Beneath the Crescent: Unveiling Political Allegories About Muslims in Elkanah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco*

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Abstract

This study challenges the traditional critical commentary on the negative representation of Muslims in Restoration drama– as simply reflecting anti-Muslim sentiment at the time. Utilizing a new historicist approach, the researchers argue that playwrights like Elkanah Settle used Muslim characters and settings allegorically to address anxieties surrounding the sexual and political climate of Charles II's court. Analyzing Settle's *The Empress of Morocco* (1673) as a case study, the text demonstrates how depictions of lascivious Moors served as veiled critiques of the King's libertine lifestyle and the perceived moral corruption within the court. Furthermore, the new historicist lens reveals how Restoration playwrights in general employed Muslim characters as a *smokescreen* to comment on contemporary English politics, using them not just to reflect existing attitudes but to explore the complex interplay between cultural anxieties and political power. Thus, this study underscores the significance of analyzing early modern drama with respect to the internal sexual debates and power dynamics of British society.

Keywords: Settle, Restoration, Charles II, Muslim depictions, Sexual politics

1. Introduction

The large body of criticism available on the representations of Muslims in early modern English literature assumes that the negative – often sexual – representations associated with Muslims are a result of the contemporary hostilities against Muslims. The majority of studies understand early modern dramatization of Muslim figures only in relation to the historically tense relationship between East and West. Such readings create a distorted view of how the West perceived different Muslim peoples and their cultures by downplaying the intricate domestic aspects of the issue. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of reading early modern drama in terms of the internal political dimension of British politics. By taking a New Historicist view of the image of the Muslim in Elkanah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco* (1673), the researchers intend to underscore the idea that it is the contemporary references to sexual politics and religion, rather than anything else that shaped the Restoration stage's portrayal of Muslim culture and its characters. This approach resonates with broader critiques of gender and identity in literature, where marginalized figures are often employed as allegories to comment on societal and political anxieties (Alqaryouti & Ismail, 2019). Such frameworks reveal how the Restoration stage's depiction of Muslims not only reflects external hostilities but also critiques the domestic power dynamics and cultural constructs within English society.

To provide a deeper understanding of the portrayal of sex in Restoration drama, we need to delve into the historical context of the era and explore the social, religious, and political landscapes that shaped contemporary theatre and its approach to sexuality. In fact, the increasing openness in talking about sex in Restoration drama could be seen as a representation of the resistance to the strict Puritan doctrine that had been imposed in the interregnum under Puritan rule in the 1650s. This period experienced a very strong intervention by the conservative religious opinions of the Puritan leaders after their victory in the Civil War. During the Puritan rule, all areas of life were strictly monitored. For instance, major holidays were forbidden, playing in playhouses and concert halls was banned, and sexual freedom was suppressed. According to Capp (2012), the Adultery Act of 1650 proclaimed extramarital sexual relations as a capital crime, especially for women, and Puritan legislators targeted prostitution and excessive drinking, "bestowing virtue" on people through public whippings, disgracing, and the expulsion of violators to the nearby colonies.

Novak (2001) argues that the Restoration of Charles II marked, in particular, the younger generation's movement towards asserting their own individuality, which was represented by their desire to be sexually free. It marked a departure from the oppressive rules and authoritative paternalism that had been in fashion during the Puritan rule. Novak argues that the new generation demonstrated an emphatic enthusiasm for change away from the very strict Puritan ideology. After the decline of Puritan rule, people could freely attend plays discussing controversial topics such as adultery and homosexuality that had previously been censored. Through comedies, in

particular, playwrights portrayed the libertine life of the ruling class. One example is Thomas Killigrew's *Thomaso* (1664), where the main protagonist, Thomaso, defends his extramarital affairs:

> All the hony of Marriage, but none of the sting, Ned; I have a Woman without that boundless Folly, of better or worse; there's a kind of Non-sence in that Vow Fools onely swallow […] Our knots hold no longer than we love; No sooner wish a liberty but we take it. (346)

Similar examples include Celadon and Florimell's *Secret Love* (1667), the plot of which is based on love and sex incidents; Dryden's *An Evening's Love*, in which the characters are always in a continual search for sexual and libertine pleasures; and Thomas Betterton's *The Amorous Widow* (1670), in which some characters are involved in an endless pursuit of sensual desires.

The significance of this paper lies in its re-evaluation of Muslim portrayals in Restoration drama, shifting the focus from a simplistic interpretation of bigotry to a rich understanding of political and social critique. By employing a New Historicist approach, this study highlights how playwrights like Elkanah Settle used Muslim characters allegorically to comment on the moral and political corruption of Charles II's court. This perspective opens up new ways of reading early modern English drama, emphasizing the importance of context in interpreting literary works. The paper also contributes to broader discussions on the intersection of cultural representation, power dynamics, and sexual politics in literature, offering deeper insights into how these elements were intertwined in Restoration England. Ultimately, the study enriches the understanding of the period's theatre by revealing the complex motives behind the depiction of marginalized groups on stage.

2. Literature Review

Historical accounts reveal that the bawdy nature of Charles II's court provided the fuel for Restoration playwrights to explore similarly bold sexual themes in their works (Alnwairan, 2020). Notably, Charles II and his courtiers were entangled in several controversies involving affairs in the public. Matthew Jenkinson (2010) affirms that Charles and his more notorious courtiers spent their time in the pursuits of an indulgent life of mistresses, and Charles himself had many bastard children (212). According to James Turner (2002), Charles was known for his many affairs with women, from the low-born Nell Gwyn to the aristocratic Louise de Kerouaille (15). This publicly open pursuit of sexual relationships resulted in the king fathering 12 illegitimate children by seven of his mistresses (Fraser, 2011). Therefore, people became increasingly discontented as they realized that the king was not using his wealth for the good of the nation, but rather, for his pleasures. As a consequence, as Hutton (1989) describes, many of the English people doubted the reason for paying taxes which were then used for the personal pleasures of the monarch (338).

A few years into his reign, Charles's sexual behavior was creating considerable public anxiety. For example, as early as 1663, Samuel Pepys – an administrator of the English navy and a Member of Parliament – expressed his discontent with the King's sexual relationship with Lady Castlemain (Marotti, 1993). Nevertheless, the Licensing of the Press Act of 1662 prevented any possibility of direct criticism of Charles's sexual behavior. In fact, major criticism came from men of letters who found in literary production a safe space to express their concerns about this issue. In the second half of the 1660s, many playwrights investigated Charles's sexual excesses with a critical eye. Plays like Edmund Waller's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1664), the anonymous *Irena* (1664), and Roger Boyle's *The Black Prince* (1666) reflected the increasing public awareness and feelings of unease about Charles II's sex life. Hermanson (2014) observes that the "infatuated" rulers in these plays are not capable of performing their duties (37). Poetry was not more lenient toward the King's sexual habits. Many poets considered Charles II responsible for the declining and miserable state of the nation. Poets criticized the King, who preferred to spend his time with his mistresses instead of attending to the urgent issues facing the country. Poets like Andrew Marvell versified their unconventional ideas on kings and kingship in such an environment. Marvell's *The History of the Insipids* (1674) is a clear attack on monarchs and their excesses,

> Of kings curs'd be the power and name,
>
> [……..]
>
> What can there be in kings divine?
>
> The most are wolves, goats, sheep, or swine. (qtd. in Chernaik, 1995 p. 58)

In fact, as Charles was endowed with a luxurious and effeminate lifestyle, he did not care for other important matters, such as producing a legitimate successor. After a few years of marriage to Catherine of Braganza, it was evident that the royal couple was having difficulties producing a successor to the throne through the line of succession. The fact that several members of the Parliament were quite adamant on persuading Charles to divorce and remarry a Protestant female who could give the nation a legitimate successor was highlighted by Barry Coward (1994). A similar solution that was presented to the king was legitimizing his first born son for the purpose of making him the sole legal heir to the throne (Webb, 2014). James Scott, the 1st Duke of Monmouth, was born in the Netherlands as the eldest illegitimate son of Charles and his mistress Lucy Walter. The young James proved himself as a leader during the Second and Third Anglo-Dutch Wars. In addition, his role in subduing the rebellion of 1679 in Scotland made him a potential substitute for the Catholic Duke of York in the Whig propaganda. Many Whig leaders urged Charles to legitimize the Duke of Monmouth in order to prepare him to ascend the throne (De Krey, 2007). Charles ignored all these suggestions, and at the same time, continued his sexual adventures, producing new illegitimate offspring with his numerous mistresses (Masters, 2001).

While Charles II was pursuing love affairs with his favorites, England witnessed one of the most humiliating episodes in English history.

In 1667 the Dutch, who were still at war with England, decided to attack the English ships which were docked in the Medway River. The Dutch sailed up the river and attacked the helpless English ships. The English fleet endured massive casualties. London itself was endangered by the unexpected Dutch attack to the extent that many people fled the city. After the Dutch had retreated to the sea, angry mobs organized massive demonstrations against the king and his irresponsible policy (De Krey, 2007). People saw their king living in his own world of fantasies and sexual pleasures paying no attention to the good of the country. The Medway Raid put Charles's private life under the spotlight. People found themselves ruled by a king who was detached from reality by his desire to pursue sensual pleasures. As a direct political response, Parliament attempted to investigate the royal finances. The indulgent lifestyle was undeniably the foundation of many difficulties that the English kingdom experienced during Charles's rule. Such court freedom and libertinism shaped the political community as a whole, affected the entire nation's life, and, ultimately, defined the broad framework for foreign policy.

3. Method

This study adopts a New Historicist approach to analyze the representation of Muslim characters in Restoration drama, with a particular focus on Elkanah Settle's play. The New Historicist framework allows for an exploration of how the socio-political and cultural contexts of the time shaped literary works, considering them as part of the broader social and political discourse. By viewing the play as a product of its historical moment, the study seeks to uncover how the portrayal of Muslim characters served as a coded critique of the political and sexual anxieties surrounding the court of Charles II.

To achieve this, the research employs a textual analysis of *The Empress of Morocco* alongside historical documents from the Restoration period. The analysis is supplemented by a range of non-literary sources, including political pamphlets, Parliamentary petitions, religious tracts, and personal correspondence. These materials provide insight into the prevailing attitudes toward sexuality, power, and religious otherness, which influenced the depiction of Muslim characters on the Restoration stage.

New Historicists examine a text within the context of its time; therefore, they highlight the need to reconstruct the culture in which the work was written. Needless to say, the more you know about a culture, the more you understand its literary production (Hoelbling & Tally, 2007). New Historicism posits that literature is one form of social construction produced by its society. Literature, in turn, participates in shaping the culture that produced it. In line with these presumptions, a better knowledge of the social, political, and religious aspects of the Restoration period is necessary to interpret the literary works of that era. On that basis, the current study incorporates a variety of non-literary texts such as political and religious pamphlets, Parliamentary petitions, letters, and diaries, **to** contribute to a better understanding of the context in which a literary work was produced.

In his introduction to *The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance*, Stephen Greenblatt (1982) describes New Historicism as a practice that "challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between 'literary foreground' and 'political background' or, more generally, between artistic production and other kinds of social production" (p. 5). Greenblatt considers literary works as "fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests" rather than "as a fixed set of texts that are set apart from all other forms of expression [...] or as a stable set of reflections of historical facts that lie beyond them" (p. 6).

In this sense, New Historicist views are particularly useful to this study as they consider literature as a form of social discourse and examine the complex and interwoven relations between literature and culture. Consistent with New Historicist views, this study is based on the inclusion of historical settings in the analysis of literary texts. Therefore, the theatrical analysis of the plays under consideration in this study is tied to the main principles of the culture that produced them, namely the English Restoration era.

4. Results

The analysis of *The Empress of Morocco* reveals that Elkanah Settle utilized Muslim characters as allegorical tools to critique the moral and sexual corruption of Charles II's court. Rather than portraying Muslims as mere reflections of anti-Islamic sentiment, the lascivious depictions of Moors served as a convenient metaphor for the libertine behaviours within the English monarchy. The exoticized and indulgent Moorish characters mirrored the King's unfaithfulness, his pursuit of mistresses, and the general atmosphere of excess in the court. This allegorical use of Muslim figures allowed Settle and other Restoration playwrights to critique the sexual politics of the time without directly attacking the crown, creating a veiled yet effective commentary on the corruption at the heart of the English elite.

Moreover, the political dimension of these representations shows that Muslim characters functioned as a "smokescreen" for internal critiques, rather than addressing England's relations with the Muslim world. The focus of Restoration dramatists was on power dynamics within the English court, and Muslim figures became a convenient symbol for the anxieties surrounding political and sexual power. By tapping into cultural stereotypes about Ottoman debauchery and harem politics, Settle crafted a narrative that covertly criticized the moral decay and political intrigues of Charles II's reign. Thus, the study underscores that the portrayal of Muslims in these plays goes beyond simplistic bigotry, instead revealing a more complex interplay of political allegory and social commentary.

5. Discussion

There was no such thing as a secret for the libertine Restoration courts. As Susan Owen (1996) points out, it was the case during the Restoration that events of the court entered the dimension of public discussions. As a public platform for courtly intrigue, the Restoration stage managed to let out the secrecy of the affairs of the state for everybody to see. For this study, it is appropriate to investigate the use of the supposed scandalous activities of the Muslim court as the allegory for the luxurious and sexual excess of the court in England. For instance, Elkanah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco* (1673) depicts the conflicts at the Moroccan court that are initiated by the lustful

Moroccan empress and her lover, Crimalhaz as a means through which he could suggest a similar British environment in which libertinism and pursuit of sensual pleasures were the norm.

Anne Hermanson (2014) points out that when *The Empress of Morocco* was first performed at court in 1671, Settle was well acquainted with the court milieu and had a clear understanding of its manners. Settle, who was also attached to some leading political figures, understood the nature of the dangers within the English court. In the early 1670s, it was clear that Charles's mistresses were competing for more influence at court in an attempt to drive the King's policy to serve their ends. Charles's mistresses were seen as increasingly threatening to the gains of the Restoration settlement which included the preservation of English liberties, property, and Protestant faith. The anti-Catholic propaganda played on the fears of the political nations in terms of the increasing influence of Catholicism and popery in the court – as in the case of Charles's most hated mistress Louise de Kerouaille. Catholic female influence in court initiated the fear of a loss of true English sovereignty through of the spreading of foreign hegemony. In opposition canon, Catholicism was always associated with sexual excess, debauchery, and lust that were combined with a desire to control the political affairs of the country against the Protestant majority.

In an interesting study of the play's political dimensions, William Bulman (2012) diagnoses the hidden threads between the plot and the contemporary affairs that Settle intended to highlight. Bulman argues that Settle's play was by no means a celebration of royalty. Instead, it offered a harsh critique of court culture, endorsing public examination of the monarchy and even incorporating scandalous rumor. In fact, Settle's play is a clear example of how Restoration drama discussed and satirized the elite's sexual behavior with witty dialogues. The close study of the circumstances that surrounded the composition of the play suggests that the depiction of the eroticization of Muslims was heavily influenced by the lascivious nature of the English court.

The Empress of Morocco deals with the fierce conflict over power in the Moroccan court. The play opens with Muly Labas, son of the emperor of Morocco, imprisoned alongside Morena, daughter of King Taffalet. It is discovered then that the reason behind the prince and princess' misery is that they challenged their fathers' wishes and decided to get married. The lovers are condemned to death by the Emperor, and as a result, King Taffalet declares war and marches with his forces to Morocco. The playwright then introduces the major evil force in his play, the "Queen Mother," Laula. The Queen plots with her lover, Crimalhaz, to murder the old emperor. The plot works well, and Muly Labas is freed and declared emperor of Morocco while Taffalet's forces withdraw. The Queen Mother proves to have a Machiavellian character and explains to Crimalhaz that her ambition does not stop at that point. The Queen plans to murder her son in order to offer her lover the Moroccan throne. She decides first to eliminate the noble and loyal prince, Muly Hamet, the general of the Moroccan army. The Queen's plot endangers the love between Muly Hamet and the Queen's daughter, the virtuous princess Mariamne.

Muly Hamet returns home from one of his campaigns and accidentally discovers the adulterous relationship between the Queen Mother and Crimalhaz. Muly Hamet tells the young king of the shocking news, but the Queen Mother manages to reverse the charge and accuses Muly Hamet of attempting her virtue. The King sentences his general to be banished from the kingdom forever. The Queen Mother mistakenly causes Morena tokill her husband, and pronounces Crimalhaz the new king. Crimalhaz turns against the Queen Mother and forgives Morena. In order to secure his rule, he sends the Queen Mother to prison. Before she is taken out, the queen stabs Morena and commits suicide. Eventually, Muly Hamet returns, with the help of Taffalet, and enters the city without resistance as the soldiers of the Moroccan army accept him as the rightful emperor. The play ends with the reunion of Muly Hamet and Mariamne and with the death of the villain, Crimalhaz.

Settle satirizes the irresponsible nature of the English court in various ways. His play is replete with references to male characters obsessed with beautiful women. When Muly Hamet returns from one of his campaigns, he expresses his deep feelings to his lover, Mariamne*:*

> I am here more blest —
>
> Than if I an Imperial Seat possest.
>
> Whilst in your Breast an Empire I obtain,
> [*to Mariamne.*
>
> Not only Kings, but Gods unenvied reign.
>
> Beauty would almost Infidels create,
>
> Who, beyond Love, can wish a higher state? (II.ii 14)[1]

At this point, Settle clarifies the danger of the uncontrolled passions of statesmen. Settle shows how easily leaders are distracted by women and neglect their political duties. The consequences of this dangerous diversion can affect the present status of the whole country and determine, to a great extent, its future. In the play, the brave and powerful leader is completely conquered by the beauty of Princess Mariamne. Later on, Abdelcador, a friend of Muly Hamet, notices the effects of the charming princess on Muly Hamet:

[1] All quotes from the play are taken from the Early English Books Online edition accessed at http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A36757.0001.001

> Oh Charming Sex! —
>
> How vast a Circle does thy Magick take?
>
> The highest Spirits humblest Lovers make.
>
> All that Heroick Greatness, which but now
>
> Made haughty Foes and stubborn Nations bow,
>
> Turns Vassal to a Smile, a Looks disguise:
>
> Who conquer Thousands are one Woman's Prize. (II.ii 14)

The emphasis on the effects of strong passion on political figures throughout Settle's play draws the attention to a similar contemporary dimension that concerned the playwright as well as the nation, namely the court's sexuality. In his play, Settle satirizes this increasing trend of effeminacy at the English royal court.

Historically, Charles II was known for his effeminate behavior as early as the period of exile in the Continent. The wandering prince and other exiled royalists were associated with licentious and scandalous behavior. It was not surprising that the young prince's frivolous and irresponsible behavior became a source of discontent to some of the wiser advisors (Smith, 2003; Staves, 2004). In 1658 James Butler, 1st Duke of Ormonde, confided his anxiety about the king's conduct in a letter to Edward Hyde, one of the king's most trustworthy advisors. Ormonde wrote:

> I must now freely confess to you that what you have written of the King's unreasonable impatience at his stay at Bruges is a greater danger to my hopes of his recovery than the strength of his enemies […] I fear his immoderate delight in empty, effeminate, and vulgar conversation is become an irresistible part of his nature. (qtd. in Ollard, 1979, p.117)

Charles's sexual adventures and effete behavior were a major source of worry for those who sought to restore the monarchy in England. Ormonde's observation provides us with a basic understanding of Charles's behavior in exile which was, shortly, transferred to England after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Ormonde was able, based on his observations, to predict the impact of the irresponsible and effeminate behavior of Charles on the political state. The young prince kept women around him all the time and put himself under their influence. Instead of gathering support for his cause, Charles spent his years in exile playing games, gambling, and seeking pleasure. Carolly Erickson (2006) points out that during his exile period, Charles "sought oblivion in sexual excess, spending his time in bathhouses and brothels, seeking new mistresses, ceasing to care what anyone thought" (206). It was not surprising then that this lifestyle was transported with him to England.

Settle alluded to the infatuated character of Charles in more than one place in the course of commenting on the character of Muly Labas, the young king of Morocco. In Act III, the Queen Mother openly observes one of the flaws of Muly Labas as she mocks the idea that monarchs are inherently "gen'rous," "kind," and "good natured." She further suggests they can be swayed by "one feign'd Tear," as a single fake tear can manipulate their decisions (III.i 25). In a sense, the play extends the Queen Mother's observation to include all monarchs of this sort. The Queen Mother establishes her perception of the weaknesses of her son and applies it to all monarchs. Her argument carries significant implications for the Restoration audience, who were annoyed by the excessively libertine and lecherous courtiers. Settle's play highlights the fact that sexual drives can sometimes be used as an agency to win dominion over politicians, or the king himself, in order to interfere in the country's decision-making. Thus, Settle's message is clear: sexual passion in a very politically sensitive milieu, like the court, can be destructive and harmful to the royal family as well as the whole nation.

Settle skillfully designed the plot and the setting of *The Empress of Morocco* to highlight the drastic effects of sexual effeminacy and libertine behavior in the court. When characters replace the more serious issues with sexual and sensual desires, corruption and anarchy spread everywhere. The weak Muly Labas, who falls prey to his leniency towards women, hastens his own death and the tragic end of his reign. He obeys all the instructions of the evil Queen Mother and trusts the naïve young Queen that, in turn, leads to his destruction. In the play, Muly Labas showed unbounded trust for the women around him. He did not suspect his mother's activities and enabled his naïve wife to end his life. The young Moroccan king, foolishly, asks the advice of his mother and never doubts her intentions. When the Queen Mother tells him that Muly Hamet attempted her virtue, he innocently believes her: "her blood does run within my Veins, / By instinct I know she all that's base disdains" (III.i 23). The king shows traits of a naïve ruler and an unwise judge who lets his heart rule his head. The Young Queen realizes this and asks him to abandon his “unmanly fears” and show “courage equal to [his] Love" (I.i 3). Even when he discovers Crimalhaz's plot, the king passively wonders if there is "no Policy nor Art that may / Prevent his Treason?" (IV.iii 42). The Queen Mother considers him as an "easie Fool," and mocks him for being so "gen'rous, easie, kind, good-natur'd" (III.i 25).

In a similar sense, Charles was always surrounded by women to the extent that his court was, sometimes, likened to a seraglio. In fact, as Stephen Bardle (2012) points out, Charles was not only criticized by playwrights but also by poets. Andrew Marvell, for instance, criticized Charles's sexual behavior and described Charles's court as a seraglio in one of his poems. Similarly, an anonymous poem that appeared in 1668 attacked Charles's irresponsible foreign policy and accused him of establishing a new seraglio. The poet wonders, in the course of attacking the sale of Dunkirk, "but why, we do not know, / Unless t'erect a new Seraglio" (qtd. in Bardle, 2012 p.150). In Settle's play, King Muly Labas holds a large seraglio which he strictly protects and cares for. Remarkably, the seeds of the decline of the Moroccan Kingdom hide in the seraglio. The scandalous behavior of the Queen Mother and her adulterous relationship with Crimalhaz

takes place in the harem and leads the actions of the play to the climax. The sensual desires of the Queen Mother result in the tragic death of two kings; her husband and her son. The Moroccan Kingdom mourns because of the harmful consequences of the deadly mixture of sex and politics.

The courtly life Settle dramatizes in his play resembles, in a broader sense, the manners and lifestyle of Charles's court. *The Empress of Morocco* presents members of the royal family who pursue sexual pleasures and ignore their responsibilities in that course. In addition, the play highlights the hidden roles of lusty and ambitious courtiers and their interference in the political sphere and decision-making arena. The Queen Mother seems to have her own philosophical views about sexual pleasures. She considers pursuing sensual passions a god that is superior to all other gods: “We'd here below enjoy our Chiefest Good,/ And reap Delights which they ne're understood. (III.i 18)

The Queen Mother is also critical of Law and Religion. She considers them to be so too idealistic to be implemented on human beings, who hold deep in their inner souls a tendency to err and pursue their desires. When the Queen Mother realizes that her relationship with Crimalhaz is discovered, she satirizes the authority of Law and Religion on their sexual freedom, which will bring their doom. In addition, the Queen Mother shows resistance to the traditional norms of society and seems to be developing her own set of values in relation to her personal freedom: “O’er fear and vertue too, I have this odds: / My will's my King, my pleasures are my Gods. (IV.iii 52). At this point, the Queen Mother defies the old values of the patriarchal social system in an attempt to satisfy her sensual desires. She challenges the "natural hierarchical order" by stepping outside the strict sexual norms of the Muslim society she lives in.

Settle's play highlights the danger of using feminine sexual allure as an agency toward power, which is personified in the character of the Queen Mother. This strange mixture ends with more effeminate and passive male dependents, a situation similar to Charles and his court. The play has no strong or active male figures who can stop the Queen Mother's ambitions. The father figure, who usually stands for the superior authority and patriarchy in the house, is absented from the scene. The audience knows only about his mysterious death in the first act. The absence of the dominant male figure in the play leaves the ambitious and lustful female figure free to exert her influence on the people around her. Without men of equal influence to face her schemes at court, the Queen Mother finds it easy to manipulate the policy of the whole country. Her evil influence leads to chaos and infighting as well as issues with foreign policy matters that prove to have severe consequences on both the royal family and the state. The Queen Mother's schemes and disruption in the political sphere endanger the whole nation, cause dissent, and encourage foreign powers to invade the kingdom. Crimalhaz's rebellion and King Taffalet's invasion of Morocco are among the direct outcomes of the Queen's interference in the politics of her country. In a similar way, the mistresses around Charles II participated in shaping the general policies of England. For example, the influence of his Catholic mistresses swayed him toward more pro-French preferences. As a result, the King neglected the wide hopes of his people for an alliance with the Protestant Dutch. In fact, Charles adopted the opposite direction by waging two destructive and unpopular wars against the Dutch while aligning himself with Europe's rising Catholic force, France. Therefore, by the means of using this allegorical setting, Settle warned of the destructive outcomes of the unrestricted involvement of women in national politics. In a hint to Charles's complex court life, Settle presents a court milieu in which power relations are reversed as domination and authority lie mainly in the hands of a few females.

In the play, Settle highlights how the sexual libertinism of the court is determined by the power that this institution holds. Crimalhaz summarizes the relationship between power and sexual libertinism as he addresses the eunuch, Achmat: “Princes Pleasures should Alliance hold / With their great Pow'r, be free and uncontrou'ld (III.i 18). At this point, Crimalhaz understands the dynamics between power and sex in his time. He stresses the importance of keeping the passions of royalty inside the walls of their castles away from curious eyes. Knowledge of the sexual adventures of powerful people should be as inscrutable as the mind of God and should protect its secrecy. Crimalhaz is aware that the power he enjoys from his relationship with the Queen Mother enables him to pursue his passions and sexual desires freely. Settle's application of Crimalhaz's opinions to Charles II's court is clear: the monarch and his courtiers can take advantage of their political and social status to supply themselves with all necessary means of fulfilling their pleasures and living in luxury. Settle projects the libertine court behavior onto the stage and presents his audience, who hail from different social classes, with an insight into the secretive world of court life. In the scene description, the audience discovers all the elements of sex and power that enable Crimalhaz and the Queen Mother to fulfill their desires. The scene description reads, "*Crimalhaz and Queen Mother sleeping on a Couch, a Table standing by, with Crimalhaz's Plume of Feathers, and his Drawn Sword upon it*" (III.i 15). The feathers signify the aesthetic pleasure of the encounter while the discarded sword implies the defenseless martial male, seduced by the desires of the liaison. Settle also designs a separate scene in which bold signals for adultery and sexual intercourse take place. A witness – Muly Hamet – is summoned to comment on the incident and further illustrate the ugliness of the action. Muly Hamet wonders,

> Laula in Crimalhaz his Arms asleep!
>
> Ha! Does she thus for her dead Husband weep?
>
> Oh fond and amorous Queen! has Lust such Charms,
>
> Can make Her fly to an Adulterers Arms? (III.i 16)

Muly Hamet's long monologue that follows this excerpt expands the duration of the sexual scene and further exposes the couple to the gaze of the audience. Muly Hamet comments on the immoral behavior of the court and suggests a way to “right its wrongs”: “My Hand shall Act what to his Guilt is due. / For, lest I should my Queens Disgrace proclaime, / I'le right her Wrongs, but I'le conceal her Shame

(III.i 16). Muly Hamet's long monologue gives more time for the audience to consider and reflect on this particular action and think of its implications for Charles's court.

Furthermore, Settle uses strong sexual language that emphasizes the obscene practices of the court. When the Queen Mother forges charges of sexual assault against Muly Hamet, she uses language that produces sympathy for her on the one hand and disgust for the assaulter on the other. The phraseology the playwright uses in this scene and other similar scenes reflects his critique of the English court milieu which was filled with rampant sexual desires. Phrases like "savage passions," "unruly Heat," and "ravish" (III.i 21) are all strong indicators of the sexual charges directed against Muly Hamet. The sensuous language and setting underline the sexual violence of court life.

Like his play *Empress of Morocco*, Settle's other dramatic works also contain numerous references to wicked, lascivious women who gain power through trickery and deceit. Towards the end of the 1670s, Settle became a very zealous writer for the Whig Exclusionists and a member of the radical Green Ribbon Club. Whig Exclusionists produced and supported the Exclusion Bill that sought to exclude the King's brother, the Duke of York, from the throne of England because he was a Roman Catholic. At the same time, the Green Ribbon Club was the most notorious group in the Whig faction. In *Radical Whigs* Melinda Zook (1999) explains that they were responsible for anti-popery and anti-Duke of York activities, effigy-burning processions, and for providing Whigs with a place to meet and discuss political issues (p. 7). Settle supported the views of the Whig party in many of his literary productions during the late 1670s and early 1680s. In *The Female Prelate being the history of the life and death of Pope Joan* (1680), Settle connects women's uncontrolled sexual lust and ambition for power with contemporary Catholic threats that were, as he believed, engulfing the nation. Settle personifies such threats in his portrayal of the character of Pope Joan who is eventually described as

> A Whore, a Poysoner! nay, a Fathers Whore,
>
> And Fathers Poysoner! Oh my bloated Soul!
>
> O most unnatural doubly damn'd *Hyena*,
>
> Mixt in my Fathers shame! Oh horrour, horrour! (V.i 59)[1]

Similar to *The Empress of Morocco*, *The Female Prelate* plays on the widespread fears of the danger of foreign influence and domination in the court represented by the influence of some of Charles's Catholic mistresses (Alnwairan et al., 2022). Settle warns of the female evil "whores" who use their political power to manipulate the politics of the nation to serve earthly desires and lusts. In a sense, *The Female Prelate* highlights this type of hideous feminine monstrosity. The major female characters in both plays commit regicide and, subsequently, pursue the destruction of their heirs. Settle blames lustful females for the destruction and miseries of whole families and kingdoms. The playwright uses the motif of the lustful woman on multiple levels. First, the female figure is presented as a corrupt court member who is capable of interfering decisively in the state's political sphere. Second, these females are dangerous because they have hostile and destructive foreign agendas, a clear reference to Charles's Catholic mistresses. Finally, they serve as an enemy within the nation's most influential political institution, the court.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study breaks away from a simplistic view of the negative Muslim portrayals in Restoration drama. While some scholars claim that these representations are a clear manifestation of bigotry, such analysis does not take into account more significant facets. These plays were part of the politically and socially charged atmosphere of early modern English society. Through employing Muslim characters and settings, the playwrights like Settle gave the audience what they wanted, while presenting them with the sexual-political realities of the court of Charles II. This study illustrates how the play under discussion uses allegorical figures purposefully to expose the problematic aspects of court libertinism.

During the Restoration period, the topics of sexually deviant and immoral behavior enjoyed common condemnation by opposition writers who focused on the moral flaws of Charles II and the members of his court. His infidelity toward his subjects, lack of commitment, and pursuit of numerous mistresses served as the inspiration for those allegorical critiques. The evidence for this is found in the way Elkanah Settle and other playwrights portrayed 'lascivious Moorish characters,' using them to reflect the excesses of courtiers who paraded themselves as jovial figures, celebrating their indulgence in carnal pleasures. Similarly, the Ottoman harem and stories of sultans' debauchery provided rich material for metaphors, conveniently allowing the figure of Charles II and his multiple 'favorites' to be superimposed upon these exotic images.

However, a crucial point emerges: liberal or conservative, Restoration dramatists were more interested in power politics within the English court than in expressing their feelings about political relations with Muslims. The portrayal of Muslims in these plays serves as a veil that conceals contemporary concerns related to power and sexuality within the English court. By analyzing the role of the Moor beyond the surface level of hatred towards Muslims, it becomes evident that Restoration dramatists employed this image to covertly discuss the sexual and political nature of Charles II's court. Consequently, studying Restoration drama within the context of the period in

[1] All quotes from the play are taken from the Early English Books Online edition accessed at http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A36757.0001.001

which it was written, with attention to the evidence of allegorical representation, is essential for understanding the messages that were communicated to the spectators

5.1 Implications of the Findings for Contemporary Scholarship

This research challenges the common interpretation that negative portrayals of Muslims in Restoration drama simply reflect the anti-Muslim sentiment of the time. By suggesting that playwrights like Elkanah Settle used these depictions allegorically to critique the political and sexual climate of Charles II's court, it encourages scholars to look for similar allegorical content in other Restoration works. This approach can lead to a broader and richer understanding of how literature from this period engaged with contemporary social and political issues.

The study's use of a New Historicist approach highlights the value of interdisciplinary methods in literary studies. By integrating historical, political, and social contexts into the analysis, it demonstrates how these methods can provide deeper insights into literary texts. This approach can be applied to other periods and genres, encouraging scholars to explore the intersections between literature and its broader cultural milieu.

The research underscores the role of literature as a medium for cultural and political discourse. Settle's use of Muslim characters and settings to comment on the English court's sexual and political dynamics shows how literature can reflect and critique societal issues. Contemporary scholars can draw parallels between historical and modern uses of allegory in literature, examining how writers navigate and critique their socio-political environments through their works.

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Authors' contributions

Dr. Met'eb Alnwairan was responsible for the study design and critical revisions. Dr. Met'eb Alnwairan and Prof. Ala Eddin Sadeq oversaw data collection and analysis. Dr. Marwan Alqaryouti drafted the manuscript, and Dr. Menia Almenia provided substantial revisions to improve its intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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