

Sex and Politics: Delarivier Manley's *New Atalantis*

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Intellectual women during the Restoration and the Augustan age frequently participated in politics indirectly—by writing political satires and allegories. One of the most famous and influential examples is the Tory propagandist Delarivier Manley (1663-1724).

Her writings reflect a self-consciousness about the diverse possibilities of propaganda and public self-representation. This paper focuses on her major and best-known work, *The New Atalantis* (1709) and reads Manley as an important transitional figure in the history of English political activity through print. Her political writings reflect a new model of political authority—not as divinely instituted and protected by subjects, but rather as open to contest via public representations, a result of the emerging public sphere.

In her lifetime, Manley had achieved widespread fame as a writer of political scandal fiction. *The New Atalantis*, for example, riveted the attention of some of her most acclaimed contemporaries—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Richard Steele, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope who alluded to it in *The Rape of the Lock* (Canto III, ll.165-70).

Nevertheless, Manley was also widely condemned. Many contemporary and later political opponents of Manley focus mainly on her sexual improprieties (she married her guardian only to discover it was a bigamous marriage, and later lived as mistress with her printer) and her critics disputed her literary credibility. Within six decades of Manley's death, Clara Reeve in *The Progress of Romance* (1785) complains that

[Manley] hoarded up all the public and private scandal within her reach, and poured it forth, in a work too well known in the last age [...] (I.119)

Over a century later, the renowned historian George Macaulay Trevelyan characterises Manley as 'a woman of no character' who 'regaled the public with brutal stories [...] about public men and their wives, especially Whigs and above all the Marlboroughs' (1934:III, 62; quoted in Richetti 1992: 123). So incensed is Marlborough's descendant Winston Churchill that he not only disparages Manley as a 'woman of disreputable character paid by the Tories to take part in the campaign of detraction which [...] was organized against Marlborough', but he also consigns her to the 'cesspool from which she should never have crawled' (1947:I.53, 130; quoted in Zelinsky 1999: 15).

While, clearly, Manley has not earned an elevated status in the historical annals of the high-minded, her strategic importance in the Tory propaganda of Queen Anne's reign should not be underestimated. For all his spiteful criticism, Trevelyan calls the *New Atalantis* 'the publication that did most harm to the Ministry' (III.62; quoted in Richetti 1992: 123). Manley's satire undeniably helped the Tories to power in the 1710 elections.

Manley began her career as a propagandist with the publication of *The Secret History of Queen Zarah and the Zarazians* in 1705. The book is a satiric attack on Sarah Jennings Churchill, the Duchess of Marlborough, and various other Whig politicians who dominated Queen Anne's cabinet. Tory political satire is also the main purpose of her next and most

popular work, *Secret Memoirs and Manners of Several Persons of Quality, of both Sexes, From the New Atalantis, an Island in the Mediterranean*. The publication of this scandal chronicle was timed to do maximum damage to the Whigs. It was published in May, just before the opening of the 1709 parliamentary session. The *New Atalantis* went through six editions in its first ten years, making it one of the best-selling novelistic fictions of the decade.

The Whig government tried unsuccessfully to suppress this book and even arranged to have its author, publisher and printer arrested and thrown into prison. The proceedings against Manley were ultimately halted because she refused to reveal her sources and proclaimed that she was divinely inspired.

The narrative of *New Atalantis* employs the framing device of a conversation between three female narrators, three allegorical personages who observe, report and reflect upon the patterns of life on the remote island named in the title. Astrea, the goddess of Justice, has come to earth to acquire the knowledge necessary to the proper moral education of the prince who is her charge. Astrea encounters a fellow goddess, her mother, called Virtue. As goddesses they are both possessed with the gift of invisibility, enabling them to spy on the political and amatory affairs of persons eminent in high life. They hover round assemblies, courts, and parks without making spectacles of themselves at the same time. This divine couple then runs into the more earthy character of Lady Intelligence, who serves as their main guide and principal narrator of affairs. As all three travel through the island they witness a succession of scenes displaying public and personal corruption, broken lives, ruined virgins, orgies, seductions, and rapes.

Manley makes her narrators into voyeurs, female “spies” who have the ability to move and speak freely without violating feminine propriety. As Ballaster observes, ‘the enforced invisibility of women in the world of politics is now presented through the figure of Astrea as a supernatural gift’ (1992: 115). Like Manley’s news-gathering spies, women could use their own marginality in political life to serve their interests and disseminate their secret intelligence to a public audience, silently transforming themselves into active participants in state affairs.

It is anonymous gossip that is the discursive equivalent of physical invisibility. And the power of Manley’s fictions stems precisely from their deployment of popular gossip and rumour: a paradoxically authoritative mode of communication—because it is impossible to trace. Rumour and gossip were the news of the politically disenfranchised. She showed how they could also be tools.

Manley was writing propaganda, and the power of propaganda, like the power of gossip, cannot be measured in terms of its quantifiable “truth”. In *Queen Zarah*, Manley demonstrated this insight for her readers by depicting her protagonist successfully deploying false rumours to accomplish her political aims. These could work as well as true ones to advance or undermine political agendas or careers. And Lady Intelligence in *New Atalantis* frankly admits that factual knowledge of court affairs is a luxury seldom available to her. Accordingly, she must sometimes perform her job without it:

I take Truth with me when I can get her. Sometimes, indeed, she’s so hard to recover that Fame grows impatient and will not suffer me to wait for her slow approach [...] (162)

Manley knew that people thirst for news of any kind and rumours could be political currency—whether true or false, new and incredible or old. So, for example, Manley attempted to defend herself during her examination for libel by claiming that the *New Atalantis* was mere gossip: nothing but ‘old Stories’ (Manley 1999: 108). And of course she was not lying. Because Manley did reproduce just that—‘old stories’. Moreover, she also

thematized the fact that she was retelling stories that everybody already knew. So, for example, in the *New Atalantis*, Lady Intelligence's divine audience can foretell the outcome of her story of John Churchill's role in the Revolution. Like Manley's own readers, they experience this story with a suspenseful foreboding, and perhaps also a secret pleasure at being in the know:

Methinks I shudder with the dread or apprehension of the Count's Ingratitude!
How do I foresee that he deserved not that distinction [bestowed upon him by
the King]? Put me out of pain; has he not been ungrateful to the royal bounty?
(16)

Astrea and Virtue listen to Intelligence's account not to learn a *new* story, but rather to rehear a story that they already know. In this way, Manley combined news and novelty with repetition and familiarity, and so supplied different kinds of pleasure to her audience at once.

Moreover, it can be said that Manley actually works by patterns of insistent repetition. Time and time again, chaste and innocent maidens are left by reckless seducers to suffer cruel hardships of shame, misery and ruin. Manley turns the story of female exploitation into a political parable that would have been easily apprehended by her audience: Just as women's sexuality is appropriated by men for their own use and pleasure, so contemporary politicians appropriate the rights and privileges of the public. Just as Manley's heroines are duped by a rhetoric that claims to represent the ideals of virtue, but which in fact leads them into sexual misdemeanour and leaves them abandoned and disgraced if not dead, so the English people and their suffering monarch, Queen Anne, are duped by those politicians who claim to be acting on their behalf and in their interest but who in fact deprive them of political power and economic freedom.

Thus, amatory plots and tropes are presented as a means towards and cover for the satirical representation of contemporary party politics from a Tory perspective. In Manley's fiction, then, there is a complex interplay between discourses that are ostensibly radically disjunct—the private/personal intrigue substitutes for the public/political intrigue; sexual corruption and perversity is employed as a metaphor for political corruption. Readers are required to read by a process of constant movement between sexual and party political meaning. Thus the *New Atalantis* sexualises politics and politicises sexuality.

Manley understands that the cards are stacked against women in the sexual game and that they are therefore at an immense disadvantage in the social one. But individual women, like Queen Zarah, can manipulate others and scheme their way to the top as well as men. The unremitting pursuit of self-interest is a female as well as a male attribute. To survive in the harsh society of the *New Atalantis* everyone must wear a mask. The *New Atalantis* is a dystopia beside Bacon's utopian *New Atlantis*, replacing his idea of disinterestedness with a reality of self-interest and cupidity. Its world, like that of all scandal novels, is quite openly sordid and debased, its inhabitants opportunistic and self-aggrandising. Yet it is also energetic and vigorous. Luxury is appealing and attractive. There is much describing of elaborate clothes, coaches and expensive interiors, much detail of gold, lace and costly embroidery. Rich food and drink accompany the intimate talk on nights that are always oppressively hot, and they augment the sense of intricate social corruption. Sexuality is overwhelming, but the sheer number and variety of the sexual scenes Manley describes is amazing. Although in her pages women necessarily suffer for sexual activity far beyond men, it is significant that on the whole it is a social suffering and the sexual fall does not bear the immense religious and moral weight it will achieve in later sentimental literature.

Importantly, the woman is often actually the subject of desire, rather than simply the pretty object of male love or lust. One such example of Manley's amorous description is the following scene from Part I of the *New Atalantis*:

The Duchess softly entered the little chamber of repose. The weather violently hot, the umbrelloes [*sic*] were let down from behind the windows, the sashes open, and the jessimine [*sic*], that covered 'em, blew in with a gentle fragrancy. Tuberoses set in pretty gilt and china pots, were placed advantageously upon stands; the curtains of the bed drawn back to the canopy, made of yellow velvet, embroidered with white bugles, the panels of the chamber looking-glass. Upon the bed were strewed, with a lavish profuseness, plenty of orange and lemon flowers. And to complete the scene, the young Germanicus in a dress and posture not very decent to describe. It was he that was newly risen from the bath, and in a loose gown of carnation taffety [*sic*], stained with Indian figures. His beautiful long flowing hair [...] tied back with a ribbon of the same colour; he had thrown himself upon the bed, pretending to sleep, with nothing on but his shirt and nightgown, which he had so indecently disposed, that slumbering as he appeared, his whole person stood confessed to the eyes of the amorous Duchess; his limbs were exactly formed, his skin shinningly white, and the pleasure the lady's graceful entrance gave him, diffused joy and desire throughout all his form. His lovely eyes seemed to be closed, his face turned on one side (to favour the deceit) was obscured by the lace depending from the pillows on which he rested. The Duchess, [...] giving her eyes time to wander over beauties so inviting, [...] gently threw her self on the bed, close to the desiring youth. (20-21)

What is important here is the deliberate role-reversal in the inviting posture of the seductive man. The gaze is female and it is the young man who has carefully arranged himself to be seduced. It is a kind of dream of equal sexuality which is made possible through Manley's concentration not on the sexual act itself, but on its prelude and setting. As mentioned before, in her stories stress is on the stimulus to copulation. There are details of heat, fragrant smells, luxurious accessories. Atmospheric details emphasise the inevitability and also the naturalness of sexual expression for male and female alike, while the social elements, the fashion and luxury, are associated with women as well as men.

Yet, it is only a dream. There is, ultimately, the sexual act to perform, an act which is represented as absolutely unequal in its physical and social repercussions. Despite her active, lusty, possessive gaze, when the sexual act occurs the Duchess becomes simply the object instead of the subject, and she dwindles from active desiring agent into a commodity: 'he got the possession of her person' (22). In time her exchange value deteriorates and she sinks from acting as lover of a king to being the mistress of servants.

Power relations are then, it seems, the most prominent subject of investigation in Manley's works. And not only as explicit treatments of sexual relations between genders, but her work is suffused with an awareness of how power is actually created through various forms of representation—be it the possibilities of female political agency through public representations; visual self-(re)presentation for the lusty gaze of the onlooker; or, the manipulative power of words to control and create meanings, to build or destroy reputations and careers, by means of truth or false gossip and rumour.

Manley recognised the importance of carefully managed public representations to politicians' careers. It is significant that Lady Intelligence, who functions as a fictional self-portrait and projection of the author, serves neither Justice, Virtue, nor even Queen Anne, but

rather 'the omnipotent Princess Fame' (13). The new ruler of British society, Manley suggests, was neither the monarch nor parliament but Public Opinion. Manley was writing at a time when opportunities for manipulation of public opinion through print were first being recognised and exploited. In the *New Atalantis*, Astrea must agree with Intelligence when she says that even monarchs are subject to the seductions of representation. But while acknowledging the power of representations, Astrea also defines herself as morally superior to those who deal in them, whereas Intelligence makes public representations her business. Thus, at one level, Manley's persona Intelligence believes in her job as exposé of 'pretenders of Vertue' and takes her duties most seriously. At another level, however, she exemplifies Manley's own ambivalence towards her propagandistic endeavours and is part of her characteristic satire on her own methods. For even as Manley represented herself as Intelligence, she also distanced herself from herself by making her persona a comic figure. Astrea and Virtue mock Intelligence throughout the *New Atalantis*, and Intelligence even parodies herself. She knows that her news is unofficial, that different people have different ideas of what is "news", and she accepts the fact that her divine companions are sometimes scornful of the low "gossip" she finds worth reporting. Manley is at once drawing on and rejecting long-standing feminised traditions of rumour and gossip. But she also creates a space for her own politically encoded writings as something superior to mere "talk". Thus, in the preface to the second volume of the *New Atalantis* she consciously enters the masculine realm of satire and establishes her place within it when she defends her writing against attacks 'by the precedent of our great forefathers of satire, who not only flew against the general reigning vices but pointed at individual persons, as may be seen in Ennius, Varro, Lucian, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, etc.' (132). Manley here sets out grandly to turn her image from a female scandal-monger into a satirist. Attacking individual vice in satire, she claims, signifies not vicious gossip but a 'lofty, steadfast soul' (132).

We can say that Manley's penchant for self-satire was to some extent an Augustan trait, shared by contemporaries such as Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. It was also a function of her insight into and ambivalence towards the nature and implications of the new propaganda press. The changing nature of political authority as increasingly a function of representation and the availability of print as a mass medium of manipulation were a combination she simultaneously exploited and warned her readers against. Although it is not probable that Manley's fame will ever again reach its *New Atalantis* peak, she, I think, rightly deserves to be a noted literary and cultural presence, not only as the author of scandal chronicles and amatory fiction, but mainly as an innovator in the area of political satire, and a journalist with keen foresight into the future of party political writing.

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