge and counter for herself in a less than dignified moment—every time she puts such encounters into practice the results leave her on the margins of one scene or another.

Melantha's relation to language is similarly impoverished; she is in constant need of words to fill her accounts: "O, my *Venus*! fourteen or fifteen words to serve me a whole day! Let me die, at this rate I cannot last till night" (III.i.198-99). Her semantic economy resembles her erotic economy; both are built on a desperately involuted sort of exchange, where her servant, Philotis, must bring her words which Melantha will claim as entirely her own: "That word shall not be yours; I'll invent it, and bring it up my self: my new Point Gorget shall be yours upon't: not a word of the word, I charge you" (III.i.222-25). Her agency, both linguistically and, in a sense, politically, is completely tied to obligations and debts. Hence, her most important linguistic possession, the phrase "let me die," resonates throughout the play, dramatizing a sort of absurd escapism, a sense that characters caught in these networks can only wriggle out by escaping life entirely. That bankruptcy comes out as well in her solo moment; she collapses, of course, into inchoate cries of "ah." I submit that her assignation with an imaginary Rodophil is calibrated carefully to echo Leonidas and Palmyra's pastoral recreation; both moments exist only in self-created temporal vacuums.

Simultaneous Climaxes and Off-Stage Restorations

If, then, time serves constantly to disrupt any moment of erotic or political coherence, if it makes the King's symbolic value contextually variable, the political and personal identities of Leonidas and Palmyra changeable, and the comic couples' intrigues empty and ineffectual, it stands to reason it will also disrupt the sort of sexual *repartee* Melantha imagines. Dryden literalizes this problem in the song from the masquerade scene, a nexus for the play's erotic (and, implicitly, political) themes that has been discussed surprisingly little:

1.
Whil'st Alexis *lay prest*
In her Arms he lov'd best,
With his hands round her neck,
And his head on her breast,
He found the fierce pleasure too hasty too stay,
And his soul in the tempest just flying away.

2.
When Cœlia *saw this,*
With a sigh, and a kiss,
She cry'd, Oh my dear, I am robb'd of my bliss;
'Tis unkind to your Love, and unfaithfully done,
To leave me behind you, and die all alone.

3.
The Youth, though in haste,
And breathing his last,
In pity dy'd slowly while she dy'd more fast;
Till at length she cry'd, Now, my dear, now let us go,
Now die, my Alexis, *and I will die too.*

4.
Thus intranc'd they did lie,
Till Alexis *did try*
To recover new breath, that again he might die:
Then often they di'd; but the more they did so,
The Nymph di'd more quick, and the Shepherd more slow. (IV.ii.47-67)

These (primarily anapestic) lines flounce rapidly along as if nothing very important were happening, but Dryden takes pains, in adapting his French source, to stress the general incongruity of most of the sexual encounter.[18] Their timing, like most timing in the play, is only achieved at great effort; note the critical word "*Till*" in line 61 as Alexis is forced to wait "*at length*" to be given the forceful, temporally insistent cue: "*Now, my dear, now let us go, / Now die, my* Alexas, *and I will die too*." The lovers appear to attain their perfect simultaneity but, as the lines continue to gallop along, it lasts what seems only a moment until we again hear the word "*Till*" in line 64, signaling that the bliss they attained has passed away and a second attempt has been deemed necessary. And of course, just as the repetition Doralice and Rhodophil associate with

the emptiness of their marriage represents a deadening and limiting of a past moment, here too the more the lovers continue, the farther out of step they get with one another, perfect reciprocity and simultaneity quite lost from the picture. Pleasure, finally, is "too hasty to stay," and the lovers are denied their continued happiness, caught, from our vantage point, in a dramatic interlude.[19]

Everything that the characters in the play hope to obtain in their varied encounters turns on a belief that a lucky simultaneity may provide a moment of coherence. For Melantha, for instance, such moments are supposed to allow for a sort of symbolic repletion: "but when I have been once or twice at Court, I begin to value my self again" (III.i.150-51). The idea in the song that sex represents such a moment carries with it a similar potential for a moment of entrancement, but, characteristically, Dryden is at pains to reveal the cost of this, the effort required, the loss entailed, and the imbalance created; entrancement gives way to renewed repetitions and the historical progression of events strips away the mythic gloss Alexis and Cœlia strive to create. There is a more than incidental irony to the phrase, "Thus entranced they did lie," for the moment of perfect repose is also perhaps a moment of fiction. Alexis, after all, had already reached a tempestuous state six lines into the song—how are we to ascertain the degree of his self-control? At the very least, it is a moment that appears less than reproducible.

What the song also reminds us is simply that Dryden's characters are constantly bent on attaining the moment of magical repletion emblematized by orgasm. In this sense, the classic conflation of sex and death speaks to the joint concerns of the double plot. The high plot and the song perfectly echo one another. In Act III, Leonidas and Palmyra, faced with the King's persecution, seem bent on a dramatic exit:

> *Leon*. In vain; if sword and poison be deni'd me,
> I'll hold my breath and die.
> *Palm*. Farewell, my last *Leonidas*; yet live,
> I charge you live, till you believe me dead.
> I cannot die in peace, if you die first.
> If life's a blessing, you shall have it last. (III.i.347-52)

As in the song, deferral is half the fun; Palmyra and Leonidas engage in an odd little bit of *repartee*, the one upstaging the other, competing for the ultimate prize—an escape from waiting, from being without the other. Simultaneous suicide (in a dangerous literalization of Melantha's catch phrase) winds up standing in as the heroic converse of the simultaneous climax seen in the song. In the final proviso scene, the lovers from the low plot likewise find themselves obliged to construct a wild array of sexual contingency plans, determining

what will happen when one or the other of them dies at a particular eventual juncture. Palamede has asked Doralice one last time if perhaps they should not simply retire to the "next room that has a couch or bed in't":

> *Dor*. No, good *Palamede*, I must not be so injurious to your Bride: 'tis ill drawing from the Bank today when, all your ready money is payable to morrow.
>
> *Pal*. A Wife is only to have the ripe fruit that falls of it self; but a wise man will always preserve a shaking for a Mistris. (V.i.215-19)

If death and sex are the ultimate rewards they are also the hardest to come by, for they seem, like money, to be in limited supply. "Forever," Palamede will remark a half page later, is a "terrible" word. This is particularly true when the word demarcates a period of waiting such as he is reluctant to undergo. Doralice agrees, as well she might, for the women in the play do not have an easier go of it. Both sexes are caught in the passage of an element that exposes their own limits, that constantly places them in an economy of loss even when they are in the midst of resolutions and new contracts.

As if one plot has given frantic instructions to its less excitable mate, the final resolution of the high plot is distinctly rushed. While some critics regard this as a naively perfect resolution, I suggest that we are supposed to feel the rushing, particularly were we watching this far too infrequently performed play. An audience, used to feeling the regular alteration between the plots is quite likely to sense that the heroic conflict's denouement takes less than half as many lines to work itself out.[20] The idea that death is the only escape from erotic uncertainty is still very much in play. Just before Leonidas's restoration Palmyra swoons, lamenting, "Break heart; for that's the least of ills to me, / And Death the onely cure" (V.i.433-34). Such cures wind up unnecessary, for the low plot comes to the peremptory rescue of the high.[21] Immediately before the perfunctory offstage battle Rhodophil vows to help the rightful king:

> We lose time: my command, or my example,
> May move the Soldiers to the better cause.
> You'll second me? [*To* Pal.
>
> *Pal*. Or die with you: no Subject e'er can meet
> A nobler fate, then at his Sovereign's feet. (V.i.447-52).

The referent of the word "Sovereign" changes out of the blue in a moment that is only barely seized. Amalthea tells us what has happened off-stage: "Two of his Guards, mov'd by the sense of virtue," defend Leonidas, who cries he is "our long-lost King" (V.i.443-45). The two plots have had so little to do with one another in terms of stage action that this moment seems deliberately unreal,

an unlikely simultaneity that evokes the Act IV song once again. The battle itself is nothing but "*Clashing of swords within, and shouts*," a commentary on the circumstantial and artificial quality of the Restoration itself.[22] Offstage, we have no idea what really is going on; the essentially public space of the stage portrays nothing. I am effectively saying that what Duane Coltharp calls the "myth of 1660 as providential comedy" appears as deliberately mythic in its absent presence (434). So strangely occult and magical is the resolution that Polydamas claims that he "should have wish'd / T'have been dethron'd before" (V.i.478-79). The idea of death (literal or sexual) appears again as Palamede and Rodophil announce that they will fight for the sovereign regardless. In the brief moment of simultaneity for which we have been striving, death, which has evoked only escapism and sexual pleasure, is conveniently recast as socially bonding pledge of allegiance.

But, comedic resolution notwithstanding, we are not done with death. The play's last death wish disturbs its ending considerably. Amalthea, who has fallen in love with Leonidas, acted as his agent, procured him access to Palmyra, and announced his identity, maintains the social order by withdrawing: "Those hours I have to live, which Heav'n in pity / Will make but few, I vow to spend with Vestals" (V.524-25).[23] In the end, marriage and truces satisfy the need for order, but the creation of pairs will necessitate exclusions if the polity is to repress the urges, the motion, and the temporal alterations that erotic love predicates. Leonidas gets his Palmyra but their relationship, however sanctioned by political legitimacy, is prey to the same exigencies as everyone else's. When Leonidas looked for her at the masquerade earlier, it was only because of Amalthea that he could find her:

> *Amal.* (*To* Leonidas): That's the Princess;
> I saw the habit ere she put it on.
> *Leon.* I know her by a thousand other signs,
> She cannot hide so much Divinity.
> Disguised, and silent, yet some graceful motion
> Breaks from her, and shines round her like a Glory. (IV.ii.9-14)

Many critics have read this as a sort of transcendental recognition.[24] The image probably prepares us for the similarly inchoate "sense of virtue" that inspires Leonidas's guards to aid him. But such an idea is a fantasy and Dryden makes sure we realize it: Leonidas only says he would know Palmyra anywhere when Amalthea has already pointed her out for him. The image of Palmyra as resplendent sunrise is beautiful but contextually fatuous. How ironic then that in the play's final lines we return to the opening song and its emphasis on time's vitiation: "Beyond my Crown," Leonidas remarks, "I have one joy in

store; / To give that Crown to her whom I adore." Even setting aside Argaleon's resentment and Amalthea's removal, we face the uncomfortable fact that the restored king has a limited number of joys "in store." The gift may as well be given now, at the brief moment of imagined relational and political repletion, for the low plot's lovers remind us that our loves, like grapes, "wither, and grow dry in the very keeping" (V.i.274).

Notes

[1]For an adroit survey of the dual-plot debate, see Rodes (477-78). The ancestral maneuver is to allege that the plots have no significant relationship with one another whatsoever, the most extreme example being Walter Scott, who speculated (groundlessly) that the two plots were just slap-dashed together: "the tragic intrigue was to have been extended into a proper heroic play, instead of occupying a spare corner in a comedy" (341). Compare Leech's similar view (149). The independence of the plots fueled the 18th century tendency (surveyed by Rodes 465-66) to separate and compartmentalize the play into various adaptations, culminating in Melantha's own play, Henry Dell's *The Frenchified Lady Never in Paris* (1757). Sound theories of how the two plots interrelate and even critique one another have been advanced by an assortment of critics, most notably Braverman, Coltharp, Hughes, Kroll, McKeon, and Rothstein and Kavenick.

[2]Like Haley, John Loftis sees the play as operating in something of a vacuum; there is "a fairy tale quality about the dynastic complications" and a related "remoteness from historical reality" (47). He goes on to suggest that the play naively mirrors recent English history without commenting on its actual fragility and contingency: "The plot moves as though by divine plan to a restoration of legitimate succession. Dryden after all wrote the play only a dozen years after legitimacy had prevailed over usurpation in England" (41-42). Haley also refers to "the naïve view" in both *Marriage à la Mode* and (equally strangely) Fletcher's *King and no King* "that sovereignty can be patently manifested at any time" (195). Much of the critical literature maintains doggedly that the play effectively has no serious political import. Thus for Rodes, "the play does not seem to be politically disposed" and its Sicilian setting indicates "the other-world, fairy-tale quality of his play" (475-76). Laura Brown emphasizes the text's putatively frivolous patterning: "it is not built upon an examination of the proper regulation or release of sexual energy" nor concerned with "the consequences of unjust usurpation" (75). This view goes back to earlier critics like Kathleen M. Lynch, who says *Marriage à la Mode* has "little interest aside from the complications of intrigue" (160).

[3]There are many things to agree with in Duane Coltharp's intelligent "Radical Royalism," but I do think he offers an overly politically conservative reading of this particular play, one where the rescue of Leonidas by low-plot characters "works to transfer these revolutionary qualities to the ostensibly royalist and patriarchalist orthodoxy of the heroic plot" (429). Douglas Canfield's "The Ideology of Restoration

Tragicomedy" also argues for the conservative thrust of the text; thus, ultimately, "nothing is disjunctive about this play. Its aristocratic values are crystalline" (457). A more nuanced reading can be found in his *Word as Bond*. Other readings that implicitly or explicitly deal with the political dimension of the play include Bruce King (Dryden contrasts the surfaces of fashionable society with the Hobbesian state of war), Michael McKeon (the two plots are dialectical, poised so as to reveal each other's reified ideologies), and Richard Braverman, who argues that the play explores "the contradictions inherent in political restoration through the literary discourse of heroic romance" (96-97). The reversals in who is and is not legitimate "undermine the fundamental trope of romance, geneology" (102). The strongest politically-tuned reading can be found in Kroll's *Restoration Drama and "The Circle of Commerce*"; he argues that the high plot effectively "resents the intrusions of the low," whose characters are more self-aware—to such an extent that they can "understand themselves *as* stage characters" in a way the princes and princesses cannot (226; 222). Ultimately, for Kroll, the "implication is that power can never operate in the belief of its own self-evidence" (253). My own argument deals with the play quite differently at a local level, but is indebted to his elegant formulation. (His basic argument can also be consulted in its earlier form, "Instituting Empiricism: Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Dryden's *Marriage à la Mode*.") See also Derek Hughes's classic essay on the public/private dilemma of the play; he is arguably the first to work out the complicated interdependence of the two plots and to show "how equivocally Dryden compares their opposed modes of life" (141).

[4]For J. R. Jones's angle on this problem, see Chapter Six of *Country and Court*, particularly 133-34. This interest in manipulating or altering time schemes to reinforce ideological order, described by Munns and Jones, arguably finds its most famous expression in Filmer's *Patriarcha*. While Filmer probably wrote the text before the Civil War and it waited until 1680 to see publication, it is still the most dramatic instance of royalist argument privileging the symbolic over the historical, hence the absolutist and super-temporal figure of the *pater patriae*, later derided by Locke as a "strange kind of domineering Phantom" that cannot be affected by or subsumed under historical circumstance (145). On *Patriarcha* and its composition see Sommerville (xxxii-iv). In *Telling Time*, Stuart Sherman notes that Restoration Englishmen were increasingly likely to own watches and contemplate directly the passage of time and the peculiar way in which "the pursuit of synchrony" itself produces "odd disjunctures" in our experience (44). This is an apt reminder of the increasing social prominence of time and timing. For another angle on Dryden's interest in the vexed relation between temporality and statecraft see my own "The Passionate Word: Temporality and Rhetoric in *All for Love*"; in his later tragedy Dryden is perhaps more systematic in his approach to the problem, carefully opposing dramatic progress (stage time) against a lyric language of withdrawal and stasis.

[5]Tragicomedy seems habitually to engineer such juxtapositions of the political and the erotic. This habit might be one reason for the popularity of some of the major Fletcherian tragicomedies on the Restoration stage. Plays like *A King and no King* or

Philaster thus were susceptible to fresh political applications. *Philaster*, interestingly, saw one of its many Restoration revivals during the same season as the first recorded performance of *Marriage à la Mode*. The action of Beaumont and Fletcher's pastoral-political tragicomedy centers on the effort to restore a displaced prince in love with a usurper's daughter. *Marriage à la Mode* was performed in April 1672, *Philaster* in June of the same year, both by the King's Company at Lincoln's Inn Fields; see *The London Stage* (194). For a wealth of information on Restoration revivals of Fletcher see A. C. Sprague. For more on the political commitments of Fletcherian drama, see also my "Anatomizing the Body Politic: Corporeal Rhetoric in *The Maid's Tragedy*."

[6]Empson, in his brilliant two-page discussion in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, seems the only critic to have begun to think through the constant references to death and dying, hinting teasingly at the degree to which the multiple senses of the word "die" add up to "a fairly complete catalogue of the sentiments of both worlds of the play" (48).

[7]I regard the suggestion that the plots are "not depending on one another" as a wry joke. Dryden playfully draws our attention away from the fact that the high plot, in the Latinate sense of "depend," *hangs* on the low one; it seems "to be contingent on or conditioned by" the low plot, even to "rest entirely on" it "for maintenance, support, supply." That is, the high plot depends profoundly on the low-plot characters rushing in and saving Leonidas under what feel like rather arbitrary circumstances. See *OED* 2nd ed. s.v. "depend."

[8]For relatively brief treatments that emphasize this plot and related social issues of marriage and libertinism, see Vernon and both Hume pieces.

[9]I quote the play from volume XI of the California Dryden throughout, indicating act, scene, and line numbers parenthetically.

[10]Economic metaphors play a key role in the ending in particular; see V.i.215-17. It is critical that we register the degree to which the great bulk of the figural language in the play ultimately emphasizes problems of resources, thus "stores" and "stocks," money generally, Melantha's bartering, and so on. That the play turns on inheritance in the low plot and dynastic succession in the high one reminds us that this is a play very much about the difficulties of perpetuation and investment—both essentially temporal dilemmas.

[11]Hughes attends carefully to how circumstances create instant alterations in personal conduct, despite some characters' professed integrity (130-33).

[12]For instance, Palamede and Doralice, largely reconciled to the impossibility of satisfaction in Act V, link food and drink with sexual repletion. Palamede, making one last attempt at sexual conquest, assures Doralice her compliance would be akin to charity: "A little comfort from a Mistris, before a man is going to give himself in Marriage, is as good as a lusty dose of Strong-water to a dying Malefactour" (V.i.210-13). The image of sustaining liquor having failed him, he makes recourse to an agricultural metaphor: "A Wife is only to have the ripe fruit, that falls of it self; but a wise man will always preserve a shaking for a Mistris" (V.i.218-19).

[13]Rodes cites this unusual metaphor as a moment of metaphysical intensity, where

the "strained diction" is a function of Dryden's search for an appropriately elevated heroic language (481). Nevertheless, one ought to note that the metaphysical imagery also attributes to the couple a certain, rather distasteful, self involvement. This connects with Empson's notion of the incestuous quality of their relationship (47). Though he does not directly invoke Bacon, Kroll nicely catches the implication of an empty "self-regarding knowledge" here (*Restoration Drama* 223).

[14]Given the importance to my argument of this extended scene of lyric pastoral and the songs, it is worth noting that Dryden is clearly tapping into lyric poetry's abiding interest in temporal thematics. Dryden's more lyrical speakers in the play seems always to struggle with mutability; each is aptly covered by Marguerite Waller's description of the lyric voice, a "desiring, incomplete self" who is by virtue of his very desire "unable to stand outside of time" (87).

[15]While an exceptionally funny character, Melantha's plight in the play is oddly painful. Kroll goes so far as to regard her dilemma as something of a tragic one (*Restoration Drama* 225). See also Canfield's interesting notion that she is a figure for the Derridean supplement in his chapter on the play in *Word as Bond* (74).

[16]Doralice also has a brief moment alone on stage in III.i. One wonders about the use of the proscenium stage in such a moment as Melantha's imaginary encounter with Rodophil; she could perhaps have been placed well downstage, caught in a particularly public theatrical space, emphasizing her vulnerability.

[17]Note Empson's tantalizing idea that the high plot is concerned with sublimated incest and the low one with sublimated sodomy: "the comic women dress up as boys, the princely lovers seem always to have thought they were brother and sister" (47). This theory perhaps needs amending to include an autoerotic mode. Hughes is the only critic to focus explicitly on Melantha's imagined assignation, correctly stressing its "sterile" and "solipsistic" nature (139).

[18]Rodes quotes the French source and suggests that Dryden's version "most urgently exploits the frustration of sexual mistiming" (501).

[19]Not only are the lovers engaged in an act of timing, but the song itself, as a dramatic entity, is there partly to kill time, giving Argaleon a moment to slip out and disguise himself as Leonidas in order to interfere in the encounter which the rightful prince has planned with Palmyra later on.

[20]Rodes notes that comic plot "takes more than twice the number of lines to bring the play to its general comic conclusion" (478).

[21]Braverman also intuits the import of this sudden intervention, noting that the rescue by the comic characters suggests "that Leonidas cannot resolve the contradictions internal to the romance itself" (104).

[22]I have not seen this notion explicitly remarked in the critical tradition. Given the sexual thematics of the play as indicated in the Act IV song, one might be inclined to construe the battle as a sort of anticlimax, all forms of death having been forestalled yet again.

[23]It is interesting, in view of Charles's sexual proclivities, that the restored monarch should have immediately to deal with a potential erotic complication. Readings of

the ending always emphasize Amalthea. Rodes's reading is farthest from my own: "While the fate of the self-effacing Amalthea injects a sober note into the joyfulness, this single personal misfortune is held in painless context by the Romance convention and the sense of timelessness of the heroic action" (483-4). On the other hand, for Canfield, she is "a sign of the sublimation of unfulfilled desire, a desire which will always threaten monogamy even within the privileged confines of the Court" (79). In "Dryden and the Critical Imagination," Stuart Sherman finds that Leonidas represses "the feelings that would complicate the play's rectangular resolutions by doubling his affinities…. In *Marriage A-la-Mode* the agitations of amorous multiplicity make for dissonance with the complacencies of recovered power" (27). Hughes suggests that the ending would be more satisfactory "if the heroic characters could adopt the shifting affections of the comic" (141).

[24]Bruce King misreads the masquerade and thus exaggerates the maintenance of ideals in the high plot: "Palamede's inability to recognise Doralice in her disguise, despite his magnet, contrasts with Leonidas's discovery of Palymyra at the ball. Amalthea offers to tell him of Palmyra's costume, but Leonidas replies: 'I know her by a thousand other signs'" (92). See also a similar slip by Hughes (131). Kroll catches a different irony, noting that this recognition can't be taken entirely seriously because Palmyra later mistakes Argaleon for Leonidas (*Restoration Drama* 224).

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