

Part II

The Restoration and Turn of the Century

If you were to look at the Restoration period simply through the lens of Restoration comedy, you might conclude that it was a time of profligacy and loose living, yet the records show that there were no more illegitimate children than in previous ages. The sexual freedom so often taken as typical of the time was, in fact, very much limited to Court circles, where libertinism was a conscious reaction against the Puritanism of the Commonwealth. Even this libertinism, however, was a licence very much limited to men, who indulged in promiscuity, whereas the expectation that respectable women should be chaste did not change. Indeed, terms like 'ruined' and 'undone' had distinctly different meanings for men and women, denoting bankruptcy on the one hand and premarital defloration on the other.

To be sure, in the aristocratic classes women achieved some mobility, but such liberties as visits to the theatre depended very much on the compliance of the husband, who still owned all the money his wife had brought into the marriage. There were cultured circles of literati to which women were admitted, but as a rule gentlewomen were expected to keep a low profile, and most of the names we remember today – Nell Gwyn and Lady Castlemaine, Mrs Barry, Mrs Bracegirdle and Aphra Behn – were those of royal or aristocratic mistresses, actresses or women whose doubtful reputation was earned in some other way.

Little changed in the legal status of women or gender roles on the return of Charles II. A woman still remained the property of her husband, so much so that a husband could sue the man who had cuckolded him for disturbance of property. Divorce was now possible, but only by a private Act of Parliament, unattainable for all but the wealthiest and impossible for women (since they forsook their property on marrying), unless their relatives supported them. Nor could even such a divorce by Act of Parliament be granted to a woman on the grounds of her husband's adultery, unless she could prove aggravating circumstances, such as excessive cruelty, though a wife's infidelity was sufficient ground for legal separation.

The turn of the eighteenth century saw a growing debate about women's legal status, spurred by the writings of early feminists such as Mary Astell. Yet even feminists did not question the institution of marriage, or demand social and political rights for women outside marriage – that only came a century later with Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary Astell gained a favourable hearing even among men, and her agitation for more serious female education in a women's academy aroused some attention, though her writings had, in fact, little practical impact on the eighteenth century.

While awareness of women's deprivation of rights reached a peak around 1700, paradoxically, at the same time, women were slowly edged out of traditional professions by male midwives and male milliners, as well as by a growing cult of female refinement and by prestige being attached to women of leisure rather than working women. Henceforth, women were less and less likely to run businesses on their own, their opportunities for work narrowed and the growing capitalist system, by its separation of the home and the workplace, steadily took even domestic production within the household out of their hands.

Though opportunities to work and participate in public life were being restricted for most women, the Restoration saw one great innovation: the appearance of the first English actresses. The phenomenon of allowing women on stage had been imported from France, where many Cavaliers had found refuge during the Commonwealth, but among the Puritans the old objections to this public exposure and to public speaking by women had by no means been stilled. Indeed, their presence undoubtedly led to greater sexual explicitness in drama, and a host of prologues and epilogues in which salacious reference is made to their sex. Many actresses

had scandalous reputations and, indeed, many exploited their notoriety to attract rich and influential lovers. Thus, the great tragedienne Elizabeth Barry had numerous affairs and quite openly bore the Earl of Rochester a child, and the famous Nell Gwyn progressed from orange seller to actress to royal mistress of 'Charles III', the King being her third lover by the name of Charles. Nonetheless, to avoid the disreputable connotations of the designation 'Miss' (a miss was a mistress), all actresses, whether married or unmarried, were addressed as Mrs. Though some of these women achieved fame on and off stage, they were nevertheless paid less than their male colleagues and they hardly ever advanced to positions of power in theatre management.

The Elizabethan playhouses had been destroyed in the Civil War, when all public performances had been forbidden. Upon his return the King granted patents to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant to open theatres and stage plays. The two companies, the King's Men and the Duke's Men (after the Duke of York, who later became James II), operated in two newly built playhouses, the Drury Lane Theatre and Dorset Garden Theatre, with the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre occasionally serving as a stopgap. After two decades of success, the political unrest during the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis of 1678/79 caused audience figures to drop. In 1682 the King's Men went bankrupt owing to financial mismanagement and embezzlement, and the two companies merged, becoming the United Company, which severely limited the market for new plays. Things improved only in 1694/95, when the famous actor Thomas Betterton led an actors' revolt against the management and opened a new company at Lincoln's Inn Fields.

It is now assumed that the audiences that filled the boxes, the pits and the galleries was made up of all classes, not only of the Court coterie, though the King and the nobility certainly set the fashion and tone. The rowdiness of Restoration audiences and the presence of prostitutes in vizards is well known. Such circumstances did not improve the reputation of the theatre among its enemies. Both Charles II and James II, however, were great patrons of the theatre, and they also encouraged courtiers to write. So it was only after the Glorious Revolution and James' flight that moralists dared to attack the stage openly. William III had little interest in the theatre; Court as well as aristocratic patronage declined and audiences became more middle class.

Acting styles were highly artificial and stylised. Actors did not subordinate themselves to their roles but flaunted their own personalities, a fact that led to a confusion of on-stage and off-stage identity especially detrimental in the case of actresses and the few women playwrights. The excitement actresses generated led to a prurient interest in their private lives. Before the Restoration, the sex lives of actors like Burbage and Kempe had been of little interest to the audience, and even after 1660 the off-stage affairs of male actors did not arouse the same lecherous curiosity as those of female actors, although quite a few were 'kept' by aristocratic ladies. Lady Castlemaine, one of Charles' mistresses, saved the actor Goodman from being hanged at Tyburn for highway robbery and obtained his pardon.¹³ With actresses, however, life and role were frequently blurred, and they were typecast according to their off-stage reputations, the notorious Mrs Barry taking the parts of passionate sinners and villainesses, and her virtuous colleague Mrs Bracegirdle specialising in unblemished heroines and virgins in distress. Such a confusion of life and art in the case of women set an unfortunate precedent: the same unhealthy interest was to focus on the private lives of women playwrights.

A number of Restoration dramatists were gentlemen of independent means closely associated with the Court, who wrote for pleasure, not for money. But for those men and women whose livelihood depended on their success, writing for the theatre provided a precarious income at best. Otway starved to death in the slums, Wycherley languished for years in a debtors' prison, Lee ended up in a lunatic asylum, and even Dryden had to cringe for patronage. It was not usual for theatre managers to pay playwrights for their scripts, nor was there any copyright protection; the money a dramatist made from a work depended entirely on the audience turnout every third night (or, rather, afternoon) of a performance. Every third night was for the author's benefit, and the author took the entire proceeds of the ticket sales. Friends would make a point of crowding the theatre on this occasion. However, enemy cliques could well kill a play before that by hissing, rioting or merely by spreading malicious rumours about it. A six-day run was reckoned a fair success, and a play that lasted nine days (involving three benefit nights) was a hit. Many works did not even survive for three days, which left the authors without any recompense. Selling the play text to a printer for a small sum after its stage run could bring in

some additional money, as could a patron's gratuity in acknowledgement of a dedication, but of course authors would have to secure the proposed dedicatee's permission.

In a period when the King and the upper crust regularly crowded the theatre, the career of a playwright, of course, always carried the hope of limelight and royal patronage as well as the intoxicating possibility of lasting fame. For most contenders, however, it could also be a gruelling experience, devoid of the glamour with which we tend to imbue these flamboyant Restoration figures.