

Sedley's *The Mulberry Garden* (1668) and the Genre of the Dramatic Dedication

Nora Rodríguez Loro
Universidad de Sevilla
nrodriguez6@us.es

Abstract

The dedication of playtexts was a common practice during the Restoration since it might offer playwrights many advantages, including access to the patron's network of connections. Authors, therefore, assumed a lowly stand by praising their addressee and humbly acknowledging their obligation. However, Sir Charles Sedley's dedication of *The Mulberry Garden* (1668) to Frances Stuart, duchess of Richmond and Lennox, flouts the conventions of dedicatory writing. Sedley did not require her support or protection, for he was a member of King Charles's intimate circle and an admired court wit. Moreover, the duchess was not in a position to offer protection at this junction, given her personal circumstances. In this epistle, Sedley challenges the intrinsic asymmetrical relation between patron and client by placing himself (and not her) in the position of superiority and in control of the exchange. This unusual dedication exemplifies the diversity of this genre during the Restoration.*

Keywords: dramatic dedication, patronage, Sedley, *The Mulberry Garden*, Frances Teresa Stuart, Restoration theatre

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse Sir Charles Sedley's dedication of *The Mulberry Garden* (1668) to Frances Teresa Stuart, duchess of Richmond and Lennox. My intention is to study this epistle as an example that flouts the established code of dedicatory writing, and to explore the reasons for the author's unconventional choice of tone.

In order to understand the way in which Sedley's dedication challenges the conventions of the genre, I would like to begin by examining the custom of theatrical patronage during the Restoration period. In her seminal study of the Restoration dramatic dedication, Deborah Payne argued that both this literary genre and the cultural practice of patronage in this period needed to be reconsidered. Payne rejects post-capitalist views, such as Korshin's, which underestimate the importance of patronage in the Restoration on purely monetary principles, and claims instead that dedicatory writing in the late seventeenth-century can be best understood in terms of anthropological theories of gift exchange.

As she points out, patronage culture during the Restoration was based on what Pierre Bourdieu called an archaic conception of economic calculation, which included "all goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as being rare and worthy

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of being sought after in a particular social formation” (Bourdieu 1977, 178). Building on this notion, Payne sketches a system in which playwrights, besides economic gain, acquire also a symbolic capital of honour and prestige through the success of their plays. They may then invest this symbolic capital, presenting their work to an influential patron by means of a dedicatory epistle. In return for this offering, they expect to receive rewards that go beyond the mere pecuniary gift: social support, protection from detractors and a point of access to the patron’s network of connections (1990, 32-33). Since the person addressed always occupies a higher position, dedications are asymmetrical forms of exchange. The playwright assumes a lowly stand, heaping praise on his patron as well as humble acknowledgements of obligation.

The importance of dedicating plays in Restoration theatre has also been observed by Stanley L. Archer, who noted that more than 50% of the plays published in the period (258 out of a total 472) carry dedicatory epistles (1971, 8). After examining these texts, Archer outlined the main characteristics of the genre. He concluded that, although it is a highly diverse literary form, several recurring features can be distinguished: the epistles are generally in prose and addressed to a single patron; they incorporate the essential components of the personal letter (such as salutation, date, complimentary close, etc.) and present freedom of content (1971, 9). Regarding their structure, the dedications tend to follow a general pattern of: 1) presenting the work to the patron; 2) explaining why he or she has been chosen as such; 3) and entreating him or her for protection (1971, 9). Dedicatory epistles sometimes reflect on political affairs, or comment on play production, actors or the circumstances of the première, and even indulge in criticism, hence their relevance in literary studies. According to Archer, dedications display four conventions of patronage: 1) a request for permission to dedicate the play; 2) praise of the addressee; 3) a request for protection; 4) some allusion to the expectation of reward (1971, 9). To these, we could add the fact that, since dedications are asymmetrical forms of gift exchange, they are naturally offered to someone higher in social rank.

2. Sedley’s dedication of *The Mulberry Garden*

Most of the Restoration dramatic dedications conform to this pattern and exhibit the conventions of dedicatory writing. However, Sedley’s dedication of *The Mulberry Garden* (1668) to the duchess of Richmond and Lennox stands out for a number of reasons. First, although the duchess surpassed him in rank, Sedley did not at all require her support or protection, as he was a member of King Charles’s intimate coterie. From the early years of the Restoration, Sir Charles Sedley had joined the “Circle of Wits”—as they were eventually called—whose company the king much enjoyed (Pinto 1927, 54). In 1661 the duke of Ormonde told the chancellor, the earl of Clarendon, that the king “spent most of his Time with confident young Men, who abhorred all Discourse that was serious, and . . . preserved no Reverence towards God or Man, but laughed at all sober Men, and even at Religion itself” (Hyde 1759, 2:85; Pinto 1927, 54). Sedley is said to have excelled among this group of courtiers for his conversation and ready wit, “which usually took the form of absurd similes which convulsed his hearers with laughter” (Wilson 1948, 68).

Sedley’s reputation as a wit made the announcement that he had written a comedy for the King’s Company arouse great expectation among London playgoers. *The Mulberry Garden* opened on 18 May 1668, attracting large crowds to the Drury Lane theatre, including the diarist Samuel Pepys. When entering, Pepys found “the house infinitely full” and among the audience he distinguished “the King and Queen, . . . and all the Court” (Latham and Matthews 1976, 9:203). However, the play did not produce the effect which was expected.

The general opinion of the audience was expressed by Pepys: "though there was, here and there, a pretty saying, and that not very many neither, yet the whole of the play had nothing extraordinary in it at all, neither of language nor design" (Latham and Matthews 1976, 9:203). In spite of this, the play must eventually have proved popular since records of performances extend over one month: between 18 May and 29 June (Van Lennep 1965, 137, 139).

Sedley's comedy was printed soon afterwards, with a dedication to Frances Teresa Stuart, duchess of Richmond and Lennox, to whom he claims he had shown the play when it was still "in loose Sheets" (1668, n.p.).¹ The epistle, however, defies the readers' expectations from the very beginning. Instead of adopting a submissive stance, the author addresses his dedicatee in a flippant tone far removed from the etiquette of the genre: though he professes himself her "Obedient Servant", yet with every turn of phrase he places himself (and not her) in the position of power and in control of the exchange. To begin with, Sedley breaks the first of the generic rules outlined by Archer: instead of requesting permission to dedicate his play, he presents the practice of dedications as a "privilege" that allows authors to impose on just anyone: "Tis an unquestion'd Priviledge we Authors have of troubling whomsoever we please with an Epistle Dedicatory . . . when we print a Play". Furthermore, Sedley characterises the offering of a dedication as "troubling" but, instead of humbly apologizing for it, he boldly asserts his authorial right.

After starting in this atypical way, Sedley introduces the customary praise of the patron, although in a highly unconventional manner: "I think your Grace (for a Person of so great Eminence, Beauty, Indulgence to Wit, and other Advantages that mark you out to suffer under Addresses of this Nature) has scap't very well hitherto." By praising the duchess parenthetically and, at the same time, pointing out that she has not yet been offered any dedication, he seems to imply that her qualities are taken for granted and need no further emphasis.

The request for the patron's protection, the third element described by Archer, is also revised in this epistle. Rather than beg, the author seizes the opportunity to berate her for being remiss in the duties pertaining to her rank: "I do not remember your Name yet made a Sanctuary to any of these Criminals: But, Madam, your time is come, and you must bear it patiently." Through the choice of the word "sanctuary," Sedley implicitly praises the duchess as a goddess in terms reminiscent of the courtly love tradition, a poetic licence which he can take since his dedicatee is a woman. In addition, playwrights are playfully referred to as malefactors who persecute their patrons in search of undeserved protection.

The poet condescendingly offers to lessen the load imposed on the duchess's shoulders by being concise: "All the favour I can shew you, is that of a good Executioner, which is not to prolong your pain." Once again Sedley blatantly subverts the dynamics of the genre since, in claiming that he can show favour and presenting himself as the "executioner" (with the duchess as the convicted criminal), he is assuming the position of superiority which naturally belongs to the patron, not to the client-author. Moreover, Sedley adds a touch of false modesty referring to his play as a "trifle," which cannot compare to the tributes ("Temples and Altars") that would have been offered to her, had she been born in ancient times. The epistle does not conclude with the typical apology for daring to approach the patron and considering the play worthy of dedicating; although Sedley seems to abide by the rules and beg pardon, he cavalierly blames the duchess for his own effrontery: "I hope you will find it no hard matter to pardon a Presumption you have your self been accessory to."

¹ All the extracts from the dedication are taken from the original edition (1668).

Sedley's epistle is characterised by the use of witty images (the poet as a criminal and an executioner), a flippant tone and a continual deviation from the conventions of dedicatory writing by adopting a position of superiority. He could concede himself such privileges due to the symbolic capital he had accumulated as a celebrated court wit.

3. Sedley's addressee: the duchess of Richmond and Lennox

The unusual tone of this epistle can be explained on the grounds of Sedley's status as a court wit, which justifies (even requires) such insouciance. However, this singular epistle may have also been motivated by the personal circumstances of its dedicatee, the duchess. Frances Teresa Stuart was the most celebrated beauty of the court. *La Belle Stuart*, as she was generally called, had made an immediate impression at court upon her arrival early in 1662 (Handley 2008). One observer wrote in February 1662: "beautiful Mrs Stuart is here so admired and so rich in clothes and jewels, she is the only blazing star" (Handley 2008). She was ardently pursued by King Charles since 1663, when Frances was only fifteen. She soon took Lady Castlemaine's (the king's *maîtresse en titre*) place as the lady whose good graces all courtiers coveted. However, Frances refused both to become Charles's mistress and to play an active role in court politics, despite the efforts made by several courtiers who tried to take advantage of the king's deep infatuation with her (Handley 2008). In November 1663, Pepys, for instance, reports a courtly intrigue to procure her for the king involving the duke of Buckingham and Sir Henry Bennet, the future earl of Arlington (Latham and Matthews 1971, 4:366). The failure of their strategy may have been due to Frances's youth and lack of interest in political schemes.²

Frances's fame as one of the most beautiful women of the court was acknowledged in various portrayals. In the summer of 1665, she was depicted as Diana as part of the famous series of portraits by Lely commissioned by the duchess of York. Then, in 1667, Frances posed as model for John Roettier's figure of Britannia in the medal entitled *The Peace of Breda* and, in a similar guise, in the unfinished *Naval Victories* medal (Handley 2008). Nevertheless, that very same year she secretly married the duke of Richmond (30 March 1667), and thus incurred the king's wrath. Charles felt outraged and banished them both from court. The king's resentment only began to abate when Frances contracted the smallpox in March 1668 and he was moved to pity. We know that in May 1668, he wrote to his sister Henrietta telling her that Frances "is not much marked with the smale pox, and I must confesse this last affliction made me pardon all that is past, and I cannot hinder myselfe from wishing her very well" (Norrington 1996, 151). He renewed his visits and by August she was restored to her position in the queen's entourage.

Sedley's reasons for the choice of his dedicatee are not clear. He may have decided to pay homage to the ailing beauty out of gallantry, at a time when there was still speculation whether Frances would recover her looks (though in the end the only consequence of her illness seems to have been some residual eye trouble). Another possibility is that Sedley wrote the dedication to propitiate the king, once he had relented and forgiven the duchess. Hanowell has also mentioned that Sedley may have dedicated his play to Frances on account of his acquaintance with the duke (2001, 152). Indeed, Sedley and Richmond seem to have been

² Contemporary views on Frances's personality were not unanimous: the Comte de Grammont found her "childish" (Hamilton 1846, 141), but Pepys described her as "cunning" (Latham and Matthews 1971, 4:366).

good friends, or at least close enough to be companions in their night ramblings.³ The dedication could then be interpreted as a gesture of support for the duke in the trying times when the duchess was ill and the couple were struggling to regain favour at court.

4. Conclusion

With this uncommon epistle Sedley chooses to invest his own symbolic and literary capital in enhancing the social image of the duke and duchess as they were trying to recover their former status. This is certainly an unconventional purpose for a dedication since authors generally use them in their own benefit. Dedications trade on a capital of honour, for the patrons are still expected “to show that they are worthy of their rank by showering material and symbolic protection upon their dependents”, while playwrights’ tribute will augment the patron’s prestige (Payne 1990, 32). Sedley’s offer of this comedy to the duchess is meant to prove that she deserves both a gift of this kind and the social prominence that belongs to her rank. However, the fact that Sedley’s symbolic capital was considerably higher than the duchess’s at this junction and that he did not seek real patronage accounts for the original character of this dedication. Sedley’s own position as a court wit allows him to revise the conventions of dedicatory writing, adopting a playful stance and eschewing the submissive tone characteristic of the genre. All in all, Sedley’s epistle illustrates the richness and vitality of this practice at the Restoration period.

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³ In a letter to his wife dated 6 February, 1664, Sir Robert Paston, first earl of Yarmouth, wrote: “The Duke of Richmond and Sir Charles Sydney (Sedley) came in about 10 at night with the Duke’s fiddlers” (Historical 1664, 364).

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