

THE FLOURISHING OF FEMALE PLAYWRITING ON THE AUGUSTAN STAGE: MARY PIX'S *THE INNOCENT MISTRESS*¹

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ABSTRACT. *This article aims at analysing Mary Pix's The Innocent Mistress (1697) as a paradigmatic example of the boom in female playwriting at the end of the seventeenth century in England. It is my main aim to determine whether and to what extent Pix's play can be considered a derivative or innovative text. In other words, does The Innocent Mistress stick to the reformist atmosphere prevailing at the end of the seventeenth century or, on the contrary, is the play fully indebted to the hard Restoration drama of the 1670s? In contrast to the classic view of the Restoration stage as a monolith, this essay shows the evolution from the libertarian Carolean plays to the essentially reformist Augustan drama, and the impact and role of women's writing in this process. Thus, after briefly delving into the main traits of both traditions—especially those concerning gender relations— my essay concludes that The Innocent Mistress proves to be clearly a product of its time, adapting recurrent Carolean devices to Augustan Reformism, but also the product of a female playwright and her limited room for transgression.*

Keywords: Female playwrights, comedy, Carolean drama, Augustan drama, moral reformism.

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EL FLORECIMIENTO DEL TEATRO ESCRITO POR MUJERES EN EL PERÍODO AUGUSTO: *THE INNOCENT MISTRESS* DE MARY PIX

RESUMEN. Este artículo analiza la obra *The Innocent Mistress* de Mary Pix como un ejemplo paradigmático de la prolífica producción de teatro escrito por mujeres al final del siglo XVII en Inglaterra. Mi principal objetivo consiste en determinar si y hasta qué punto la obra de Pix imita a sus predecesores o, por el contrario, es innovadora. Es decir, ¿se ajusta esta obra al espíritu reformista imperante en aquel momento o es claramente tributaria del teatro de la década de 1670? Frente a la visión general del teatro de la Restauración como un todo uniforme, este ensayo muestra la evolución de las obras en la época de Carlos II al teatro reformista Augusto, así como el impacto y el papel de las dramaturgas en este proceso. Así, después de explorar los rasgos principales de ambas tradiciones – especialmente en lo que se refiere a las relaciones de género – se demuestra que la obra más famosa de Pix es un producto de su tiempo, al adaptar aspectos del teatro Carolino al reformismo de fin del siglo XVII, pero también el de una dramaturga y su limitado margen de transgresión.

Palabras clave: Dramaturgas, comedia, teatro Carolino, teatro Augusto, reformismo moral.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In her introduction to *Oxford English Drama: Eighteenth-century Women Dramatists* (2009), Melinda Finberg points out: “Mary Pix has been a link between women writers of the Restoration and Augustan periods” (xi). In her opinion, the playwright “emulated Behn’s comedies of intrigue with their multiple plots, and her style was further influenced by her mentor, William Congreve” (xii). What is at stake is why has Pix’s production become virtually erased from the master canon despite being a direct link between two key generations of playwrights and in spite of her moderate discourse (Finberg 2009: xii).

There are few available biographical data about Mary Pix’s life. In her introduction to *The Female Wits. Women Playwrights of the Restoration* (1981), Fidelis Morgan gives a brief approach:

Mary Pix was born in 1666, the daughter of the Reverend Roger Griffith and his wife Lucy Berriman, in Nettlebed, Oxfordshire.

Her father had died before 24 July 1684, when she married George Pix, a merchant sailor six years her senior, at St Saviour’s Benefink.

The couple had one child, who was buried in the cemetery at Hawhurst in 1690.

[...] We do not know when Mary Pix died, but it must have been some time before 28 May 1709, when “at the desire of several persons of quality” a benefit performance was held on behalf of the executor of Mrs Pix's will. The play performed was *The Busy Body*, the author, Susanna Centlivre (44, 50).

Some of these biographical data help us understand the special conditions whereby a woman could become a playwright during the Restoration period. First of all, Mary Pix was the daughter of a clergyman, which eased her way into culture. Also, her husband understood and encouraged her intellectual aspirations. Being still young, she became a widow, which even increased her freedom from family constraints. Moreover, the fact that Centlivre dedicated a play to Pix proves the sisterhood female playwrights considered they belonged to. It is significant, though, that despite her fairly brilliant career—she wrote a total of twelve plays, six comedies and six tragedies, a prose work, *The Inhuman Cardinal* (1696), and some poems, in a short span of ten years—the exact date of her death remains a mystery.

It was not until quite recently that the work done by women in Restoration drama started to be reassessed. This labour of rediscovery of female-authored texts (because of fear, lack of interest or of understanding) has guaranteed a more comprehensive literary canon. Things started to change with feminism and its concept of women as “hidden from history”, a concept which made an impact on literary criticism in two ways. Firstly, it motivated feminist critics to understand how and why women had been buried by man-made history and, secondly, it initiated the recovery of their “lost” female ancestors. In literary criticism this involved explaining and interpreting how and why women had been oppressively represented by men in literature (Kate Millet *Sexual Politics*, 1977), and finding a tradition of women's writing (Elaine Showalter *A Literature of their Own*, 1977). Having said this, it is, however, necessary to point out that the task of finding a tradition of women's writing or of re-discovering women's work, was not so readily fulfilled in the realm of the theatre. In other words, feminist scholarship was rather slow in challenging the canon of “great” theatre.

For this reason, a similar approach to the re-reading of male-made images of women, pioneered by Kate Millet in the context of literary criticism began lately in theatre studies, especially with feminist approaches to the “classic” periods of Western theatre, which excluded women. The two classic periods in the British theatrical canon targeted by feminist deconstructive activity are the Graeco-Roman and Elizabethan stages. In terms of those classic periods of theatre, where women were absent from the stage, more recent work now offers tangible demonstration of how (and why) the female has been constructed as a man-made sign in her absence (Belsey 1985: 148-149, 164).

While this radical “against the grain” re-reading of the great dramatists (that is, against the traditionally received images of women in plays written by women) can

be marked out as one branch of feminist inquiry, another critical approach that works in tandem with the challenge to the “canon” is one which attempts to dig up or recover female-authored dramatic texts. It is this latter feminist critical approach, known as gynocritics, that made female Restoration playwrights, such as Aphra Behn, Susanna Centlivre, Mary Pix, Catherine Trotter and others, visible again after almost three centuries of silence (Morgan 1981; Clark, 1986; Pearson 1988, 1998; Browne 1987; Mann and Mann 1996; McLaren 1990; Roberts 1989; Rose 1988; Straznicky 1997; Todd 1989; Quinsey 1996; Cuder-Domínguez, Luis-Martínez and Prieto-Pablos 2006; Luis-Martínez and Figueroa Dorrego 2003; Finberg 2009).

Of this group of female pioneers, Mary Pix’s literary production has sparked off controversy among critics. As a whole, female wits have been regarded as inexperienced and their plays as poor stuff –if not ignored– by mainstream criticism. However, Pix has also been the victim of some feminist critics, who accuse her of repeating the misogynist formulas of Restoration drama. This is, for instance, the case of Jacqueline Pearson, who considers the playwright an orthodox playwright submissive to patriarchal structures and stereotypes. In her vindictory rehabilitation of female voices of the Restoration in *The Prostituted Muse* (1988), Pearson points out: “Pix was not a vocal feminist, and her plays rarely complain about women’s lot and tend to repeat and endorse stereotypes of female behaviour” (169). The critic goes still further, remarking that Pix “on the whole concentrates on women who are weak, doomed, flawed or monstrous. She is also unlikely to depict women’s friendships strongly and to present a woman who is faithful, courageous and unselfish to a female friend. Female friendships are ineffectual, treacherous and violent” (169). As this paper will show, this is rather inaccurate.

Unlike Pearson, other critics regard Pix’s literary production (proto)feminist. In “The Comedies of Mary Pix” (1990), Juliet McLaren tries to underline the feminist message of the playwright’s comedies. McLaren justifies her arguments not only through references to Pix’s plays, but also by making reference to other reputed critics of the same opinion such as Edna Steeves. Drawing on the latter, McLaren (1990) points out:

[Pix] was a feminist before feminism became trendy. Although not stridently offensive in her feminism, as her contemporary Mrs. Manley could be, she seizes every opportunity to defend women against attacks upon their characters and intelligence. And like her near contemporaries, Mrs. Manley and Mrs. Trotter, Mrs. Mary Pix by her success as a playwright served as a model for other women aspiring to write for the stage (81).

The question that immediately arises is (once assumed that mainstream criticism considers most female writing as second class) why Mary Pix’s production triggers such contradictory reactions among feminist criticism, while there seems to be some degree of consensus on the rest of female Restoration playwrights. Pearson herself draws a

difference between the tandem Mary Delarivier Manley and Catherine Trotter, and Mary Pix: "Manley and Trotter have ideologies, or at least ideas, of gender while Pix does not, and they offer more politicized versions of sex-distinctions" (1988: 169). Likewise, Susanna Centlivre and Aphra Behn are often regarded as proto-feminist playwrights.

Needless to say, Pix had to undergo the stigmatization of being both a woman and a writer. Moreover, like the rest of her female colleagues, she had to adjust to the strict rules of a theatre, which, in Hume's words, was "formulaic in the extreme" (1977: 128), if she wanted her plays to be performed. Her literary career, like that of the other women playwrights, depended on a public and a producer whose taste and ideology were male-centred. Apart from the drawbacks common to all female Restoration playwrights, she suffered two incidents that may explain why her plays are more conformist than those of her colleagues or are thus perceived. As mentioned above, together with Mary Delarivier Manley and Catherine Trotter, Mary Pix was the target of the devastating misogynist satire *The Female Wits* (1696). According to Juliet McLaren (1990), the impact of this satire on the three playwrights was undeniable, yet not definitive:

The anonymously authored farce temporarily silenced two of the new writers –Delarivier Manley and Trotter– and sent the third, Mary Pix, to offer her services as a writer to Betterton's troupe at Lilcoln's Inn Fields. But in spite of this attack, these women's success in their efforts was sufficient to encourage others to join them during the next few years (78).

One year later, Mary Pix suffered a new attack when she had the script of her play *The Deceiver Deceived* (1697) rejected by the actor and producer George Powell. To make things worse, he plagiarized it in *Imposture Defeated* (1697) (Pearson 1988: 172). The subsequent dialectical battle between Powell and his colleagues and Pix's group –Congreve being her best advocate– did not help Pix's already fragile position as a female writer. This string of scandals in which she was involved compelled her to be very cautious. With all this in mind, this study aims at analyzing Pix's best known comedy, *The Innocent Mistress* (1697), to explore whether and to what extent the playwright produced an innovative text, or simply followed mainstream conventions absorbing and recasting them in a derivative fashion.

2. MARY PIX IN CONTEXT: FROM THE CAROLEAN TO THE AUGUSTAN STAGE

Classic criticism dealing with Restoration drama has traditionally neglected both the minor male and all female playwrights, and especially most turn-of-the-seventeenth-century drama. Thus, five decades (1660-1710) have been

traditionally reduced to one, the 1670s, to a genre, the comedy of manners, and to a group of male authors. In his classic two-volume *A History of English Drama 1660-1900* (1965), Allardyce Nicoll was supposed to have revised this univocal vision of Restoration drama. However, he mostly maintained the standard criteria which discriminate female writing. As concerns Pix's comedies, and more concretely *The Innocent Mistress*, Nicoll is rather ambiguous, defining the play as an intrigue comedy,² but with "a definite sentimental tone running through it" (1965: 224).

Later, critics like Robert Hume demythologised Restoration comedy as a collection of emblematic plays. However, like his predecessors, Hume is particularly critical when dealing with the theatre of the 1690s and the first decade of the eighteenth century. As the critic points out: "Surveying the state of comedy in the mid-nineties we find that the average quality is the worst yet in the period, partly as a result of exemplary moral demonstrations, partly just as the result of a lot of heavy and inexpert writing" (1977: 421-422). Hume's words reveal his patriarchal point of view that enhances Carolean drama because of its "masculine" discourse –particularly keen on sex, money and politics– while he devalues Augustan drama because of its "feminine" sentimental reformist attitude.

What all critics agree on is the changing tone of Restoration comedy as the seventeenth century approached its end. Apart from the increasing influence of the classics, the essential differences between Carolean drama (which Hume dates from 1660 to 1685 approximately) and Augustan drama (which the same critic dates from 1685 onwards) do not have to do with their sources and influences, but with deeper issues. All in all, there are two basic elements that, according to most critics, made Restoration drama evolve as it did: firstly, the social, political, economic, and cultural changes produced by the shift of power from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie; and, in the second place, women's more active participation in theatre as writers, performers, and producers, especially during the female playwrighting boom of the 1690s. These two facts are intimately connected: the moral values encouraged by the bourgeoisie have been traditionally attributed to women, which has proved quite "useful" for many critics to make female playwrights responsible for the re-moralizing "impoverishment" of the late Restoration stage.

² Intrigue and romance have been traditionally successful among female readers. It was in this literary territory where women could escape from their fate as such. In Pix's play, despite Beaumont's patriarchal discourse condemning Bellinda's preference for romances, which he calls "the seducers of the women" (I, i. 158-159), she goes on romanticizing her own life up to the end of the play.

Although the external appearance of Augustan plays resembled Carolean ones,³ their attitude was new. The hipersexualized aristocracy of Etherege's plays in the 1670s turned into a pragmatic middle class, whose values were reflected and transmitted in didactic plays. Consequently, citizens, merchants or country squires, ridiculed *ad nauseam* in the Carolean tradition, became respectable characters in the Augustan stage. Wycherley's Mr Pinchwife (*The Country Wife* [1675]), whose behaviour is an anthology of ridiculous jealousy and brutishness, has very little in common with Mr Rich (his counterpart in Pix's *The Beau Defeated* [1700]), whose bourgeois values triumph against the affectation and dangerous artificiality of (fake) aristocrats. The agile language, witty conversations, asides and repartees which had characterized the work of Etherege, Wycherley or Dryden, faded away. Hume makes reference to this process in a melancholic tone. While the critic despises the Augustan, mainly "humane comedy", he celebrates Carolean "hard comedy". He describes the first as "sympathetic, tolerant, less critical" (1977: 382), and the second as "cutting, cynical, and libertine" (382). London was no longer the desirable place to learn how to behave and acquire good manners, but a place from where well-to-do people –like Lady Landsworth in Pix's *The Beau Defeated* (1700)– escape. Perhaps the only trait late Restoration comedy keeps from Etherege's time is the "happy couple" stereotype, namely the Restoration version of the young couple inherited from Roman New Comedy. However, the relative subversiveness of the Carolean happy couple was repressed. Although apparently similar, the attitude and manners of Harriet and Dorimant in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, and those of Mrs Beauclair and Sir Francis Wildlove in Pix's *The Innocent Mistress*, are very different. The first couple is not morally, but socially and dramatically, attractive; its interest lies in the witty spectacle of their courting, their morality being left aside. The second couple embodies the hero's reformation process through the moral influence of the heroine. In this case, their wittiness and sexual undertones become secondary.

The Innocent Mistress is inscribed in what Nicoll calls "genteel" comedy. With this term, the critic makes reference to "a comedy which arose in the reign of Queen Anne [1702-1714] [...] an adaptation of the comedy of manners to the more artificial, more effeminate age started by Cibber" (1965: 161). Inevitably, Nicoll announces the lack of quality of this "genteel" comedy, of which he says: "The weaknesses of the genteel species is evident [...]. It does not depend ultimately on wit for its being, but on the artificial manners of the time" (162). Behind his criticism lies again the

³ The main stereotypes of the peak of Restoration drama –witty girls, rakes to be reformed, ludicrous squires, or tricky servants– were still present on the new stage, as *The Innocent Mistress* proves. However, this parallelism was just aesthetic, since the reformist atmosphere of the turn of the century changed everything in new drama, characterization, plotting, and above all, the overall aim of comedy itself.

widespread feeling that female writing tends to sentimentalism and is thus subordinate to male-oriented “serious” genres.

Although Margaret Cavendish (1623-1674), Katherine Phillips (1632-1664) and Aphra Behn (1640?-1689) had been successful writers throughout the 1660s and 1670s, it was in the 1690s when female playwrights “conquered” the stage. The situation was so atypical that Marsilia (Mary Delarivier Manley’s alter ego) in the satire *The Female Wits* claims for women to replace men as writers: “Methinks ‘twould be but civil of the men to lay down their pens for one year and let us divert the Town. But if we should, they’d certainly be ashamed ever to take ‘em up again” (1981: 395). Although the target of Marsilia’s words is to ridicule female playwrighting, the fact is that, by the end of the seventeenth century, women had already demonstrated their literary capacity. This boom of female literary production in England can be explained both from political and literary standpoints. The Glorious Revolution of 1689 forced William of Orange and Mary Stuart to share their power with Parliament. This democratic change in power relations at a national scale eased the negotiation of gender roles and power in the household. As Susan Steeves points out: “The same questions that had been raised about the absolute authority of the King (in seventeenth century England) were now raised about the absolute authority of fathers and husbands [...]. After rebellion became respectable at the Glorious Revolution, such questions were asked with increasing seriousness” (in McLaren 1990: 79). The boom of female playwrights in the 1690s was also the outcome of a subterranean female literary tradition. In a eulogistic tribute to Mary Delarivier Manley for her play *The Royal Mischief* (1696), Mary Pix makes reference to the latter as the last exponent in the chain of a long female literary tradition:

Your self must strive to keep the rapid course,
 Like Sappho, charming, like Aphra, eloquent,
 Like chaste Orinda, sweetly innocent ...
 (in Morgan, 1981: 390).

Despite this tradition, Augustan female playwrights were stigmatised because they left the private sphere that patriarchy intended for them. The association between masculinity and literature was so widespread that the mere sight of a pen in the hands of women was enough to consider them akin to prostitutes. In her article “Restoration Women Playwrights and the Limits of Professionalism” (1997), Martha Straznicky points out how female dramatists of the Restoration were linked to prostitution since they (metaphorically) displayed their bodies to give pleasure to the audience: “For female dramatists, the pleasure-for-money exchange acquired sexual undertones, and this in turn created an association between playwrighting and whoring” (1997: 709). Likewise, Jacqueline Pearson points out: “A woman

'prostitutes' herself by publication, but they are still more disturbing and unnatural, for they usurp the pen, 'the male quill'" (1988: 10). Apart from being considered "prostitutes", female playwrights were also considered some sort of third sex. They self-emasculated their female bodies into a pseudo-masculinity and penis envy they "solved" by appropriating the male phallus. This androgyny was a two-edged weapon: these women were considered somehow superior to those of their sex, but also despicable because they subverted conventional sexual roles: "This praised androgyny had a dark side. Aphra Behn, praised as a literary androgyne, could also be satirised as 'a Hermaphrodite' who did not deserve the 'Privileges of either sex'" (Pearson, 9).

Within this context, it is no wonder that cultivated upper-class women wrote in the domestic sphere. Amateur plays, written not to be staged as closet dramas (Dulong 1992: 442), were quite popular, especially before professional female writers emerged. Amateurs did not have to come to terms with patriarchal double morality, at least not directly. Moreover, according to Stranicky: "Unlike the sexual commerce in which professional playwrights engaged, the amateur writer thus described is engaged in a self-pleasuring activity and remains importantly 'untouched'" (1997: 719). In spite of Stranicky's re-valuation of the amateur playwrights of the Restoration, it was the "assertive, competitive, professional, and openly public model [of playwrights] pioneered by Aphra Behn" (705) that increased both in number and relevance at the end of the seventeenth century. Yet, against "masculine hard comedy", female playwrights' "humane comedy" is "much more tolerant, less critical. And obviously it is easily extended into the overtly exemplary" since it reflects women's strict but benevolent morality (Hume: 382). This can also be read the other round, though. For David Roberts, "if there is no reason to doubt that comedy changed its style to suit the modesty of the ladies, there is every reason to be skeptical about the ladies' part in bringing the change about" (1989: 127). In other words, it was the change in moral and social conditions rather than the female writers themselves that brought about the change in Restoration comedy. In fact, although women have been "accused" of the change in drama, it was the discourse of male theorists that triggered the Augustan moralism. Influential playwrights and theorists such as Jeremy Collier, with "A Short View of the Immorality, and Profaneness of the English Stage" (1698), or Richard Steele, with his pro-reformist magazine, *The Tatler*, gave an intellectual dimension to a far-reaching conservative climate (McLean 1995: 3, 31).⁴ The reform of the English stage is a rather complex process. It affected all aspects of life, in

⁴ On this, see Gómez-Lara's "The Politics of Modesty: The Collier Controversy and the Societies for the Reformation of Manners" (2006).

most of which women had no role or active part. Furthermore, once women were manipulated into believing in their moral mission, they could be blamed for the impoverishment of the late seventeenth-century stage. Despite females' literary success, the Licensing Act passed in 1737 –whereby any play should be accepted by the Lord Chamberlain– stopped women's literary aspirations. This way, the “mirage” of female writing came to an end.

3. *THE INNOCENT MISTRESS*, OR THE TRIUMPH OF AUGUSTAN DRAMA

The Innocent Mistress, published and performed for the first time in 1697, was Pix's second comedy, a farce in three acts that she had written in 1696 in response to *The Female Wits* (Mclaren 1990: 90). *The Innocent Mistress* is a multiplot play with several interwoven love intrigues. Sir Charles is married to an older woman, Lady Beauclair, supposedly a widow, who is very different from the witty heroines of other Restoration plays. In fact, she is presented in the *Dramatis Personae*, together with her daughter Peggy, as “an ill-bred woman”. Her marriage to Sir Charles cannot work since it is just the product of socio-economic interests. Being Sir Charles a younger brother with no estate, and Lady Beauclair a wealthy woman, Sir Charles' friends and family induce him to marry her. At the end of the play, we learn that the marriage is not valid for two reasons. Because it has not been consummated and because Lady Beauclair's first husband, Mr Flywife, is alive and back to London after several years of voluntary exile in Jamaica. The re-encounter of Mr Flywife and Lady Beauclair makes Sir Charles free to marry Bellinda, his niece's friend, whom he has been courting throughout the play. Bellinda, whose real name is Marianne, lives at Mrs Beauclair's (Sir Charles' niece) under an assumed name after having escaped from a forced marriage. Mrs Beauclair, presented in the *dramatis personae* as “an independent woman”, fulfils and updates, together with Sir Francis Wildlove, the “happy couple” stereotype of Restoration comedies. The plot turns around Mrs Beauclair's attempts to reform Sir Francis from his initial rakishness to his final “faithfulness”. His reform process is slow. The rake only changes his attitude and reveals his true feelings for Mrs Beauclair when, due to a misunderstanding, he thinks she has married another man. Another couple is formed by Beaumont and Arabella. The former is, like Sir Charles, a character with an “incorruptible” morality, whom Bellinda's father has sent to find her after her brother's death. Arabella, her father thinks, has her fortune and person controlled by Lady Beauclair and her stupid brother Cheatall. Once Arabella is liberated with the help of Lady Beauclair's servant Eugenia, she can marry Beaumont. There is yet another marrying couple at the end, Lady Beauclair's “ill-bred” daughter, Peggy, and the social parasite Mr Spendall, who tricks both mother and daughter into believing he is a man of quality with a fortune

to inherit. Once Mr Flywife comes back and Peggy's fortune –the only reason for Spendall's interest in marrying her– fades away, Peggy is punished with a lazy husband with no fortune. Likewise, Mr Spendall must deal with an ill-bred girl with no properties so far. Finally, even the servants Eugenia and Gentil marry just the way their "betters" do, thus following Roman comedy tradition. Only Mrs Flywife (the mistress of Mr Flywife while in Jamaica) is left outside the marriage fair. We learn that both have been living together, but Mr Flywife, after his first experience, prefers not to marry again. Thus, when they are back in London, the former has to live with Lady Beauclair again, and the second becomes the odd one out in the comedy happy ending.

For Richard Bevis, the play is "a sprawling collection of manners and intrigues: Mrs Beauclair is clever and attractive as she begs her rake, but the Bellinda-Sir Charles relationship is pretentious, the other two plots are boring, and the end is fortuitous" (1988: 162). In my view, *The Innocent Mistress* constitutes a characteristic example of an Augustan play, with manners and intrigue, a moralistic turn with respect to Carolean tradition, stereotyped (rather than boring) plots, and a prescriptive end. Briefly stated, Pix was responsive to the audience's interests and the expectations of the Establishment in order to succeed as a playwright.

Of the twofold nature of comedy, celebratory and corrective, *The Innocent Mistress* emphasizes the latter, as was expected at the time. Therefore, although the end of the play fulfils the comic imperative of multiple weddings, after the regenerative principle of the genre, it also deals with the reformation of most of its characters. There are some fortunate or magic strokes, such as Mr Flywife's re-appearance or the death of Bellinda's brother, which connect Pix's play with wishfulfilment devices inherited from the classics and from medieval romance; but, on the whole, it is virtue (of both males and females) that is eventually rewarded. Structurally and, somehow, thematically, *The Innocent Mistress* fits the pattern of Roman New Comedy, consisting of prologue, *protasis* or exposition, *epitasis*, or the core of the action, and *catastrophe*, or its resolution. Classical comedy goes from a situation of crisis, exposed in the *protasis*, and emphasized through the *nodus erroris* in the *epitasis*, to the *anagnorisis* of reality and the subsequent resolution of the problem in the *catastrophe*. At the beginning of *The Innocent Mistress*, most of the characters suffer from diverse "crises": the marriage of Sir Charles and Lady Beauclair is a mistake; the relationship of Sir Charles and Bellinda is impossible; Arabella is the victim of Lady Beauclair and her brother Cheatall; the atypical relationship of Mr Flywife and Mrs Flywife starts the play at a critical stage; and the love affair between Sir Francis Wildlove and Mrs Beauclair does not work because the former refuses to lose his freedom. This initial crisis increases along the *epitasis*. The confusion brought about by Mr Flywife's return from Jamaica and the intrigues of some

characters bring the situation to a breaking point. The intrigue that Eugenia, the witty servant, invents to liberate Arabella, or Mrs Beauclair's constant attempts to test and reform Sir Francis by going alone along a park in a mask, or disguised as a boy, are perhaps the best examples. Once the confusion has reached its climax, everybody overcomes his or her comic *hamartia* or error, and the reformation process is accomplished. Sir Charles and Bellinda can marry, as well as Sir Francis and Mrs Beauclair, while Lady Beauclair and Mr Flywife have to pay for their mistakes by living together again, just as Peggy and Mr Spendall.

Apart from updating the comic essentials just mentioned, *The Innocent Mistress* reveals many specific elements taken from Carolean, classical, courtly love and sentimental traditions. Yet, the main concern of this essay is on the first. Although the play belongs to the Augustan tradition, the Carolean substratum, still present in the late Restoration stage, should not be forgotten if we are to approach and fully understand *The Innocent Mistress*.

The most characteristically Carolean device of the play is the "happy couple" stereotype, here updated by Sir Francis Wildlove and Mrs Beauclair. At first glance, they resemble eminent examples of the stereotype, such as Dorimant and Harriet in Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676), or Mirabell and Millamant in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700). However, although Pix uses most of the devices characteristic of the "happy couple", namely the repartee, the breeches part, masks and disguises, promenades and the proviso scene, her couple is not as blunt as those of Etherege and Congreve. Pix's discourse is more nuanced, allowing the heroine a prominent role; nothing surprising, though, taking into account that she is presented as "an independent woman". Sir Francis and Mrs Beauclair particularly recall Carolean couples in their meeting at Saint James's Park (*The Innocent Mistress* II, iii. lines 20-65). However, it is Mrs Beauclair who takes the lead, overpowering her rival/suitor and making him accept her moral standards. In the end, he surrenders: "Pshaw, I do confess I am caught" (II, iii. 68). They firstly exchange witty remarks and flirt. The heroine does it behind a mask, which helps Sir Francis in his approach until he discovers Mrs Beauclair's identity: "Mrs Beauclair! What a blind puppy am I? Twice in one day" (IV, iv. 29-30). Mrs Beauclair's second attempt to catch Sir Francis's attention allows the playwright to introduce the Carolean "breeches part" (i.e., the heroine's disguise in male attire). Apart from the sexual connotations of Mrs Beauclair's disguise, Jacqueline Pearson thinks that Pix's aim in travesty Mrs Beauclair is to propose "a heroine [who] disguises herself to follow and serve the man she loves, like Fidelity in Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676), Philadelphia in Shadwell's *Bury Fair* (1689), Astella in Harris' *The Mistakes: or, The False Report* (1691), Viola in Burnaby's *Love Betray'd* (1703), or Orinda in the anonymous *The General Cashier'd* (1712)" (1988: 100). However, Mrs Beauclair uses

male attire not only to reform her beloved but also to ironise on the stereotype of a “poor” man’s lot when dealing with women: “What have I done? In seeking to preserve my liberty I have forever lost it. My unexperienced youth ne’er viewed such charms before, and, without compassion, this bondage may be worse than what I avoided” (IV, i. 36-39). Mrs Beauclair’s tone is unequivocally ironic because she herself makes fun of the alleged bliss of marriage women must conform to. Making reference to Lady Beauclair and her uncle Sir Charles, she argues ironically: “Here’s matrimony in its true colours” (III, ii. 153).

Pix updates the Carolean proviso scene which closes Sir Francis’ and Mrs Beauclair’s courtship. The proviso was a pre-matrimonial contract through which the happy couple signed their capitulation conditions. Styan exemplifies this contract (1985: 194), normally established on equal terms by both partners, with Farquhar’s *The Beaux’ Stratagem* (1707) and Congreve’s *The Way of the World* (1700). The proviso scene in *The Innocent Mistress* is different from all these Carolean examples. Unlike her predecessors, Mrs Beauclair only accepts Sir Francis as far as he leaves his libertine life style behind (V, iv. 79-83) and reforms the way she aims at. That is, Pix adapts the Carolean proviso scene to the more conservative Augustan stage. Not only is this conservatism perceptible in the proviso scene, but in all the comic devices which shape the “happy couple” stereotype. The promenades in Saint James’s Park, the use of masks or disguises etc. work as tests to reinforce the moral reformation of the hero to be the adequate partner for the virtuous heroine.⁵ However, Pix’s male and female characters follow the same moral rules. Moreover, she turns the screw beyond Augustan censorship and allows her heroine ironic undertones: “You’ll fall into the romantic style, Sir Francis?” (V, iv. 87-88). Thus, Pix’s “happy couple” results from moral reformation, Augustan proto-sentimentalism, intrigue –schemes, plots, and farcesque situations prevailing over witty conversation–, and the playwright’s female condition.

Against Carolean oversexualization, virtue is emphasized once and again. According to Beaumont, “Sir Charles Beauclair has moral virtues to our late English heroes unpractised and unknown” (III, iii. 13-14). Although Bellinda is firstly able to disobey her father’s matrimonial plans for her, she eventually becomes an example of virtue. She falls in love with Sir Charles before knowing he was married (I, ii. 45-47), and when she finds it out, she chooses celibacy and virginity rather than becoming his mistress or marrying another man. At the end of the play their true love is rewarded when Mr Flywife returns home. Despite being virtuous, Bellinda does

⁵ Andrew Varney tries to negotiate a way out of this conflict between entertainment and morality. In *18th Century Writers in their World* (1999), he analyses the way Congreve in *The Way of the World* is able to show how virtue and wit can work together (1999: 48).

not fit the passive female stereotype. She is a rebel with a cause, challenging her father's wish, rejecting the rule of Lady Beauclair, her daughter Peggy, and the foppish Spendall (three caricatures down from Carolean tradition). Likewise, Arabella devises a plan to escape from them. She achieves it with the help of her maid Eugenia: "So, my dear deliverer, how have you succeeded? EUGENIA: O, Madam, the poor Squire's [Spendall] frightened out of the little wit he had. One scene more and the day's our own" (IV, iv. 42-44). This event recalls once more Pix's pro-female discourse; well-to-do women make up a sisterhood whereby they help each other against the numerous repressive forces they must face up.

The evolution that the "happy couple" suffered from the Carolean to the Augustan period can be applied to gender relations in general and to the concept of marriage in particular. Middle-class Augustan drama re-defined the Carolean concept of marriage, and Mary Pix was not an exception. Infidelity, amorality and libertinism were no longer celebrated, but revised. Carolean heroes like Horner or Dorimant were rascals who cuckolded every stupid husband they came across. However, in spite of their amoral conduct, they were not punished, but rewarded for their resourcefulness in a world they controlled to perfection. By contrast, in Augustan drama marriage was re-valued and rakishness punished. In fact, in contrast to Carolean comedy, the Augustan tradition dealt with already married couples: "[The plays of the turn of the century] are increasingly likely to begin with the major characters already married" (Staves, in McLaren 1990: 82); and more concretely with marriages in crisis: "Augustan comedy often shifts the dramatic emphasis to marital discord" (Pearson 1988: 79). A. H. Scouten (1976) points to Mary Pix as one of the "minor" playwrights that exemplify Augustan marital debate:

"Mary Pix has three works in which one or more of the leading characters is married, in two of them the plot complications include adultery, treated sympathetically, but not endorsed: *The Spanish Wives* (1696) and *The Deceiver Deceived* (1697). In the third, *The Innocent Mistress* (1697) the hero is married" (227).

Her plays move from a marriage in crisis to a celebratory ending through a corrective resolution. However, on the way to a moral resolution, men are supposed to share the responsibility with women. Moreover, like her female colleagues, she proves to be interested in the debate about gender roles and negotiation beyond the sexualized Carolean discourse.

From the very beginning Sir Charles is presented as the patient victim of a disastrous marriage with an ill-bred woman, a Roman and Carolean stereotype Pix keeps faithful to (McLaren 1990: 90). As his niece Mrs Beauclair says: "Twas a detested match. Ruling friends and cursed avarice joined this unthinking youth to the worst of women" (I, ii. 60-62). Her words corroborate those of Sir Francis pointed

out above (I, i. 87-96). The economic interest that justifies Sir Charles and Lady Beauclair's loveless marriage leads to failure. This type of marriage, easily solved through plots and cuckoldings in Carolean drama, becomes a mistake with moral and pragmatic consequences in Augustan drama. Being a virtuous hero, Sir Charles cannot behave as Horner or Dorimant did before. He just suffers with the dilemma of being married to the wrong woman and being in love with Bellinda. In this context, Mr Flywife's unofficial union with Mrs Flywife and the marriage-plot of Mr Spendall and Peggy, both based on money rather than love, are not praised, but doomed to dissolution. As mentioned above, Mrs Flywife becomes an outcast (V, iv. 246) and Mr Flywife is condemned to live a loveless marriage with Lady Beauclair (V, iv. 292-294). Whereas Lady Beauclair and Peggy are Carolean caricatures, Mrs Flywife is at least given the chance to express her view on men. She tells her maid Jenny: "Thou understan'st intrigues, art cunning, subtle as all our sex ought to be who deal with those deluders, men" (I, iii. 4-5). Mrs Flywife's fate only confirms her words. Although *The Innocent Mistress* responds to the requirements of the reformists, it is not a play that assumes romanticism naïvely and unquestioningly.⁶ The love relationships between Sir Charles and Bellinda, and Mrs Beauclair and Sir Francis can be regarded as self-conscious analyses of romanticism where literal and ironic readings of the romantic discourse are available. With all due caution, they foreground the problematization of gender relations and roles in current Hollywood romantic comedies.

Apart from marriage and gender relations, Pix also adapted to the Augustan stage two other Carolean topics, namely social class and the country-town dichotomy. I will make reference to both very briefly since they are intimately related to the reformist changes addressed above. The shift from the aristocracy to the middle class in the Restoration stage in the short span of two decades explains why Augustan drama served class politics. Class discourse in *The Innocent Mistress* is twofold: the play mirrors late-Restoration intermarriages between an aristocracy with much "pedigree" and no money, and a bourgeoisie with a lot of money and no social prestige. Both classes needed each other, and Pix's play is a testimony of this fact, as proved by the matrimonial triangle formed by Mr Flywife, a rich merchant, Lady Beauclair, his rich widow, and Sir Charles, a younger brother with no fortune. The dichotomy between country and town, particularly the arrival of a relative from the country to London – which raised social scorn and laughter in the 1670s– is still present in *The Innocent Mistress*. However, Pix's discourse is more nuanced (as it is with gender) in the treatment of stereotypes than her predecessors'. Instead of ludicrous country squires,

⁶ According to Sonia Villegas (2006), Pix is particularly critical with romantic tradition and how it affects women in *The Inhumane Cardinal*.

characters coming from the provinces combine social *savoir faire* and a valuable strict morality. This is the case of Bellinda or Beaumont, whose faultless attitude sets the moral standards of the play. Likewise, Lady Landsworth, the respectable widow of Pix's *The Beau Defeated*, visits London only to conclude that her virtuous nature cannot adjust to the city, longing for country life instead: "If I continue here one week longer I shall even exchange the town, where I expected such pleasure, for my old Yorkshire retirement" (I, i. 183-185). She is not scorned as a fool when she rejects London because the freedom in the city eventually favours men and represses women. However, as with gender roles, Pix's idealization of the country is not without irony, mainly because both Carolean and Augustan drama were produced in, from and for the city. Her plays may sympathize with the characters coming from the country; they even evoke the unaffected and authentic life there (Lady Landsworth and Elder Clerimont in *The Beau Defeated*, or Beaumont in *The Innocent Mistress*). However, her plays are invariably set in the city. The country does not replace the town. It simply gives a turn on the univocal discourse of Carolean theatre.

4. CONCLUSION

As a comedigrapher, Mary Pix inherited a long comic tradition that goes back to the classics. The aim of this essay has been to show, always with an eye on the past, how *The Innocent Mistress* mirrors her times' anxieties and fears in view of the overall change undergone by the English society in late seventeenth century. Whereas Carolean drama was celebratory, Pix's *imago veritatis* adds a corrective teleology. Once the Carolean sexual libertinism abated, the Augustan stage became more reactionary and morally repressive. However, *The Innocent Mistress* is rather ambiguous in this respect. It combines the conservative traits patriarchal Augustan theatre demanded from female writers with Pix's pro-female discourse that contests, albeit timidly, women's discrimination.

Pix's play is derivative because it draws on different traditions, mainly Carolean, classical, and romantic. However, for practical reasons, I have focused my attention on the former. The playwright adapts different thematic and formal materials from earlier traditions and authors, but only to create her own distinctive drama which both follows and uses Augustan reformism to fulfil her pro-female politics. Thus, she makes use of Carolean elements, particularly gender relations (such as the "happy couple" stereotype) as well as social relations (especially the country-town dialectic) to comply with new morality whereas she also demands a new role and territory for some of her female characters.

Pix's adaptation of old material is informed by her own literary interests. Obviously she was not immune to the socio-political *status quo* which she had to

assume if she wanted her plays to be staged. In *The Innocent Mistress*, the (Carolean) comic spirit –like the other literary traditions she absorbs– focuses on female characters who accept their lot, though not without irony and asking men to reform as well. Mrs Beauclair is praised for her exemplary behaviour, but also for her intelligence and resourcefulness. Lady Beauclair is more in line with the *uxor* type in Roman comedy. Yet, her reformation and punishment also implies that of her husband. Bellinda is not the classic young romantic heroine, praised for being resolute and breaking her father's rule. In sum, Pix endorses and revises benevolent patriarchy – the theoretical basis of forthcoming sentimentalism. Her play proposes new ideals of femininity together with classic types. The heroine is no longer just the libertine counterpart of Restoration rakes. She follows reformist rules, but also demands a more favourable role. Briefly stated, *The Innocent Mistress* addresses gender inequalities and timidly demands changes for women within the constraining context of moral reformation.

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