

This research project demonstrates the political significance of King Charles II's mistresses and the British public's perception of them through a case study of the stage actress Eleanor "Nell" Gwynn (1650-1687). She was the king's mistress for several years, beginning in 1669, and bore him two sons. She is a popular figure in histories of Stuart England because of her sensationalized "rags to riches" story and because she served as symbol for the libertinism that developed in the 1660s as a response to Oliver Cromwell's puritanical Protectorate of the mid-1600s. Representations of Gwynn do not usually consider her to be an important political agent, but the perception that the body politic had of her had major political implications. Public criticisms of her and other courtesans of the time were not only attacking the king and the aristocracy, but that they reflected the fears that many men held about sexually liberated women wielding power and destroying that status quo that favored men.

The context of both the historical study of early modern women, as well as the political climate specific to Stuart England, was the essential foundation for this project. This included the ways that men have historically viewed women's sexuality, the culture of the Stuart court, and how propaganda can be used as a historical source. Most of the relevant primary source documents are housed at The British Library. These included poems and pamphlets that satirized the lifestyle of the Stuart court in highly sexual and provocative ways. For example, there were poems that made assumptions about the carnal relations between Nell Gwynn and King Charles. There were also popular pamphlets that ridiculed lower-class female sex workers for being greedy, dishonest, and repulsive. The poems were often circulated amongst the aristocracy at court, while the pamphlets would have distributed on the street and in public coffeehouses. Comparing these documents was important to demonstrate the many similarities in the ways that these women were satirized, and showed how the (presumed) male, anonymous authors of these documents feared that women who had control over their own sexuality might also seize political control.

This work has lived up to its original intention—to demonstrate that courtesans and prostitutes have a political significance that should not be ignored or disregarded because they are sex workers. Sex is often intertwined with politics, and misogynistic attacks on sex workers are frequently out of fear that empowered women will upset the status quo. Of course, sex workers are often quite disadvantaged and not necessarily empowered. Nell Gwynn, for instance, was born into poverty and could not even write her own name. Yet her every move was speculated about and satirized by leading figures in the Stuart court and powerful men feared that she would gain too much power through her relationship with the king and because she did not fulfill a traditional female role. Today, women who have been intimate with powerful men are still seen as interested in using that position to obtain power and status for themselves and they are often publicly attacked for that.

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