

**Alexander Oldys's Comic Displacement of  
Romance in *The Fair Extravagant*  
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**Abstract**

In Alexander Oldys's *The Fair Extravagant* (1682), the male protagonist is anxious about his authority as a husband due to the heroine's superior social rank and wealth, her strong personality, and her free agency. This paper shows how this is presented in a kind of novel of trial that intends to test the protagonist's manly virtues through a comic displacement of chivalric romance. It draws on Bakhtin's concept of *Prüfungsroman* and his idea that the novel is a markedly dialogic genre, often permeated with irony and parody. This analysis also assumes that manhood is a social and cultural construction which is materialised in a status that men must achieve under the constant scrutiny and assessment of others.

Alexander Oldys's *The Fair Extravagant, or, The Humorous Bride* is a largely unknown novel that has not been reprinted since its first edition in 1682, and that has only been briefly analysed by one critic, Charles Mish, in his 1969 extensive article on "English Short Fiction in the Seventeenth Century." For Mish, this text is the best illustration of the "novel of manners in the period" (1969: 298), which is like "a stage comedy in narrative form" (299), with lively action and style, genuine dialogues and familiar settings. This is certainly the impression that one gets when reading this novel for the first time. Yet the dialogic nature of this prose fiction is much more complex than that, because the text is not only in constant communication with contemporary comedy but also with romance and epic. In a previous paper I analysed how the hero was anxious about his authority as a husband due to the heroine's superior social rank and wealth, her strong personality, and her free

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

agency.<sup>1</sup> Here I aim to show how this is presented in a kind of mock-heroic *Prüfungsroman* –or novel of trial– that intends to test the protagonist’s manly virtues through a comic displacement of chivalric romance.

I borrow the term *Prüfungsroman* from Bakhtin, who used it to qualify the Baroque novel as a kind of prose fiction based on the testing of the protagonists’ qualities (1981: 388). The trial is an organising principle which that narrative genre shares with Greek and chivalric romances (107). And Bakhtinian is also the idea underlying this paper that the novel is a markedly dialogic genre, often permeated with irony and parody (7). I will also work under the assumption that manhood is a social and cultural construction which is materialised in a status that men must achieve under the constant scrutiny and assessment of others (*cf* Clark, 2003: 12). And that in early modern England, the two key manly features were expected to be reason and strength, both requiring men to show self-control over their own passions and emotions, courage, and physical power (*cf* Foyster, 1999: 29 and *passim*). However, here I will place more emphasis on the genre than on the gender issue.

The female protagonist of the title and subtitle is called Ariadne. She could be the heroine of a romance because she is the young, virtuous, and beautiful daughter of an English baronet. However, the ironic, intrusive narrator tells us that she is too witty and humorous, and that she lives near St. James’s park. The whole story takes place in specific and well-known locations in Restoration London or nearby, therefore familiar to contemporary readers and very much unlike the abstract or distant settings of romance. Ariadne’s lodgings are meaningfully decorated with portraits of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza together with those of Amadis, Oroondates, and Caesario (these three being heroes of romance) and full of books of various kinds: “here lay a Play, there a Sermon; here an Academy, there a Prayer-Book; here a Romance, and there a Bible” (1682: 4 [B2v]). An array that may remind us of Belinda’s “Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux” at the end of Canto I in Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* (1712, 2004: 117), that so masterly represent the frivolity of that coquette. In the case of Ariadne, all that medley of pictures and books

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<sup>1</sup> “Anxious Masculinity in Alexander Oldys’s novel *The Fair Extravagant* (1682),” paper presented at the 18<sup>th</sup> SEDERI Conference, Cádiz (Spain), 7-9 March 2007, unpublished.

is supposed to reflect her humorous nature. But then the narrator says something that is interesting for the purpose of this paper: when the protagonist was weary of singing and dancing, she often read, “especially Romances, for she was a great lover of Knight Errantry, and was a little that way addicted, as I fear you’ll find” (1682: 4 [B2v]).

Ariadne does not become a female knight in an *unknightly* world like Cervantes’s hero, nor does she attempt to interpret her whole world in terms of French heroic romances like Arabella, the protagonist of Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752). However, we may say that, like the latter, Ariadne tries in a certain way to extend the period of courtship by making the hero undergo a series of tests before submitting herself as a wife. That may certainly be an idea she has got from her reading of romances, where heroines usually enjoy that prerogative. The problem in this novel comes from the fact that, in a clear reversal of roles, it is she who chooses, seduces, and besides she marries the hero before putting him into those trials. Moreover, the tests sometimes become too capricious, cruel, and even dangerous, and everything is done without the hero knowing what is going on, which plunges him into a constant state of perplexity and anxiety.

As she dislikes all her suitors, Ariadne resolves to go out and search for a prospective husband, in the company of her cousin Miranda, and both cross-dressed. She finds what she wants at the Duke’s Theatre: a 30-year-old man called Polydor –a young son from a good family, honest, constant, and with more education than money. After the play, in Locket’s Tavern, she acts as a proxy wooer for herself and arranges a meeting at the park the following morning. All these actions, as well as the dialogues between the characters are presented in a way that reminds us more of Restoration comedies than of chivalric or heroic romances: witty conversations in a playhouse and a tavern about contemporary life and about courtship. Yet, interestingly enough, in the dialogue at Locket’s, Polydor uses chivalric discourse to describe his commitment to Ariadne: “And now this very minute am I playing the Knight Errant to serve this Lady” (21 [B10r]). So it seems that Polydor is a reader of romances too and that he identifies himself with chivalric heroes.

The intermittent juxtaposition of romance and contemporary comedy continues in the next meeting. When the young ladies go to the park, they wear their own clothes, but have masks on. This is no

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

obstacle however, for Polydor to fall in love with Ariadne at first sight, he has made up his mind/fancy to like her. The episode is narrated in a mock-romantic manner:

[The woman he thought was Ariadne] presented him a most Beautiful, Soft, White Hand; without saying a word to him. He took it, and seating one Knee to the Ground, kiss'd it most religiously. I believe you may see the print of his Lips there yet, if she has not us'd some art to get it out. Well –he look'd on it, and kiss'd it, and kiss'd it, and look'd on it again: Then gaz'd on her two Delicate, Charming, Black Eyes through the peep holes of her Mask. And fancy'd to himself a Face, if not so Beautiful altogether as *Ariadnes* indeed was; yet such as the most excellent Painter cou'd not have flatter'd if he shou'd endeavour it. (40-1 [C8v-C9r])

After this typical visual attraction –no matter how hindered by the mask– Polydor starts using the discourse of courtly love, presenting himself as her serf, and worshipping her as a divinity:

I have seen, Madam [...] enough to compleat your Victory. Dispose, Madam (pursu'd he all over in a transport of Love!) Dispose how you please of your Slave. I was an Infidel last Night, 'tis true, but now I will believe, nay I do believe you are the greatest Blessing Heav'n cou'd bestow on me in this World. (42 [C9v])

Finally, as they approach the church to get married, Polydor tells her: “I am resolv'd to enter the Enchanted Castle with thee, and try the force of its Charms” (44 [C10v]). Once in the temple, the minister compels Ariadne to take her mask off. At the sight of her beauty, Polydor “stood like a Statue, and was all over Extasy'd with the Apprehension of his future Happiness” (47 [C12r]).

However, this romantic ecstasy does not last long. The bathos of this novel takes us back to Locket's where they eat, drink, and kiss.

## JORGE FIGUEROA DORREGO

Polydor looks forward to consummation but Ariadne delays it by speaking about food, which soon turns into a witty dialogue full of sexual innuendoes. She suddenly stops his insistent kissing and gives him a diamond ring as a present and a purse full of gold for him to keep while she leaves for a while. But she never comes back, which makes Polydor start railing against women and fall into remorse, self-pity, and heavy-drinking. We later learn that she has left him on the wedding day because she wants to try his patience and constancy, because she is aware that she has married him too soon to know him well. She will test him for a week before she gives herself and her fortune to him forever. The rest of the story is precisely about the trials that Polydor must face.

This links the plot to epic and romance. As we know, the epic hero must overcome a series of trials before he may achieve his goal (*cf.* Campbell, 1972). In ancient romances too, the protagonists have to endure a number of ordeals (*cf.* Archibald, 2004) in order to put their chastity and fidelity to the test, a compositional idea that was later developed in chivalric romances and “Baroque novels” (Bakhtin, 1981: 106-7, 387-92). And quite recently, Barbara Fuchs has proposed to consider romance as a literary strategy which is characterised by idealisation, the marvellous, obscured identity, and by narrative delay that postpones a quest, in which love can function either as an impediment or as the very aim (2004: 9, 36). In *The Fair Extravagant*, the expected happy ending of marriage is achieved too soon, and so Oldys makes her “humorous” heroine prolong the narrative by making the hero travel on the road of trials that would lead him not to marriage, as happens in many romances, but to consummation. This way she prolongs her independence and confirms her choice of husband before submitting herself as a wife.

The trials that Polydor must face echo those found in epic and romance. The first one he confronts is sexual temptation from another woman. Ariadne asks her cousin Dorothea to impersonate her, make Polydor believe he has married another person, and pretend that she loves him and is willing to marry him. So, like Odysseus, who must stand up to female perils such as the sirens; or like Sir Gawain, who must resist the temptations of Lady Bercilak and remain chaste, Polydor must prove his constancy by rejecting Dorothea’s apparent love and her two marriage proposals, in spite of the miseries he is

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

suffering due to Ariadne's tormenting wiles.<sup>2</sup> Curiously enough, Polydor calls Ariadne "Syren" in one of his frequent verbal attacks against her, in which words such as "Jilt," "Whore," and "Devil" abound. That is because he thinks Ariadne is an impostor who has cheated him into marriage, and because he joins the contemporary misogynistic discourse which intends to debase women by relating them to Satan and prostitution, i.e. to deceit and lechery.

Yet the test of sexual temptation is mild compared to the next two trials that Polydor must face. Wishing to try his courage too, Ariadne urges Marwoud –her main suitor and a friend of Polydor's– to challenge him to a duel. Again, this episode is told with an eye on epic and romance. Before the duel and following the custom, Polydor "threw himself on his Knees, and recommended the Care of his Soul and Body to Heaven" (109 [F7r]). He meets Marwoud "with all the Gallantry and Resolution of a Generous Enemy" (110 [F7v]), and offers to solve the problem in a different way. But, Marwoud insists on fighting and, in spite of his fury, is defeated by Polydor. None dies but both are wounded yet manage to recover soon. Ariadne is glad to know the happy results of this daring test, which certainly proves her husband's courage and strength but which could bring about his death.

For the next trial she uses Marwoud again. She asks him to get someone to sue Polydor for a debt of 10,000 pounds supposedly contracted by his wife before marriage. As a consequence, the protagonist is sent to jail. Once more, the narrator plays with romance reminiscences in an ironic tone:

[Polydor entered] his Enchanted Castle, with a Resolution worthy an Hero who makes such desperate Adventures! He was attended only by four of the Giants Warders. The other two stayd with *Marwoud* till they had squeezed three Guineys out of him. [...]

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<sup>2</sup> In the discussion time after the oral presentation of this paper at the AEDEAN conference, Dr Ana Sáez mentioned the Wife of Bath's tale as another example of a romance hero who is tested by women, and Dr Laura Lojo pointed out that Joseph Andrews also has to resist the sexual advances of women, such as Lady Booby and Betty the chambermaid, and thus proves his fidelity towards Fanny. I really appreciate these contributions to my arguments.

All the rest of the poor Enchanted Souls look'd upon him, as the wretched Ghosts in Hell did on *Hercules* and *Theseus* whom they were in hopes came to deliver'em; and truly if Polydor did not altogether enlarge their Bodies, yet he did much encrease their Commons, during his stay there. (129-30 [G5r-v])

Polydor's stay in prison represents his own descent to hell, the ultimate ordeal which will show his mettle. There he proves his charity towards his fellow prisoners, which gains their gratitude and the keepers' admiration. He also finds time for meditation. Sometimes he falls into self-pity, wondering about how improper Ariadne's name is, because her namesake in Greek mythology helped Theseus go out of the labyrinth, whereas his "False Ariadne" has led him into a maze. Yet Polydor endures his imprisonment so stoically that he even writes a poem entitled: "An Attempt, in *Pindarique*, on the Blessings of Adversity," in which he argues that brave men are not moved by misfortune and that Heaven always rewards the distressed, so he asks Heaven to teach him to withstand his miseries. This poem later falls into the hands of Ariadne, who writes another one in mocking imitation laughing at this gullibility. And this prison is also where Polydor resists Dorothea's second temptation. His declaration that he expected the greatest happiness with Ariadne "were she yet but Virtuous" (162 [H9v]), together with the good qualities that he has proved in the trials, convince Ariadne that she must give up her "cruel Experiments" and "undeceive [her] Enchanted Squire" (167 [H12r]). This leads to a happy ending typical of romantic comedies: with reconciliation, two more weddings, and merry festivity.

When Polydor is in jail, he is visited by his fun-loving, rakish friends, and he starts relating his adventure saying "Tis pure Knight Errantry" (138 [G9v]). As we have seen, this is a recurrent idea throughout the novel. Ariadne is fond of chivalric romances and feels free to put her lover to the test, and Polydor uses the discourse of the courtly lover, enters imaginary enchanted castles, and even descends to hell like Hercules and Theseus. The dialogisation with epic and romance is clear and explicit in this text, and produces an ironic contrast with other elements of characterisation, subject matter, action, speech, and setting that make the story dialogise also with seventeenth-

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

century comedy and *realism*. This seeming incongruity generates a comic displacement of romance that proves successful to narrate a story of anxious masculinity, in which the hero must test his masculine virtues in a series of trials contrived by a “humorous bride” whose beauty, wealth, and agency bring about hopes first, but soon fears and misogynistic feelings.

I think that Oldys’s novels, as well as other ignored pieces of Restoration prose fiction, provide interesting material for research not only about genre and gender, but also about other issues of contemporary society and culture. They are important pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of English prose fiction before Defoe, which is far from being finished, because it does not really show a plain landscape with a few idealised knights and shepherds, as we have been told, but a large motley panorama where there are also rogues, rakes, jilts, younger brothers, cuckolds, and other characters interacting in London streets, coffee-houses, parks, prisons, and so on. There is a busy time ahead.

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