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Wiki Draft

Women in Restoration Theatre

Restoration

The reinstatement of Charles II in 1660 marked the end of Puritan control in England. This period known as The Restoration, commenced great prosperity in terms of colonization, trade and religious freedom. This time frame also brought about many new poets, actors, playwrights and artists. Theatre’s that had been shut down for eighteen years under Puritan reign were now able to re-open their doors to the public. (Barnicle). The shift back to a monarchial rule led to an abundance of artistic expression to celebrate the end of Puritanism. (Ferreira).



Charles II of England

The Start of Restoration Theatre

During the Elizabethan Era (1558-1603) and the Jacobean period (1604-1641) theatre blossomed. This came to an end once the Puritans took control in 1642, banning all theatrical productions.(Wordpress.com). Strict Puritan laws made it nearly impossible for performances to take place. Theater productions were done in secrecy, many times in a playwright’s own personal theatre. The arts were able to make a comeback after Charles II was reinstated in 1660. His love of French style theatre provoked him to issue patents to playwrights Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant. Free creative expression led to a variety of different theatre styles and techniques. (Ferreira). Mixtures of comedies and tragedies birthed crude humor, advanced stage technology and for the first time in English history the appearance of women actresses.

The Adaption of Women in Theatre

Prior to Restoration, women were often times portrayed by “pretty,” young boys. Considering the prior Puritan Era, this at first seemed a bit scandalous, even though women naturally brought a more realistic feel to the stage. The use of the female sex meant for some raunchy humor, vulgar language and the exploitation of women’s bodies. (wordpress.com).

“Breeches,” scenes were acceptable during this time. This referred to women actresses dressing in breeches and acting as male characters. Exposed legs and ankles as opposed to long skirts helped to sexualize productions. Other visual attempts involved women wearing ripped clothing and often times even bare breasts. “The bosom as a letterbox,” was used to draw attention to the actresses’ chest, another attempt at sexualizing productions. This involved a woman using her chest as a storage area, for “letters,” or other materials. (Williams).

“Rape,” scenes became common occurrences. They were used to create scandal to ultimately draw in the audience’s attention. This provoked the ideology that men dominate over women, whom they consider their “property.” In Aphra Behn’s, *Rover,* we see the rape of Florinda which reinstates the theory of sexual violence and possession. (Williams).These performances allowed actresses to remain pure while still satisfying the audience’s sexual drive. (Anderson).

Most of society viewed actresses as whores or prostitutes, because they displayed their bodies inappropriately on stage. (Williams). They were also known to have affairs with wealthy young men. This was mainly due to the fact that their income was significantly lower compared to their male counterpart, and they desired lavish treatment. (Anderson). Behind the stage, actresses were prone to sexual advances. They were not taken seriously, and men were constantly watching as they changed in their fitting rooms. Actresses married to other actors were the only ones safe from this perversion.(Williams).



“Bosom as a letterbox”

Although unclear, most historians would argue Margret Hughes was the first woman to ever perform in England, in Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1660). (“Restoration Stage Actresses” n.d.).Other popular actresses would include Nell Gwyn, Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle.

Margret Hughes (1645-1719)

Also referred to as Peg, Margret Hughes was known for being the first actress to legally act on an English stage in 1660. Her first appearance was in Thomas Killigrew’s adaption of Shakespeare’s *Othello,* where audiences were shocked to see a woman play the role of Desmonda.(Santoski). Her noted charm had set the bar high for other actresses to follow. According to Samuel Pepys, she was said to be “a great beauty, with dark ringlet hair, a fine figure and particularly good legs.”(“Margret Hughes.”). It was implied Margret had frequent affairs, one of her earliest with Sir Charles Sedley, she was rumored to also have been with Charles II for a limited period. It is not known who fathered her first son Arthur during this time frame. She eventually found her true love Prince Rupert the Duke of Cumberland, and birthed her daughter Ruperta 1663. (Santoski). Rupert’s title assisted Margret in her in becoming a member of the King’s Company in 1669, where she was able to remain free of arrest for any debt. She continued acting in 1676 with the Duke’s Company until Rupert’s death in 1682, where she began squandering her fortune. She died in 1719. (“Margret Hughes.”)



Margret Hughes as Desmonda

Nell Gwyn (1650-1687)

At the young age of fifteen Eleanor Gwyn started her career off by selling oranges at Drury Lane theatre. Her bright personality and irresistible beauty caught the eye of the leading actor of the time, Charles Hart. (Anderson). It is said she most likely took the stage in December 1665, stunning audiences with her rare talent. First called “pretty witty Nell,” by Samuel Pepys, she took on roles in plays such as *Secret Love* and *All Mistaken.*(Johnson). Although, mostly known for her comedic performances she often times acquired roles in romantic dramas. She later became the leading comedienne in the King’s Company in 1666. After numerous affairs with Lord Buckhurst and the 6th Earl of Dorset, she became Charles II’s mistress. The two had met at a theatre in Lincoln Inn Fields. In 1670, Nell birthed her first son from King Charles II, forcing her to retire from her acting career. Her last production in January 1670 was *Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards.* (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). The remainder of her days were spent living extravagantly with the king and his court. Even after Charles’ death in 1685, Nell continued to live off of his fortune. Her life tragically ended when she passed away from apoplexy in 1687.

**Nell Gwyn

Elizabeth Barry (1658-1713)

Elizabeth Barry is recognized as one of the most influential tragic actresses of the time. Although Elizabeth was born into a rich royalist family, she was raised by Sir William and Henrietta Davenant. Her family was forced to give her away at a young age, after losing their wealth. At the age of seventeen, Elizabeth debuted in Thomas Otway’s, *Alcibiades.* (Scott).Otway eventually fired her due to her lack of acting skills. It was not until she met her love, the Earl of Rochester that she began to take her career seriously and became a notable comedienne. After taking acting lessons from the Earl of Rochester, Barry was able to make a comeback in the play *Mustapha,* where she played the queen of Hungary. (Encyclopedia Britannica).She later developed into a determined tragic actress inspiring famous playwright Thomas Otway. Elizabeth portrayed a “desirable orphan,” in Otway’s *Orphan.* (Scott).This particular role is said to have made Elizabeth famous. She is also known for her roles in *The Fatal Marriage* and *Venice Preserved.* Elizabeth portrayed such deep emotions on stage, she often times brought the audience to tears. According to Thomas Betterton, an English actor, “*Elizabeth’s acting gave success to plays that would disgust the most patient reader.”* (Encyclopedia Britannica). Portraits depict Elizabeth as a sharp, very plain heavy set woman. After birthing two children by Lord Rochester and Sir George Etheredge, Elizabeth officially retired in 1709. Never married, she died November 7th 1713.



Elizabeth Barry

Anne Bracegirdle (1674-1748)

Parented by Thomas Betterton and his wife, Anne Bracegirdle made her debut at age six in *Orphan,* at Dorset Stage.(Encyclopedia Britannica). A very attractive actress of the time, she was claimed to be innocent and moral. With the aid of Thomas Betterton the manager of Drury Lane, Anne excelled in her career as a comedic actress. She appeared in many of Congreve’s works including *Love for love* and *The Mourning Bride* as well as Shadwell’s *Squire of Alsatia.* Moving to Haymarket Theatre in 1705 sparked a rivalry with Anne Odfield in regards to the part of Mrs. Brittle, in the play the “*Amorous Widow*.” (“Anne Bracegirlde”).The audience was left to determine who better suited the part, and ultimately voted Odfield to play the role. Anne then quit acting only to return in 1709. Anne’s virtue had caught the eye of several men, it is rumored she was the cause of actor William Mountfort’s death. Captain Richard Hill a pursuer of Anne’s, stabbed Mountfort to death in a jealous rage, presuming the pair had intimate relations. (“Anne Bracegirdle.”). Needless to say, Captain Richard Hill and Anne were never lovers, but it is said she married William Congreve in secrecy.(Encyclopedia Britannica). Her later years were spent with Betterton running their own theatre company, called The New Playhouse. Her following productions included both of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *Othello,* as well as Aphra Behn’s *The Widow Ranter.* (Iola).She was buried in Westminster Abbey after her death in 1748.



Anne Bracegirdle

Women Playwrights

It was exceptionally difficult for women to emerge as playwrights during Restoration. Often time’s women were not taken as seriously as their male counterpart. Women were additionally paid substantially less in this line of work. There were few women who were able to overcome these obstacles, the two most well-known being Aphra Behn and Susanna Centrlivre.(Nestvold).

Aphra Behn (1640-1689)

Very little is known about Aphra Behn’s early life. Her first known job was as a spy for King Charles II in 1666. (Steibel). Three years later, she left this position for the world of theatre where she debuted her play, *The Forced Marriage,* at the Duke’s Theatre Company in 1670. She wrote her most successful play *The Rover,* in 1677. (Nestvold). The scandalous rape scene in *The Rover*, birthed the sexually risqué trend for her other plays to follow. Aphra received much criticism for the continued sexualization of her works. One contemporary, Alexander Pope wrote of her plays, *“The stage how loosely does Astraea tread, who fairly puts all characters to bed.”*(Jokinen).Aphra also specialized in comedies, many focusing on the idea of “forced marriage.” “Living in a male-dominated society, she riskily portrayed her female characters as strong, independent women who were capable of making their own decisions.” (Nestvold).She was shockingly arrested in 1682, for a heinous prologue in her play *Like Father, Like Son.* She was certainly released from jail shortly after. Her later years were spent writing books of poetry, *Poems upon Several Occasions* and *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684)*.* (Jokinen.).Her empowering messages were expressed in the twenty plays she formulated over the course of her lifetime.



Aphra Behn

Susanna Centlivre(1667-1723)

Susanna Centlivre wrote seventeen plays throughout her career. Her French adaptions made her tragi-comedies tremendously cherished.(Nestvold). She utilized criticism in an effort to open her plays to greater audiences. An English writer and actress, she was left in poverty after her second husband named Caroll was killed in a tragic duel. (Encyclopedia.com). She wrote her first tragedy *The Perjured Husband,* in 1700. Prior to marrying her third husband Joseph Centlivre, she wrote eight other plays as a source of income. Not much is truly known about her early years, but many interesting stories have surfaced. One in particular, that Susanna had disguised herself as a man to attend Cambridge University.(Broadstrokes.com). She worked with different genres such as farces, comedies, tragedies and often times even blended these together. Her gender biased themes and portrayal of marriage was considered a bit controversial. Her most impressive famous works include *The Busie Body* and *The Tatler.* The *Busie Body* became extremely recognized for its use of satire comedy as well as sympathetic comedy. Susanna was often criticized for her using “slang,” in her plays. (Broadstrokes.com).

Other Female Roles

Women carried a variety of different roles in regards to theatre. There were some women who even managed theatres during this time. This is true for Charlotte Clark who managed the Little Theater in Haymarket London. Also Lady Henrietta Maria Davenant became the manager of the Duke’s theatre company with some help from the Bettertons. (Nestvold).



The Haymarket Theatre, London

Themes

The appearance of women provoked new elements and material used in theatre. Typical social anxieties such as cuckolding, shaming and seduction re-emerged from the Elizabethan Era. These particular elements revealed to be more realistic during Restoration, due to the fact women actresses were used instead of men attempting to act as women. Furthermore, the use of actresses made seductive scenes more realistic.(Ferreira). The transformation of gender attitudes was also massive in this time period. Scenes of rape left the audience feeling sympathetic for the woman victim. Women started being viewed as heroes and men ultimately began to change their views towards women. (Galloway).

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