

The Aphra Behn Page

Women in the Theater after the Restoration

After the Restoration in 1660, Charles II brought an innovative addition to the English theater: women were allowed to take the stage as actresses. The novelty of having women on stage created something of a stir, but for the most part the reaction of the public was positive, especially that of the young men who regularly chose their mistresses from the ranks of the new professionals. Many of the new actresses were women who intentionally used their position to achieve liaisons with titled gentlemen and thus increase their meager income. One of the most famous was of course Nell Gwyn, who became the mistress of Charles II. Another, Elizabeth Barry, outlived her noble patron the Earl of Rochester by several decades, and later enjoyed the reputation of being one of the greatest actresses of the age. Not all actresses used the stage as a market, however: Mrs. Betterton helped manage the highly successful Duke's Company with her husband, training the younger actresses, and her pupil Anne Bracegirdle had the reputation of living a strict moral life.

Despite their popularity, women did not enjoy the same status as men in the theater. Their pay did not equal that of their male colleagues, and while many male actors became playwrights, very

few women made the transition. One of the few who did, Charlotte Charke, wrote a total of three plays.

Aphra Behn, never an actress, may have possibly made her way into the world of Restoration theater through family connections. Her forte was comedy, often revolving around a plot of "forced marriage" -- which was also the title of her first produced play in 1670. Even working within the constraints of the Restoration's male dominated society, Behn managed to create strong, independent female characters who made their own choices. Over the course of her nineteen year career, Behn probably wrote over twenty plays, as well as several novels and volumes of poetry.

The most well-known female dramatist to follow Behn, Susanna Centlivre, wrote nineteen plays during her career, beginning in 1700. Most of her plays were comedies of intrigue, although she did write two tragicomedies, *The Perjur'd Husband* (1700) and *The Cruel Gift* (1716). She was very popular in her time but has since been forgotten more effectively even than Aphra Behn.

In addition to actresses and playwrights, there were several women during this period who managed theaters, for example Charlotte Charke, who followed Henry Fielding as the manager of the Little Theatre in Haymarket. Lady Henrietta Maria Davenant succeeded her husband, the playwright Sir William Davenant, as manager of the Duke's Company, and with the assistance of the Bettertons lead the company until its merger with the King's Company. Under her management, the Dorset Garden Theater, where Aphra Behn produced her plays, was the most successful theatrical company in London. She also acted as a mentor for actresses and actors, even putting young actresses up in her own house when they couldn't find affordable lodgings.

Women also exerted considerable influence as playgoers, not always in support of their own sex. Aphra Behn complained

bitterly in her preface to *The Lucky Chance* (1686), one of her more bawdy plays, how the "Ladies" cried it down. But this defense of her writing did lead to one of her more memorable forewords:

...I am not content to write for a Third Day only. I value Fame as much as if I had been born a *Hero*; and if you rob me of that, I can retire from the ungrateful World, and scorn its fickle Favours.

For further information see:

Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984).

Jacqueline Pearson, *The Prostituted Muse: Images of Women and Women Dramatists 1642-1737*. (New York: Harvester, 1988).

David Roberts, *The Ladies: Female Patronage of Restoration Drama 1660-1700*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Theatre from Restoration through Romanticism Restoration and 18th Century

Resources

Text...

Wilson and Goldfarb. *Theatre: The Lively Art*, 7th edition:
Chapter 14, pages 308 - 323.

Plays...Restoration... William Congreve. *The Way of the
World* John Dryden. *All For Love* 18th Century... John
Gay. *The Beggar's Opera* Richard Sheridan. *School for
Scandal*

Theatre from 1660 to 1875

[Restoration: 1660 to 1700](#) | [18th Century](#)

Restoration: 1660 to 1700



King Charles II

Charles II (1630-1685), the son of King Charles I and the grandson of King James, was King of England, Scotland and Ireland from his Coronation in 1660 to his death in 1685.

characteristics of a Restoration Comedy of Manners

Restoration (and 18th century) comedy ridiculed human failings--breaches of a "sophisticated code of manners" established by the courtiers of Charles II. They assumed (but never stated) an ideal mode of life which they expected the audience to accept.

The *Ideal Gentleman* was well born, dressed well, was poised and witty, skilled in love making, was able to conduct several affairs simultaneously, never boasted of his affairs, was always discreet, and never fell in love (or showed true compassion). If he was married, he could not be jealous if his wife took a lover.

The *Fashionable Young Lady* was familiar with the world of intrigue, but did not become involved in it. If she was a widow (or married to an older man) she could take a lover, as long as she was not found out. If she was married, she should not expect constancy in her husband.

The best example of an English Comedy of Manners



William Congreve
John Dryden write

William Congreve (1670-1729) wrote four comedies and one tragedy. His masterpiece is *The Way of the World* (1700), considered by many to be the best example of a *Restoration Comedy*. Read the play synopsis on page 413 in the Appendix.

his most important play

John Dryden
en *All For Love, or A World Well Lost* (1677)
earlier work is it based

William Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*.
changes he make

John Dryden (1631-1700), influential poet, critic, translator and playwright is primarily remembered (as a dramatist) for his Neo-

Classic tragedies. He dominated the literary life of Restoration England and was made *Poet Laureate of England* in 1667.

He condensed the 15 years of dramatic time in Shakespeare's play into one 24 hour day. He compressed Shakespeare's large cast (30 men and 4 women) drama into a much smaller and more manageable size (6 men and 4 women). Unlike Shakespeare who had scenes in Rome and Egypt, Dryden's play takes place in one location: in front of the temple of Isis in Alexandre, Egypt. He took Shakespeare's episodic tragedy, and turned it into a small cast climactic tragedy which observed the unity of time and place.

the actor-manager system function

During the Elizabethan period, the acting company was a stock company. The control of the organization was vested in the "shareholders." A Restoration acting company was owned and controlled by one man: the manager. He usually was the leading actor of the company, and chose those plays which best exhibited his abilities. The remainder of the acting company was hired and did not share in the company's profit (or loss).

the leading English actor-manager of the 18th Century



David Garrick

David Garrick (1717-1779). In addition to being an actor with over ninety roles in his repertory and the manager and "patent holder" of Drury Lane (1747 to 1776), he was a playwright, director and designer. As a director he oversaw the entire production process. He expected his actors to be on time, to have their lines memorized, and to act during rehearsal. As a designer he introduced appropriate and historically accurate costumes to the English stage.

problems theatre managers encounter when hiring an actress

Since acting was still socially unacceptable, it was often difficult recruiting women to perform on stage. There also were few women's roles in the plays (primarily the work of Shakespeare) that most managers staged.

Nell Gwynn

Eleanor "Nell" Gwynn (1650-1687), one of the most popular comic actresses of the Restoration, performed for only four years: 1665-1669. During her tenure on stage she became the mistress of King Charles II and bore him two illegitimate sons: Charles Beauclerk (1670-1726) and James Beauclerk (1671-1680). She was retired from the stage, by order of the King, in 1669.

legitimate theatres operated in London during the 17th century

Two. These were originally (in 1660) the two playhouses managed by William Davenant (1606-1668) and Thomas Killigrew (1612-1683). After parliament passed the Licensing Act of 1737, the two legitimate houses were Covent Garden and Drury Lane.

a minor theatre

A minor theatre was a legal, licensed, London playhouse which could **not** perform "regular" drama.

Type of plays were they permitted to present

1. Short plays (two or three act),
2. Operas (both ballad and Italianate),
3. Melodramas (plays with a musical score) and
4. Illustrated lectures (for example: Presenting *Othello* as an "illustrated lecture" on jealousy).

type of scenery was used on an English Restoration stage

Restoration theatres used the wing - border - backdrop style of scenery. Because of the cost, scenic units painted for one show were usually incorporated into a theatre's stock set for use in other productions.

18th Century

type of comedies Richard Sheridan

Richard Sheridan (1751-1816), the leading English playwright of the 18th century is remembered for his sentimental comedies. Like Restoration comedy, they were also a comedy of manners, but they reaffirmed middle class morality

his most important work

The School for Scandal (1777) His other two major, often revived works are *The Rivals* (1775) and *The Critic* (1779).

A Meeting of the "School"

Crabtree, Sir. Benjamin Backbite, Lady Sneerwell, Mrs. Candour

In 1776 Sheridan became a stock holder in and manager of Drury Lane, one of the two patent houses. He became a member of

Parliament (representing Stafford) in 1780 making him a politician as well as theatre manager and playwright.

John Gay's only major work

John Gay's (1685-1732) only major dramatic work is *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), a ballad opera telling the story of Macheath, the head of a band of robbers, Peachum, the "godfather" of London's underworld and Polly, Peachum's daughter and Macheath's wife. With 62 consecutive performances at Lincoln's Inn Field, a minor theatre, this early form of musical-comedy is considered by many, to be the theatre's first long run.

"How Happy Could I Be With Either"

Macheath and his two wives, Lucy and Polly, at Newgate Prison

a ballad opera differ from an Italian opera

In a ballad opera *recitatives* are replaced with spoken dialogue and the music (with original words) was adapted from popular folk songs, bar-room tunes, familiar ballads, even airs (*airas*) and choruses from opera. The songs were brief so they would not slow down the story. In an Italian opera, the dialogue becomes *recitatives* and the music is specifically composed for the work.

the major change in theatre architecture during the 18th century



Drury Lane, 1794

Because the size of the theatre audience grew during the 18th century, the capacity of the auditoriums also grew. In 1700, Drury Lane could seat a maximum of 650, a hundred years later, after the addition of three new galleries, the seating capacity was 3600; a five fold increase. Not only did the capacity of the house increase, so did the size of the stage. The Drury Lane of the English Restoration had a stage that was only 34 feet deep: 17 feet from the foot lights to the proscenium arch and 17 feet from the arch to the back wall. (See the Ground Plan on page 320). In 1800 the stage house of Drury Lane was 85 feet wide and 92 feet deep. The proscenium opening was 43 feet wide by 38 feet high. The 3600 seat Drury Lane, which was really too large for drama, burned to the ground in 1809. A new Theatre Royal was built in Drury Lane in 1812. Today, November 2011, that theatre is the London home of *Shreck, the Musical*.

the importance of the court theatre at Drottningholm



Stage of the Drottningholm Theatre

This small court theatre was built in the middle of the 18th Century (1766) at the summer palace of the Swedish royal family. The space was closed in 1792, "rediscovered" in 1920 and reopened in 1922. It is today a working example of an eighteenth century Italianate proscenium theatre complete with 15 complete sets of scenery. See the photographs on page 319. Visit the