



Restoration Volume 46.2-47.1

Performativity and Spectacle in the Oriental Novel: The Harem as Dramatic Space in Sébastien Brémond's *The Happy Slave*¹

Sonia Villegas-López
University of Huelva

Abstract

Some fourteen novels of French origin, set in oriental locations, were published in England with great success in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. Many of them chose the exotic territories of Tunis, Morocco or Turkey to situate love intrigues that involved people of high rank. In these idealised spaces, love reigns supreme, and the harem becomes the focus of attention, a hybrid place where the public and the domestic collide. In Sébastien Brémond's oriental tale *The Happy Slave*, the harem is often a source of spectacle, a dynamic space full of performative potential for both sexes, in which bashaws (*bassas*) exert their absolute authority, and sultanas, though initially objects of male desire, evade their masters' surveillance, and become agents of their own acts of seduction. In Brémond's novel the harem is portrayed in rich detail, and most probably as the result of his own observations, not merely as a prison and a place of seclusion for women, but most significantly as a space of creativity, performance, and transformation. I argue that in this text Brémond's purpose was twofold: on the one hand, he relied on the function of stories as sources of pleasurable entertainment, whilst on the other, he explored the transnational and performative potential of the form of the oriental tale, and by so doing,

he shed light on the exchanges between dramatic action and the new realism that prose fiction was adopting in the early days of the novel.

The Influence of the French Oriental Novel in the Restoration

Restoration prose fiction cannot be fully understood unless analysed in connection with its European sources, and from a transnational and trans-European perspective, as critics of the early novel like Isabelle Moreau and Srinivas Aravamudan have recently argued.² A growing interest in stories about the east—the oriental tale being a set form in the emerging prose fiction of the period—was stimulated after the publication of two influential texts: Paul Rycourt's *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1668), and Giovanni Paolo Marana's *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy* (1687), a best-seller at the time which is representative of the transnational nature of this type of fiction.³ Alongside this, the popularity of the oriental novel in England was prompted by French models, and between 1674 and 1696, the form expanded in the bustling market thanks to the translations. Among the most prominent were stories by Sébastien Brémond, Jean de Préchac, Mlle de La Roche Guilhaem, the sieur des Joanots du Vignau, and Eustache Le Noble. This trend of translation from French and the interest in fiction of oriental setting had begun some years earlier, though, with the publication in England of French heroic romances, especially those by Madeleine de Scudéry, whose *Ibrahim; or, The Illustrious Bassa*, first published in 1641, was translated into English in 1652, with a further edition in 1674. Expensive folio editions of romances, primarily meant for an elite audience of literate readers, were later published in cheaper duodecimo format, attracting a larger audience in search of informative entertainment.⁴

The role of oriental stories in the development of prose fiction in the long eighteenth century has been critically assessed with any thoroughness only recently. One of the few exceptions is Martha Pike Conant's *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century*. In her preface Conant addressed the foreign nature of the novel, and especially its French influence, providing a very vivid picture of the early novel as a whole;⁵ indeed, she situated the beginning of this oriental influence in the context of the first translations of Marana's work. In her view, this interest in the east crystallised, however, with French romances and heroic plays in the seventeenth century and with the early eighteenth-century translations of *The Arabian Nights*.⁶ Much more recently, Ros Ballaster has also explored in *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England 1662-1785* the fictional exchanges between east and west. Whilst considering many other texts and contexts, Ballaster focused on tales about the Turkish seraglio, a recurrent space in oriental fiction which she strikingly read as "a metaphor" for the relation between narrative space and time, that the text of the Arabian Nights (space) / 1001 Nights (time) itself narrates.⁷ Ballaster was also interested in the ways in which readers are prompted to reconstruct this space in their minds, a place of the imagination, of exoticism, that they can never know first-hand other than through these fictional exploits. By travelling east, at least metaphorically, readers are invited to "occupy" spaces that had been previously alien or unknown to the European imagination, and also to embody "other bodies and cultures."⁸ They become willing spectators of what is performed in front of their eyes, the harem or seraglio displaying a great dramatic potential.

As Ballaster demonstrated, the orient was thereby turned into a narrative, "a species of fiction itself: a hybrid and manufactured product of imaginative investments on the part of the West."⁹ I want to claim that the orient is also associated with a stage, in which women often "perform" their exotic femininity to lure their eastern masters or to seduce western men and get their freedom.¹⁰

In *Enlightenment Orientalism*, Aravamudan also discussed similar images associated with these early fictions of the east. He was particularly interested in the influence of French oriental narratives in English letters, a productive context that he represented as one of "traffic [...] through literary translation."¹¹ He claimed that the popularity of French fictions of the east spoke to the composite, non-monolithic nature of the English novel in its origins, the result of a combination and amalgamation of sources—not only French, but also Italian, Spanish and eastern ones—and literary genres and forms. In his view, oriental tales in particular contrast with the other types of domestic novel also produced in the late seventeenth century, especially as the former address national and transnational concerns, whereas the latter reproduce national culture. Furthermore, inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" and by his description of the dialogical nature of the novel,¹² Aravamudan argued that the process of "novelization," and other features associated with the genre like "unfinalizability" are in themselves acts of performance.

A similar approach was adopted by Bernadette Andrea in *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature*, when she emphasized the transnational nature of English orientalisating stories. Choosing not only examples of prose fiction, but also the oriental plays of female writers like Mary Pix and Delarivier Manley, Andrea argued that the seraglio was variously depicted in their texts either as a space of eastern sexual oppression or as a peculiar locus of female empowerment.¹³ As fantasies of the east with clear western overtones became common in the English literary market of the late seventeenth century, these narratives of the seraglio often accommodated critiques of the political and moral corruption of eastern, preferably Turkish, kings, *deys* and bashaws, who at times and by extension stood for European states in disguise. Brémond's oriental fictions *Hattige; or, The Amours of the King of Tamaran* (1680) and *Homais, Queen of Tunis* (1681) were cases in point.¹⁴ Other texts like *The Happy Slave* (1677), selected for discussion here, chose the harem as a *tableau vivant* of the errors of absolutist courts, where queens, sultaneses and favourites made the most of their chances and exploited their limited freedom to counteract patriarchal authority. As Andrea has remarked, sometimes in these texts the plight of oriental women, represented as virtual slaves, was set against the more favourable situation of western ones, but on other occasions, their subjection was described in very similar terms, to some extent adopting a counterorientalist stance.¹⁵ In the light of Andrea's focus on women's roles in the oriental fiction and drama of the period, but also in consonance with Ballaster and Aravamudan's readings of oriental fiction as emblematic of the transnational nature of the early novel, I would like to analyse the specific connections between drama and oriental novels like *The Happy Slave*, which in my view represents not only the strong ties between drama and fiction in the period, but also the complex gender and power relations at work that are presented in front of the readers' eyes in the

performative space of the seraglio. I would like to argue that in this text non-eastern male characters are the mediators between oriental excess and western frugality, and that they do this by frequently becoming the unwilling spectators of a drama of luxury and violence, often falling into a complicit scopophilic behaviour. In Brémond's novella, the subjection of Muslim and Christian women is described in very similar terms, though, the former living in the golden cage of the seraglio, and the latter becoming the object of patriarchal exchanges through marriage. It is in the privileged space of fiction that their tragic life stories can be transformed and, as mentioned above, this is done by resorting to dramatic devices and conventions.

Travelling between Genres: Experimental Fiction in the Late Seventeenth Century

In the early stages of novel writing in England, and mainly due to the impact of French literature and national dramatic models, the cross-fertilization of the genres of drama and fictional prose was a fact.¹⁶ Not only did English prose fiction benefit from experiments in dramatic theory, but French exemplars—both in drama and the novel—were at the heart of many English Restoration plays. Also, as Kristiaan Aerecke has pointed out, one of the models followed by playwrights in England was Aubignac's *Practique du Theatre* (1657), whose theory about *vraisemblance* and *bienséance* could be easily applied to the experiments not only in domestic drama but also in the new realism the novel was gradually imposing. The 1684 English translation reads:

In a Word, all that in a Play either is consider'd as a part, or has a necessary dependence upon the Story, ought to be of the truth of the Action; and 'tis by this Rule that one ought to Examine the probability of all that's done in the Play; as the fitness and decency of the Expressions, the connexion of the Intrigue, the patness of the Events, &c. And one naturally approves of all that ought to have been don according to the truth, though it be a suppos'd Story, and one condemns all that one thinks contrary to truth, or not becoming the actions of life.¹⁷

The emphasis on truth speaks both about the workings of drama, and certainly about the purposes of fiction, as popular novels of the period make clear in their insistence in reproducing fact.¹⁸ As hinted above, elements of realistic representation worked in favour of this blending of dramatic and novelistic conventions in the fiction of the period.

There were changes in artistic imitation, too, taking place during the Restoration which explain the mutual influence between drama and the novel. Rose Zimbaro has contended that the novel emulated drama in the early decades of the period, maintaining the centrality of experience and verisimilitude in this form, and that later drama came to imitate the inner world and psychological conflicts that prose fiction was already experimenting with.¹⁹ More recently, Ballaster has also claimed that novel and theatre animated each other in the period, though for playwrights, perhaps with the exception of Aphra Behn, printed fiction never became a profession.²⁰ It is no surprise, therefore, but highly unusual, to find such a skilled mingling of dramatic and novelistic elements in short

novels like *The Fair Jilt* (1688) and *The History of the Nun* (1689). To give just one example, Miranda's creation of a favourable *mise-en-scène* in the early pages of *The Fair Jilt*, in which she adopts the role of a victim accosted by a supposedly lecherous Father Francisco, when the real situation is precisely the opposite, matches her later performance of the honourable lady when Prince Tarquin is found guilty of her sister's attempted murder and his crime is publicly exposed at the scaffold, two episodes rich in detail.²¹

Though Behn's approach to fiction represents the dramatist's turn to the novel later in her career, the opposite trend was certainly more common among writers like Catharine Trotter, Mary Pix and William Congreve. In fact, it is in Congreve's preface to his only novella, *Incognita; or, Love and Duty Reconcil'd* (1692), that we find the first theory about the merging of dramatic and novelistic conventions. In his often-quoted paratext, Congreve attested to the inclusion of dramatic techniques and conventions in his narrative as follows: "Since all Traditions must indisputably give place to the Drama, and since there is no possibility of giving that life to the Writing or Repetition of a Story which it has in the Action, I resolv'd in another beauty to imitate Dramatic Writing, namely, in the Design, Contexture and Result of the Plot."²² Given the dramatic nature of his text, he claimed that he had been careful to adjust action ("Contrivance"), time and place in the story to the three dramatic unities. Indeed, the story of *Incognita* is full of action, and the most interesting parts of the tale unfold at a ball, where the protagonist plays the role of an altogether different woman hidden behind a mask and in front of her audience.²³ The pace of the narrative is always brisk and an inventive and dynamic language matches the scenes. A great deal of what happens is not merely for the sake of other characters, but for the prospective and intended reader, whose role resembles that of witness or spectator, especially because the novel is constructed around a number of set scenes that only the reader is able to make full sense of.²⁴ It might be assumed that Restoration audiences were also aware of the fact that the new and fashionable "little Histories,"²⁵ in contrast to heroic romances, were concerned with action, as they became used to "seeing" stories being dramatized on a stage. Authors seemed to share a similar experience and most probably saw themselves, as Edwin P. Grobe phrased it, as "itinerant travellers between genres," moving between performance and printed fiction.²⁶ In the pages that follow, I would like to argue that the performative nature of Brémond's oriental novel, *The Happy Slave*, can be also explained in the light of his embrace of a new realism, a new representation of truth, which in its reproduction of detail, its interest in characterization and its appeal to the senses is full of dramatic potential. Though not a playwright himself, Brémond managed, nonetheless, to incorporate dramatic realism in his *novelles*. Such incorporation appears in practice in many of his stories that rely on a sense of performance and spectacle which is informed by these realistic strategies to move the plot forward.²⁶

Performing the East in Sébastien Brémond's *The Happy Slave*

Brémond's acquaintance with Charles II's court began sometime in 1672. He managed to be introduced to the Duchess of Cleveland, and later he also engaged the attention of another of the king's mistresses, Louise de Kéroualle, to whom he dedicated the French edition of his work *Le Cercle, ou conversations galantes* in 1673.²⁷ Grobe contended

that Brémond's popularity in England during the Restoration had two key sources: the growing taste for French fashion and French literature; and the performative potential of the topics he chose for his novels which were shared by Restoration comedies, especially romantic liaisons involving wilful heroines and morally reprehensible and easily cuckolded husbands. Not only did his novels share many elements with drama, especially in the use of masquerade, disguise, and the donning of identities,²⁸ but some of them inspired other playwrights during the Restoration. Key examples include John Dryden in *The Spanish Friar*, and Pix in her farce *The Spanish Wives*, which both followed Brémond's Behn's *The Younger Brother*; or *The Amorous Jilt*, which took *Hattigé* as its most probable source.²⁹

Of particular significance for the analysis that follows here is that oriental motifs were also a fertile ground for playwrights before and in this period, and travels to the east were frequently a topic used to engage spectators at the playhouse in seventeenth-century London. The public was drawn to witness the splendour of foreign and luxurious scenes involving figures of Turkish extraction, characters that they equally admired and feared, as Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1590), or a century later Pix's *Iranahim, the Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks* (1696), instance.³⁰ Works like Richard Knolles's *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603) and its above-mentioned sequel by Rycart set the context for a favourable reception of stories about the east. Though sometimes the ethnographic approaches of these texts did not derive from first-hand experience, the interest in the writing of other traveller-writers like Brémond was genuine.³¹ He had travelled extensively to North Africa, meeting Mohammed El-Hafsi, Bey of Tunis, around 1668, and this friendship was reflected in some of his novels that followed, and specifically in *The Happy Slave*, in *Hattigé*, and in *Homais, Queen of Tunis*. Turkish Tamaran and Tunis were England in disguise in Brémond's fiction, and the kings' relationship with their queens was inspired by Charles II's relationship with Barbara Villiers and then with Kéroualle.³²

The action and setting of his oriental novels were familiar to Brémond, who included many realistic details in his fiction.³³ The seraglio, which he describes accurately, is represented as the centre of private life at the king's court and at the bashaw's. On the one hand, it is primarily a patriarchal location, where women are carefully chosen for their masters' pleasure, though surrounded by less "dangerous" men, the eunuchs. On the other hand, it is an ambivalent site of women's sexual freedom and political manoeuvrings, as they transform this domestic and private space into a stage on which they either perform their femininity in front of their masters or exert authority and power over men who have furtively entered the place. Helped by intermediary figures such as slaves, servants and eunuchs, sultaneesses and queens make their own sexual fantasies real and play tricks on their enemies while their masters' power is temporarily suspended by virtue of their domestic authority.³⁴ In a pure dramatic fashion, kings and lovers resort to secret doors, rope ladders, wicker baskets, crossdressing and disguise to enter the seraglio and gain access to their mistresses. The atmosphere of the place is characterised by intrigue and heavy plot or action, offering fictions of power and sexual liberty, and challenging the political authority of the establishment by drawing a satirical portrait of court and state.

Nevertheless, in the context of the oriental tale, the seraglio also imparts fantasies of freedom within safe bounds. From the perspective of the west, the seraglio is the space of otherness, a site of identity negotiation in different respects: colonial, sexual and political. I would like to interpret Brémond's *The Happy Slave* as an act of performance by means of which the orient is set on stage, and exhaustively described characters and mores turn into sources of spectacle, luring readers into the seduction of otherness and suggesting that political and social change is possible. Brémond chooses the space of the Turkish seraglio to set a scene of moral and political corruption before the readers' eyes. Additionally, not merely does Brémond reproduce a state of affairs in eastern locales, but he relies on readers' ability to decode the story and, thus, to recognise their own country and society behind the eccentricities of the oriental tale. And this even despite Brémond's insistence to the contrary in the Advertisement to his novel.³⁵

The Happy Slave is a novel in three parts, the first of which is mainly performative in nature and describes events as they unfold in the present. Part I is set in the exotic territory of Turkey, the scene of the love of sultaneess Alhie and Alexander, an Italian count captured by corsairs from Barbary and sold as a slave to the bashaw. This first book ends with the reunion of Alhie and Alexander and their departure for Italy, whereas Part II extends one of the former subplots, Elinor / Laura's previous life in Sicily, her rivalry with her mother-in-law and her troublesome relationship with Marquess Hippolito. In Part III, Brémond continues with Elinor's story, who finally reconciles with Hippolito, and resumes Alhie and Alexander's adventure. Thus, the novel ends on a hopeful note especially for its female protagonists, sultaneess Alhie and Elinor / Laura, the former outwitting her husband and the latter benefitting from her own determination, her unflinching moral worth, and the swings of fortune. From a narrative perspective, the story narrated in Part I is self-contained and independent from Parts II and III, in which Brémond uses retrospective narration and reported speech more profusely. Perhaps, encouraged by the success of the first part of *The Happy Slave*, Brémond decided to capitalize on its popularity and to write both a prequel and a sequel to it in Parts II and III in a less space-using form.³⁶ Though Parts II and III include some scenes with an extraordinary dramatic potential,³⁷ I will focus specifically on Part I, which is mainly performative in nature and describes events as they unfold in the present.

Brémond's attention to detail, which informs the performative experience of reading this novel, is at its best in his description of the events taking place in the seraglio. Early in Part I this enclosed area appears as an oppressive space for sultaneess Alhie, who actually manages to turn it into a stage where she plays an orientalist fantasy of femininity which grants her freedom later on. To ease his favourite's melancholic state, the bashaw facilitates Alexander's entrance into the sultaneess' apartment while he takes the chance to see Laura, his wife's trusted slave. Neglected by her husband, however, the sultaneess indicates that she perceives her experience of confinement in the seraglio as worse than the life of a Christian slave, since in her eyes she is "a Slave more unhappy than those under Chains."³⁸ The sultaneess adopts an agentive role and desires a sight of her husband's favourite, a meaningful act, since the reader is told that in this country such behaviour is a prelude to love. The encounter between the prospective lovers is achieved thanks to

Laura's skilled mediation, when she tells Alexander about the sultaness' extreme beauty and sadness, preparing for him a prologue to a play. In a convoluted *mise-en-scène*, during their first encounter the sultaness never relinquishes control of the gaze and presents herself as the emblem of oriental femininity, using masquerade—the masquerade of exotic, exuberant femininity—as a means to overcome and seduce a besotted Alexander.³⁹ He is conducted into her most private chamber, an image of Allhié's intimate body parts, as she stands behind a curtain and looks at him; accepting her conditions, he cannot either watch or speak to her while they are together. In creating this frame, Brémond not only explores the sultaness' inner thoughts, as her point-of-view leads the scene, but, most significantly, he offers western readers a privileged insight into her chamber—an image of her body, her intimacy, even her psychology; it could be argued—only otherwise available to her personal servant Laura, rarely to the bashaw, and never seen by anyone outside the seraglio. The reader becomes then witness and spectator, and the narrative rendering of the lovers' encounter emphasizes the function of the novel as pleasurable entertainment, but also as a dramatic enactment of Scheherezade's tale.

The oriental setting and the social extraction of the protagonists become a metaphor of the novel's origin, reminiscent of the Arabian tales. Moved by the sultaness' desire, which contrasts in the novel with Laura's self-restraint, Alexander achieves a sight of her, and in exchange, and in Scheherezade fashion, he "told her a thousand pretty Stories, a thousand Gallantries,"⁴⁰ claiming that "he would die of the Phantasmie ... if she denied him his favour."⁴¹ Striking here is that the sultaness relies on spectacle, indeed, on a *tableau vivant*, of her exotic femininity, fully aware that her allure is based on the gaze, while Alexander believes in the power of words—of narrative—as a form of seduction. As the sultaness' performance begins to take effect in Alexander's imagination—from vision and performance to narrative—the young man is left wishing for more and he asks to narrow the physical distance on his next visit. The subsequent time, he craves to "see" more, and is curious to have a sight of the sultaness' inner apartment, a new allegory of her body, a wish that she grants without relinquishing, however, her control of the gaze. He raises the curtain and becomes the privileged observer of a new *tableau* that has been performed for his eyes only, though also displayed for the reader, whom Brémond's narrator overtly addresses in the text—"you." The wealth of detail—the shape, texture, colour of the materials—as well as the emphasis on visual elements and the choice of particular vocabulary—"beholder," "visible," "admirable to behold," and "for an eye"—also works in favour of spectacle and theatricality, recalling the increasing interest in costume and scenery in Restoration drama:

The *Sultanes* lay on a bed of Damask of like work; and having design'd to shew her self that day to the Count, she had not forgot to put herself in an equipage and posture capable to charm him at first sight: she had turned her face towards the *Ballister*, leaning her head carelessly on her left arm, which you might cleatly see in her great Tiffany sleeve after the Turkish mode. Her black hair was partly pleated with great ropes of Pearl, parting down on her Breast, and part on her shoulders, and set off the clearness of her delicate Complexion (vying with the Snow

in whiteness) to so much advantage, that it wrought wonderful effects in the beholder. She had about her body, a small Gold Bodice only, her bosom being half open, and the rest cover'd with a piece of fine Tiffany, like an Amazons Scarf: all was visible from her Neck to her Breast, and so admirable to behold, that it had been impossible for an eye, having seen it, (as the Count did) to escape being enamour'd of it: she had on her head plumes of several colours, and in the midst of them a crescent of silver. Her coat was of a light stuff Imbroyled with Gold after the fashion of the Country with Diamond Buckles to tuck it up at the knee: her Leg was half naked, and the rest covered with Buskins all laid over with Diamonds and Pearls: in a word, she was all so Rich, so Gallant, so full of Charms, that the poor *Count* was utterly undone at the sight.⁴²

Brémond constructs an exotic and highly sexualized visual image of the young sultaness, who is "playing" the roles of the powerful woman but also of the Ottoman ocdalisque to seduce Alexander. As a western man, Alexander immediately falls prey to her charms and her provocative bodily postures, which add to the luxurious setting, and are reinforced by the references to bright colours, rich fabrics and magnificent jewels. Scenes like this prepare the ground for later orientalist discourse, and work very much like orientalist paintings do, as historically, Heather Madar argues, they "contain[ed] the germ of later harem discourse and repeatedly explore[d] themes that parallel its major tropes."⁴³ The sultaness' depiction in *The Happy Slave* differs, though, from later and more exoticized images of Ottoman women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts, where they appear as indolent and passive, a role that sultaness Allhié has temporarily and consciously played only to make a virtue of necessity and attract Alexander's attention.

From the former scopophilic scene, Alexander and the sultaness move to sadomasochistic pleasure, as in transports of love his kisses force "Blood out of her Lips."⁴⁴ The taste for detail works here for the reader's sake, who is granted a privileged site to observe these practices that the narrator implicitly condemns and only explicitly accepts because they occur in these exotic locations, since, he claims, for western women "blows exceed the limits of gallantry." Interestingly, this is reminiscent once more of the violence traditionally associated with eastern locales that in the *Arabian Tales* sets in motion not only the main action, but also Scheherezade's act of storytelling. Despite the explicit violence, the sultaness is uncomplaining and "charmed with pleasure," which brings her to keep her blood-stained handkerchief "as a trophy to shew *Laura*, as a most sensible mark of the extrem Passion her dear *Alexander* had for her."⁴⁵ After witnessing this extreme proof of love and passion, readers are told that the bashaw rarely visits Allhié, that theirs is a loveless marriage and that she feels slighted, all of which help to present the sultaness in a state of virginity, thus drawing a connection between Allhié's bleeding lips and first sexual intercourse.⁴⁶

As mentioned above, *The Happy Slave* repeatedly uses disguise as a dramatic element. In Part I, for example, Alexander and the bashaw wear eunuchs' clothes to enter the seraglio and go unnoticed. Later on, to escape from her husband, the sultaness wears

Laura's costume to leave her apartment without raising suspicion. In a double reversal of identities, all characters are misled by appearances and mistake people for others: the bashaw uses Alexander's disguise and, confused by Laura's burqa ("barmis"), takes his wife for her. At the same time, the sultaness mistakes her husband for Alexander, noticing her error only too late, when the bashaw has already forced consummation. This game of false appearances and misunderstandings increases the dramatic nature of Brémont's narrative, and the practice of disguise quite often accelerates action and precipitates events. At the end of Part I, while Alexander is on his voyage home, a Moor leaves a great basket in his cabin containing the sultaness wearing Laura's habit. From here onwards, the dramatic device of disguise intertwines with the conventional narrative ending of romances, and though the first volume ends full of promise, Part III unfolds the couple's misadventures, as they suffer a shipwreck and are left to their own devices at sea. At the novel's end they are luckily rescued by Laura / Elinor and Marquess Hippolito, who have also miraculously met after a long separation.

Brémont's realism is granted thanks to his power of observation and his skill for narrative description, both of which reinforce the dramatic nature of this novel, set in the exotic territory of Turkey. In *The Happy Slave*, he chooses the oriental locale involving eastern and western characters and plots to foster a dialogue between cultures, which evidences the polyvocality of the novel in the years of its making. By focusing on the productive and evocative space of the harem or the seraglio, the French author stages a masquerade of femininity and otherness for the consumption of an occidental male character, Alexander, an Italian, and for the rest of his western readership by extension. Drawing on his extensive knowledge of the east, deriving from his first-hand experience as a traveller, Brémont makes of his narrative a spectacle for his European audience, mainly French and English, who at times—as in Part I in the novel—become part of a community of spectators, rather than solipsistic readers. This is reinforced by the kind of narrative discourse chosen in each part of the novel: whilst in the first part unfolding the oriental plot he plays on dialogue and detailed description, creating a sense of dramatic illusion for the reader, Parts II and III are more self-contained, relying on a quick succession of reported speeches.

The Happy Slave represents to perfection the *modus operandi* of the market for early fiction in England in the late Restoration period, as it is a novel originally written in French, quickly translated into English, which was successful in the English market, as the prequel and sequel of Parts II and III demonstrate. Brémont's text is also emblematic of the turns fiction was taking in other respects, most significantly as it speaks about genre fluidity, being a novel which relies on dramatic conventions. This is a story about love and the adventures of young heroines, who are tossed about by circumstances in a male-dominated world, and who make the most of their chances to change the unhappy course of their lives, and in some cases, to cuckold their husbands. For example, they resort to female bonding in the context of the seraglio to escape patriarchal surveillance: Laura / Elinor's former plights in Genoa and Naples, narrated in Part II, at the mercy of a weak father, a wicked stepmother and the jealous Viceroy's wife, explain her complicity with Alhie, with whom she shares a similar subjection. Though the tales of

Alhie-Alexander and Elinor-Hippolito end happily, Brémont's novel illustrates the thin line between comedy and tragedy, as so often happens in the plays of the period, and certainly in Brémont's oriental fictions.⁴⁷ Tragedy is then attenuated and all ends well for the mixed-race couple formed by Alhie and Alexander, but before that Alhie loses her sexual prowess and embraces the Christian faith, and the bashaw goes through a symbolic castration, as he wears an eunuch's habit twice in the story. Laura / Elinor and Marquess Hippolito's story also ends happily, but in their case they make the journey from the other side, and get reconciled after their encounter with otherness and once they have narrated each other their plights. As in one of Scheherezade's tales, the wishes of eastern characters come true almost miraculously, as they find their "open sesame," in an uncanny association between eastern motives and settings and theatricality, whereas more self-restrained and circumspect western characters choose the medium of prose to vent their hopes and sufferings. *The Happy Slave* investigates the complex associations of late seventeenth-century fiction with questions of performance, race and gender identity and its analysis suggests, in the light of recent theoretical studies of the period's cultural development, that other neglected examples of similar transnational nature will emerge to shed some light on these complex issues.



Notes

¹ This essay originates in the Research Project "Early Novel in English, 1660–1700: Database and Textual Editing" (ENEID), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Economy and Competitiveness (Proyecto de Investigación de Excelencia, Ref. FFI2017–82728–P).

² Moreau, "Seventeenth-Century Fiction," 1. See also, Aravamudan's reading of Enlightenment oriental fictions as examples of "transcultural allegories" (*Enlightenment Orientalism*, 29).

³ The text was written originally in Italian in 1684 (*L'Esploratore turco*), then translated into French in the same year (*L'Espion turc*), and from there translated into English. The first volume was published in English translation in 1687, but subsequent editions with seven additional parts appeared until 1694, and new partial and complete re-editions did not appear until 1765, one of them attributed to Daniel Defoe (*A Continuation of Letters Written by a Turkish Spy at Paris*, 1718).

⁴ English readers also bought copies in French of the romances and of the oriental tales that resulted from them. See Eardley, "Marketing Aspiration," for evidence of the former (esp. 132). Many of the cheap editions in French of the oriental stories were sold

by Richard Bentley in his Convent Garden bookshop, among them Brémond's *Hattige; or, The Amours of the King of Tamaran* and *Homais, Queen of Tunis*. See also McKenzie and Bell, *Chronology and Calendar*, 107.

⁵ Conant, *Oriental Tales*, vii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xvii, xxi.

⁷ Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ The terms "performance" and "performativity" in this article will use primarily the meanings of "interpretation" and "action" (*OED*), and allude to the space where drama takes place, no matter how tempting it would be to associate them with Judith Butler's sense of performativity of gender and race in *Gender Trouble*, xxv.

¹¹ Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 50.

¹² See Bakhtin (*Dialogic Imagination*, 46) for the dialogue that the author engages in with characters and text. In his view, the author is not merely familiar with characters' language, but actually converses with them.

¹³ Andrea, *Women and Islam*, 85. Andrea focuses on Pix's *Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks* and Manley's *The Lost Lover* and *The Royal Mischief*.

¹⁴ Brémond's novels of the early 1680s can be read as satirical descriptions of Charles II's relationships with his mistresses, Barbara Villiers and Louise de Kéroualle and thus as fierce critiques of the political corruption at his court.

¹⁵ Andrea, *Women and Islam*, 84, 92.

¹⁶ Aercke, "Theatrical Background," 120.

¹⁷ Aubignac, *Whole Art of the Stage*, 44.

¹⁸ See Aphra Behn's famous introductory words to the reader in *Oroonoko; or, The History of the Royal Slave* in connection with this (1).

¹⁹ Zimbardo, *Mirror to Nature*, 9.

²⁰ Ballaster, "Bring(ing) Forth Alive," 184.

²¹ Behn, *Fair Jilt*, 91–92, 106. See Aercke on the theatricality of *The Fair Jilt*.

²² Another case in point is the performative potential of Hellená's use of disguise in Behn's *The Rover* (1677).

²³ Early in the novel, for example, the young heroes Aurelian and Hippolito attend a masque and meet the women they later fall in love with, Incognita and Leonora, who also wear vizards and are in disguise. Aurelian falls in love nor with Incognita's face and real identity, but with "her Shape, Wit, and Air," and declares his love for her whilst assuming Hippolito's name and guise (*Congreve, Incognita*, 21, 40). Meanwhile, Hippolito is mistaken by Leonora for her cousin Don Lorenzo and exploits the misunderstanding to his own benefit (25).

²⁴ Manley, *Secret History*, A2r. This is Manley's name for the fashionable short novels of the time, which, she claims, better suited English reading tastes.

²⁵ Ballaster, "Bring(ing) Forth Alive," 186.

²⁶ For example, in *Hattige* the king and his new mistress, Roukia, witness Hatrige and Meharen's furtive encounter in the grotto (97–99), and in *Homais* the queen hurts herself and plays the victim in front of the king to make his favourite, Rostan, appear in his eyes as a violent abuser (55–56).

²⁷ Grobe, *Sébastien Brémond*, 29. The English translation of this work by Nathaniel Noel, *The Circle; or, Conversations on Love and Gallantry* (London, 1675), did not attract the attention that Brémond expected.

²⁸ Grobe, *Sébastien Brémond*, 172.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178–90. In the introduction to her edition of Behn's *The Younger Brother* for *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Aphra Behn*, Margarete Rubik explains that *Hattige* is a probable source for this play, given the many similarities between Brémond's female libertine and Behn's Mirtilla, and between the trusting nature of the king of Tamaran and Prince Frederick, Vol. IV, 724.

³⁰ Barbour, *Before Orientalism*, 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16. Barbour explains how Knolles's paramount study of the Turks was "the product of an untraveled imagination."

³² Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism*, 206. On his return to England in 1676, Brémond brought with him some copies that he took to Richard Bentley's bookshop. Bentley was able to bind and print some new copies of the novel in French and then in English and tried without success to get them licensed by Henry Oldenburg. On April 23, 1676, Bentley had to answer before the authorities for the immorality of the book, and he and Brémond were accused of libel. The text was banned, but nonetheless, copies of *Hattige* circulated and the novel was officially in print in 1680. See McKenzie and Bell, *Chronology and Calendar*, 107–08.

³³ In *Hornais*, the tribal conflict between the Ali Bashaw of Tripoly and a rebel called Sidy Ackmet Benoe, illustrating a period of civil wars in Ottoman Tunisia in the late seventeenth century, sets the action in motion. See Abun-Nasar. "The Beylicate in Seventeenth-Century Tunisia," 83. Historically, a civil war broke out between the two sons of Murad Bey, Muhammad and 'Ali, between 1675 and 1686. Muhammad al-Hafsi, whose plan was to become the only *bey*, benefitted from the conflict and confusion.

³⁴ Though it would be tempting to apply here Nancy Armstrong's related concepts of "domestic fiction" and "domestic woman," the domestic power of Brémond's heroines is limited to sexuality and rarely has any real effect on the public state of affairs. While Armstrong offers an alternative to the customary account of the rise of the novel, linking it to the rise of the domestic woman, for her the exponent of modern individualism, Brémond's heroines are closer to the type of the female libertine that women like Barbara Villiers, Louise de Kéroualle or Hortense Mancini would represent. They were often the target of satire in Restoration plays written by men. If anything, these women are made to play ambivalent roles, and their rebellious nature seemed to make writers anxious of their power over king and state. See Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 8, and Linker, *Dangerous Women*, 2, 3.

³⁵ "Therefore, I declare to the Publick, and especially to those who busie themselves in penetrating into other mens intentions, that under the literal sense of my Tales there is not hid any Allegorical meaning, that when I speak of the Turks and of Africk, I have not any Ideas in Europe or any other Nation, and that they will make me think quite otherwise than I think, if they make me speak any otherwise than I speak, if the Intrigues or Adventures I write of, have some conformity to those of our times, I am not to answer for it: 'Tis the fault of Chance and not mine" (*Happy Slave*, A4v).

³⁶ Be that as it may, Brémond treats here a path common to other fiction writers of the time, and his narrative choices bring to mind Behn's turn from epistolary form in the first part of *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister* to the more narrated parts of its volume II, and even more decisively in its volume III, *The Amours of Philander and Silvia*.

³⁷ For example, Part III reproduces a burial ceremony in which Laura is taken in a bier to leave the Dey's palace incognito (285–86).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32. The title, the "happy" slave, could be variously applied to the sultanness when she escapes the seraglio, to Alexander, when he is allowed to return to Italy, or to Elinor in her service to the sultanness: "[her] happiness consisted in her complaisance to a mistress, who loved her so well as to make her confident in affairs of this consequence" (*Happy Slave*, 146).

³⁹ I apply here Joan Riviere's theory about the concept of womanliness as masquerade, according to which woman embraces the "mystery" of femininity as a tool to achieve male power ("Womanliness as a Masquerade," 303–ff.). In fact, in Brémond's novel, the Sultanness does not merely fall in love with Alexander but wishes for freedom.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴² *Happy Slave*, 51–52. Several centuries later, Salman Rushdie evokes a very similar image in *Midnight's Children*, when Doctor Aziz is asked to examine Naseem, the woman he would eventually marry, through a perforated sheet. The protagonist, Saleem Sinai, tells the story in parts, "just as Scheherzade, depending for her very survival on leaving Prince Shahryar eaten up by curiosity, used to do night after night" (*Midnight's Children*, 21–22). Akin to the novels under study, Rushdie's episode suggests the connection between storytelling, sexuality and exoticism.

⁴³ Madar, "Before the Odalisque," 5. She situates the shift in the perception of women in the seraglio to around 1683, the year of the second siege of Vienna, which implied a change of power in Turkish-European relations, as the Ottomans stopped being feared and became associated with degeneracy. See page 32 on this point.

⁴⁴ *Happy Slave*, 55.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁶ In *Menstruation and the Female Body*, Read associates hymenal bleeding with women's access to adulthood (122–ff.).

⁴⁷ Carnell develops this topic in reading Behn's transition from her heroic tragedies to her prose fiction, bringing tragedy to the context of domesticity, and thus anticipating the new paths writers were exploring in the late seventeenth century ("Subverting Tragic Conventions," 131).



Works Cited

- Abun-Nasr, J. M. "The Beylicate in Seventeenth-Century Tunisia." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6, no. 1 (1975): 70–93.
- Aercke, Kristiaan P. "Theatrical Background in English Novels of the Seventeenth Century." *Journal of Narrative Technique* 18, no. 2 (1988): 120–36.
- Andrea, Bernadette. *Women and Islam in Early Modern English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Aravamudan, Srinivas. *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Aubignac, François-Hédelin, abbé d'. *The Whole Art of the Stage*. London, 1684.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Ballaster, Ros. *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England 1662–1785*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- . "Bring(ing) Forth Alive the Conceptions of the Brain: The Transmission of French to English Fiction between Stage and Page." In *Seventeenth-Century Fiction: Text & Transmission*, edited by Jacqueline Glomski and Isabelle Moreau, 183–97. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Barbour, Richard. *Before Orientalism: London's Theatre of the East 1576–1626*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Behn, Aphra. *The Rover; or, the Banish'd Cavaliers*. London, 1677.
- . *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister*. Edited by Janet Todd. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- . *Oroonoko; or, The History of the Royal Slave*. In *Oroonoko and Other Writings*, edited by Paul Salzman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Performativity and Spectacle in the Oriental Novel 119
- . *The Fair Jilt; or, The History of Prince Tarquin and Miranda*. In *Oroonoko and Other Writings*, edited by Paul Salzman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- . *The History of the Nun; or, The Fair Vow-Breaker*. London, 1689.
- Brémond, Sébastien. *The Happy Slave*. London, 1677.
- . *The Happy Slave. A Novel. In Three Parts Compleat*. London, 1686.
- . *Hattige; or, The Amours of the King of Tamaran*. London, 1680.
- . [Sébastien Grenadine]. *Homaïs, Queen of Tunis*. Amsterdam, 1680.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Carnell, Rachel K. "Subverting Tragic Conventions: Aphra Behn's Turn to the Novel." *Studies in the Novel* 31, no. 2 (1999): 133–51.
- Conant, Martha Pike. *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1908.
- Congreve, William. *Incognita; or, Love and Duty Reconcil'd*. London, 1692.
- Dryden, John. *The Spanish Friar; or, The Double Discovery*. London, 1681.
- Eardley, Alice. "Marketing Aspiration: Fact, Fiction, and the Publication of French Romance in mid-Seventeenth-Century England." In *Seventeenth-Century Fiction: Text and Transmission*, edited by Jacqueline Glomski and Isabelle Moreau, 130–42. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Grobe, Edwin P. *Sébastien Brémond: His Life and his Works*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1954.
- Knolles, Richard. *The General History of the Turkes from the First Beginning of that Nation to the Rising of the Ottoman Family*. London, 1603.
- Linker, Laura. *Dangerous Women. Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670–1730*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.
- Madar, Heather. "Before the Odalisque: Renaissance Representation of Elite Ottoman Women." *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6 (2011): 1–41.

- Manley, Delarivier. *Letters, Written [sic] by Mrs Manley*. London, 1696.
- . *The Secret History of Queen Zarah and the Zanazians: Being a Looking-glass for ----- in the Kingdom of Albion*. Albion [London], 1705.
- Matana, Giovanni Paolo. *Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, Who Lived, Five and Forty Years, Undiscovered, at Paris*. London, 1687.
- Matlowe, Christopher. *Tamburlaine the Great*. 1590. London, 1605.
- McKenzie, D. E., and Maureen Bell. *A Chronology and Calendar of Documents Relating to the London Book Trade 1641–1700*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Moreau, Isabelle. "Seventeenth-Century Fiction in the Making." In *Seventeenth-century Fiction: Text & Transmission*, edited by Jacqueline Glomski and Isabelle Moreau, 1–16. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Pix, Mary. *Ibrahim, the Thirteenth Emperor of the Turks. A Tragedie*. London, 1696.
- . *The Spanish Wives. A Farce*. London, 1696.
- Read, Sara. *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Riviere, Joan. "Womanliness as a Masquerade." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13.
- Rubik, Margarete, ed. *The Younger Brother*. In *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Aphra Behn, Volume IV, The Plays 1682–1696*. Edited by Rachel Adcock, Kate Aughterson, Claire Bowditch, et al., 705–878. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Penguin, 1980.
- Rycaut, Paul. *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*. London, 1668.
- Zimbaro, Rose A. *A Mirror to Nature: Transformations in Drama and Aesthetics 1660–1732*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986.



Restoration Volume 46.2-47.1

Letter Matters: Corporeality, Physicality, Epistolary

Gerd Bayer
University of Erlangen

Abstract

During the English Restoration, the writing of letters took on new significance, and the formal tradition of letter writing contributed significantly to the experimentation that played out within the genres of narrative prose fiction. While epistolary is built on the absence of speakers, merely evoking their spectral presence during the moment of reading, materiality nevertheless finds its way into these indirect forms of communication. In fact, corporeality and the physicality of objects included in letters could be said to make up for the absent body of the speaker. This article discusses how Restoration epistolary employs such forms of materiality, arguing that readers and writers, both within the diegetic realm and in actual reality, decoded ostentatious moments of materiality as acts that lent letters an element of veracity and reliability that this generic form was not usually able to claim at this particular historical moment. Texts studied include Robert Beaumont's *Loves Missives to Virtue* (1660) and Margaret Cavendish's *Sociable Letters* (1664).

Restoration England provided the breeding ground for numerous literary innovations that only fully blossomed in the early eighteenth century. This article will hopefully