SEXLESS SPIRITS?: GENDER IDEOLOGY AND DRYDEN’S MUSICAL MAGIC

“it is non sense to say Woman-Spirits, as if spirits had sexes”—from John Dryden’s commentary on Elkanah Settle’s The Empress of Morocco

John Dryden’s scenes of magical spectacle in The Enchanted Island (with William Davenant), Tyrannick Love, King Arthur, The Indian Queen, and The Indian Emperour have attracted considerable scholarly attention. Studies by J.M. Armistead, Maxmillian Novak and others have carefully parsed the texts, identifying the occult sources Dryden used to fashion his supernatural creatures. Other scholars, most notably Curtis Price, have focused on the beautiful music Henry Purcell and others composed for these singing spirits. The current paper brings the musical and the dramatic together, as I investigate the relationship between spiritual and gender hierarchies in these scenes.

1690s revivals of both The Indian Queen and its sequel The Indian Emperour use males singing in the treble range to portray a powerful God and a benevolent female spirit. On the other hand, actresses played the airy male spirits Ariel in The Enchanted Island and Philidel in King Arthur, spirits who despite their “sex” reaffirm Restoration ideas about the persuasive and seductive qualities of the female voice. A more misogynistic example of the power of the female voice is found in the 1694 revival of Tyrannick Love, as Damilcar sings a siren song by Henry Purcell designed to seduce St. Catharine from her vow of chastity. The composer assigns her musical conventions associated with amorous or seductive music on the Restoration stage—the key of G minor, chromaticism, melismas emphasizing the pleasures of love, and pervasive repetition. Predictably, Damilcar is brought low by her impertinence, reduced to cowering in a corner by St. Catharine’s guardian angel, Amariel, and his “flaming Sword.” As these examples make clear, Dryden’s spirits often occupy an ambiguously gendered, but not “sexless” space: his texts, the performers, and the music work together to create roles that combine masculinity and femininity in ways that reveal contemporary prejudices about both sexes.