“Mrs. Nelly’s Complaint” is unusual among the Court satires. In form it is essentially a clever dramatic monologue; in tone it is good-natured, lacking the usual weapons of obscene and scatological epithets. There is, of course, a deal of exaggeration; we can be reasonably sure that Mary Knight and Nell Gwyn did not seduce Charles, Lord Lansdowne, and William Dutton Colt.

Aspiring courtiers were well aware that the King’s mistresses could help their careers, and occasionally an unscrupulous gentleman “managed” a likely lass, hoping for a *quid pro quo* if the King took her into his seraglio. It was always safe, and wise, to court a royal mistress and shower her with extravagant compliments, but it was dangerous to go to bed with her. Easy-going King Charles had a temper. Probably the poet (Sir George Etherege?) put together a couple of harmless flirtations observed in the summer of 1682, when the Court was at Windsor, and turned them into a satiric comment on the ladies of pleasure.


If Sylla’s ghost made bloody Catline start
And shook the fabric of his marble heart;
If Samuel’s shade could wicked Saul affright,
When Endor raised him from the depths of night;
Pity poor Nell, that’s haunted by Mall Knight.

You that have seen me in my youthful age,
Preferred from stall of turnips to the stage,
Those sympathetic griefs you did bestow,
And tears to scenic sufferings once allow,
Employ 'em on my real torments now. 10
Knight, cruel Knight, that once lay in my breast,
My constant crony and eternal guest,
Th' applauder of my beauty and my jest—
She, she, that cruel she, to France is fled,
Yet lets me not enjoy my quiet bed; 15
Whene'er I lay me down to love or sleep,
She through the op'ning curtains seems to peep,
Dreadful as Gorgon, turning all to stone,
Unpainted and without her plumpers on,
Her eyes and cheeks all hollow, so her voice, 20
And this she utters with a dreadful noise:
“Pug! cruel Pug! with whom so long I lived,
For whom so well I faithfully contrived,
Wherein have I deserved so ill of thee
That thou shouldst part my dearest Colt and me?
Of brawny blockheads hadst thou not before,
By my industrious care, a numerous store?
Cleveland herself was never crammed with more.
By her when first of Wycherley bereft,
My charming Colt was still a treasure left. 30
Nor to my wishes did he disagree;
I ogled him and he would squint at me;
But when his charming limbs the first time pressed
My hectic body, ne'er was bawd so blest!
Lansdowne himself for Colt I did despise,
Lansdowne, in whom each hour new charms arise,
Lansdowne the gay, the sprightly, and the wise.

Big with my joys, to thee I still did run,
Declared how oft the sacred act was done;
While, as the melting history I told, 40
My twinkling eyes in their old sockets rolled.
All this by faithless thee with craft was heard,
No blush, in sign of kindling lust, appeared;
Blushing's a thing thou'lt conquered long ago,
MRS. NELLY’S COMPLAINT

And modesty has always been thy foe.
If e'er thou affect it, 'tis with awkward grace,
For bawd is always opened in thy face;
Bawd is thy art, thy accomplishment and trade,
For that, not love, thou wert a mistress made.
No hero ever to thy arms was won
But in some drunken hour, when love was gone,
To wallow, fumble, grunt, and spew upon;
Till my false squinter thou didst lead astray,
And her that too much trusted thee betray.”

Thus I, poor nymph, am plagued and must not rest
Because in that Adonis Colt I'm blest.
Colt, who for close intrigues was doubtless made,
Whose love was never by his looks betrayed;
For while his melting eyes did mine survey,
They craftily still seemed another way,
Which when fond Knight, our confidante, did see,
She claimed the homage that was paid to me;
Till to redress the mighty wrong sustained,
I to my God-like Sovereign complained,
And by his justice I my right maintained.

Let mountebanks make market houses ring
Of what great feats they've done before the King;
Let learn'd Sir Sam his Windsor engine try;
Before great Charles let quacks and seamen lie;
He ne'er heard swearers till Mall Knight and I.
Never heard oaths less valued or less true
(And yet, 'tis said, he has paid for swearing too),
Loudlier we swore than plundering dragoons;
S'blood followed s'blood, and zoons succeeded zoons;
Till at the last the bawd's weak forces failed,
And I by noise and impudence prevailed.

To France my baffled, squeaking rival's gone,
And Colt and all his eyes are now my own.
Should she pretend to what's so much my due,
She might as well take lovely Duncan too.
COURT SATIRES OF THE RESTORATION

Duncan, by my great sway and power preferred,
For mounting me well first, now mounts the guard.
Help, Church and State, to do a princess right,
Guard me from wrongs and exorcize this sprite.
Even now in terror on my bed I lie;
Send Doctor Burnet to me or I die.


4. Endor. For the woman who had "a familiar spirit at Endor," see I Sam. 28: 7–20.

5. Mall Knight. Mary Knight, Nell's friend and neighbor in Pall Mall, was a famous singer and had important roles in Crowne's masque Calisto, February, 1675. Reputedly one of the King's earlier mistresses, she was still the recipient of his bounty; an entry in the Lord Chamberlain's records for March 4, 1678, calls for gifts to her of 125 yards of damask for a bed and £100 for furniture (PRO, L.C. 5/ 42, 89v.). Her age is unknown, but on May 19, 1659, John Evelyn called her "the famous singer, Mrs. Knight." She must have been in her forties in 1682.

14. to France. The date of Mrs. Knight's trip to France is unknown, but it must have been fairly late in 1682. On June 15, 1683, a letter from France suggests that the Whigs were trying to find out how money was sent to France for investment in foreign securities. The writer concludes, "Besides, if your lordship pleases to reflect upon a certain Duchess's being sent over here a year ago, and since then Mrs. Knight, and now the Countess Per[n]broke, the wonder will not be great how things are managed" (Hastings MS, II, 173–74). The Duchess of Portsmouth left London for France on March 3, 1682, and was back in London on July 2, 1682.

19. plumpers. According to Mary Evelyn ("The Fop Dictionary," appended to Mundus Muliebris, 1690), plumpers were "Certain very thin, round, and light balls, to plump out, and fill up the Cavities of the Cheeks, much us'd by old Court-Countesses."

25. Colt. William Dutton Colt (1646–93), probably one of the numerous sons of George Colt of Colt's Hall, Suffolk, was in 1682 Gentleman of the Horse to Prince Rupert (who died on November 29, 1682). Later Colt was in the entourage of George Fitzroy, Duke of Northumberland. He was knighted November 26, 1684.

28. Cleveland. Barbara, Duchess of Cleveland; see Appendix.

29. Wycherley. William Wycherley, playwright, and once the Duchess of Cleveland's lover. Apparently Mrs. Knight once acted as bawd for the duchess and Wycherley; see above, "Lampoon" [1676], note to line 14.

68. *Sir Sam.* The famous inventor, Sir Samuel Morland, constructed at Windsor "a new invention of raising any quantity of water to any height by the help of fire only" (*CSPD*, 1682, p. 579). He tried it out in the summer of 1682, and on December 16 he was granted a patent. At Windsor on June 16, 1683, Evelyn commented on the improvements, particularly "the throwing so huge a quantity of excellent water to the enormous height of the castle for the use of the whole house by an extraordinary invention of Sir Samuel Morland."

70. *swearers.* According to Defoe (*Review*, VIII, 247–48), an admirer of Nell Gwyn was once praising her to the Duchess of Portsmouth for her wit, beauty, repartee, and appearance as a lady of quality. "Yes, madam," said the duchess, "but anybody may know she has been an orange wenche by her swearing."

80. *Duncan.* Variant "Duncomb." If the name was indeed Duncan, the reference could be to swashbuckling Duncan Abercromby, who was a lieutenant in Colonel Russell's Regiment of Footguards at this time. Abercromby was sometimes called "Duncombe" (see Appendix). There was also one Stint Duncomb who, in February, 1682, was commissioned a lieutenant in Captain Reresby's company in the First Regiment of Footguards (*CSPD*, 1682, p. 103). However, this gentleman was only twenty-seven in 1682, five years younger than Nell (Chester's *Marriage Licenses*).

86. *Doctor Burnet.* Gilbert Burnet, Chaplain of the Rolls, became known to the ladies of pleasure in the summer of 1679 when he attended Jane Roberts on her deathbed. Mrs. Roberts had been successively mistress to the King and to John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (*Burnet, History*, 1809, I, xxiii).