

Turning Oppression Into Success:  
How the English Restoration Actress Received Poetic Justice

by  
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England during the historical period known as the Restoration (1660-75) experienced great societal upheaval as a result of many tumultuous years that came before. This paper will give the reader an introduction to the main elements that helped form Restoration theatre, including analysis of the political and social climates, as well as examining the types of roles available to women and what those public portrayals may tell us about the men who controlled the theatres and how these men felt about women's gaining a footing in the public sphere.

During the Restoration, women were allowed to perform on the public stage for the first time in English history. The portrayal of women on stage in roles that were—by today's standards—stereotypically sexist was a common practice in Restoration England. The patriarchal culture's attempts to control the anxiety men felt when women occupied the spotlight backfired completely. Despite their singular portrayal of base women, many actresses, on their own, gained financial stability and influential court connections while developing prestige and a public following.

Many of the roles available to actresses fit into one of several categories. There was the good girl who was chaste and virginal, the whore who was sexually loose and deserved condemnation, and the witty society lady who is rewarded in the end of the play. Though the range was limited, actresses could fan the fire of fame by using the characters as foils against their own personalities. Audiences were greatly entertained by performances that reflected the real lives of performers on the stage; at a time when everyone knew everyone else's business, it was common to know who was fighting, who was sneaking around, and who was hoping for a new paramour. If an actor and actress who were lovers in real life played lovers onstage, the audience was doubly entertained. This juxtaposition helped actresses gain star status in the public sphere, which afforded them greater mobility. It is my aim to illuminate the factors that

shaped Restoration theatre and examine the way that women benefitted from the subjugation of their gender in a public forum. To understand the progression of events it is necessary to examine the historical incidents that would later shape popular culture of the Restoration.

In order to discuss the changes in Restoration theatre, one must begin with the history prior to Charles II (1630-1685). As a monarch, Charles I (1600-49) was inconsistent with religious matters, levied significant taxes, and argued about the line between royal and Parliamentary authority. The Puritans, a group of conservative, highly religious politicians, were the victors in the drawn out English Civil Wars (1642-46, 1648-49, 1649-51) and executed Charles I in 1649 when his son, Charles II, was only 19. The younger Charles was forced to flee to the continent in order to preserve his life. Oliver Cromwell, who was one of the signatories of Charles I's death (Kelsey 750-1), then ruled England for 11 years, a period of time that is now called the Interregnum. Cromwell, as Lord Protector, enforced very strict Puritan rules. Subsequent to the Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell's illness and death, the Puritan government imploded. The oppressive atmosphere of Puritanism quickly dissipated following the return of Charles II, the first son of Charles I. The result was an English Restoration society that experienced a revolutionary transformation, enchantingly exemplified in the Restoration theatre. This metamorphosis encouraged the development of women's roles in the theatre.

During the Puritan era, theatres had been closed and burnt, and while plays were outlawed, other entertainments like "rope-dancing, drolls, and amateur theatricals fared considerably better than regular drama" (Lynch 109). Puritans outlawed theatre on several occasions, though the trickiest of managers and performers sometimes succeeded in circumventing the rules; even closed performances in private houses were not exempt from raids (108). The strictest ordinance required "the punishment of actors, the demolishing of

theatrical equipment, and the fining of all spectators of plays” (108-9). Author Charles Beauclerk, a distant modern-day heir to the famous Restoration actress, Nell Gwyn, clarifies: actors could be whipped and audience members might be fined five shillings. The Puritan inclination to focus on the afterlife limited the kinds of activities, clothing, and behaviors that were considered appropriate. Society was dour and heavily focused on following religious rules. J.R. Jones in *The Restored Monarchy* writes, “Naturally during the Interregnum fashionable cultural activity had atrophied, and popular culture had largely assumed religious forms that were already partly discredited by 1660” (26). Furthermore, as Beauclerk explains, “. . . actors were considered a public menace and were relegated to the status of vagabonds” (41). Oliver Cromwell died, leaving his son Richard to replace him. When Richard was unable to replicate his father’s strong sense of a Puritan government, the Commonwealth collapsed. Charles II came home to England and reclaimed the crown, reestablishing the monarchy.

When he triumphantly returned to England in 1660, Charles II was quick to reinstate a lifestyle influenced by the time he spent on the continent in exile, specifically in France. Courtiers and the well-to-do again enjoyed a high level of frivolity in court life. Libertinism, the culture of excess, overindulgence, and overt sexuality, was “a conscious reaction against the Puritanism of the Commonwealth” (Rubik 17). The majority of England was happy to have a monarch ruling their country again; citizens were eager to return to a monarchy because most everyone thought it was in their best interest. In his introductory chapter to *The Restored Monarchy*, a collection of essays about the Restoration, editor and author Jones explains the appeal of restoring the monarchy:

The instability and confusion that followed Oliver Cromwell’s death, and were intensified after the fall of Richard Cromwell in April 1659, had enhanced the appeal of

the exiled and deposed monarchy. Apparent political disintegration led most men to believe that only if the King came into his own again could the nation hope to enjoy its constitutional and legal rights, and properties, without fear of further arbitrary interference from self-constituted and oppressive military governments. (8)

By giving this explanation, Jones provides a way to interpret the eagerness of most English citizens to restore the monarchy. The rule of Richard Cromwell after his father's death was unsuccessful to the point of near anarchy, and the citizens then began to wish for the reestablishment of the monarchy. Noted scholar Gary S. DeKrey, in *London and the Restoration, 1659-1683*, points out that Richard Cromwell lacked "his father's skills, experience and charisma" (13), a significant fact in the collapse of the Protectorate. DeKrey states, "[The Londoners'] zeal for the rights, liberties, privileges, and customs of the commons of London had driven them in a royalist direction" (66). Jones explains in his book about Charles II's political life, *Charles II: Royal Politician*, that "subjects . . . saw a future ruler who was Protestant not papist, who promised to govern by legal and constitutional methods, and who showed that he wanted to reunite a divided nation by undertaking to pardon all [crimes] except the regicides" (32). Jones helps the reader understand the eagerness to reinstate the monarchy. The citizens of England could not resist such a promising potential leader. The British were eager for change, and Charles II certainly provided it.

With a Stuart king on the throne, the unadorned Puritan lifestyle was quickly abandoned for the colorful, inane, amusing distractions of an English court heavily influenced by French customs and fashion. However, the honeymoon period didn't last long. Charles and his courtiers abused the power they demanded when the monarchy was reestablished, squabbling for titles, land, and estates. This behavior, of course, did not please the common citizens or

those belonging to the upper-middle class who did not receive what they believed to be their due. Factions eventually split between those in the court and those in the country, later made worse by the religious break between Anglicans and everyone else (Jones 9). After Charles' first year on the throne, the monarchy was stable, though rumbling discontent could be heard among those who disagreed with Charles's frivolity. In *Charles II: Royal Politician*, Jones states,

. . . observers deplored [the court's] promiscuous immorality and irresponsible extravagance. The restored Court did not in essentials differ greatly from that of any young or recently crowned monarch . . . . But special factors made life at Court a cause of political discontent. A population that had lived without a Court at Whitehall for eighteen years gave much prurient attention to the ways in which Charles and his courtiers lived and misbehaved. (55)

Because of the recent change in governments, subjects clearly remembered the frugality of the Puritans, and while they wanted change, they didn't appreciate the wastefulness of the reinstated monarchy. The themes of overindulgence, promiscuity and extravagance that originated at court then became lasting elements in the English Restoration theatrical culture.

Within two months of ascending the throne, Charles reopened the theatres. The recently established theatres quickly began to exploit the themes of the new Restoration lifestyle. Playwrights much preferred the naughty style of theatre influenced by the French court to which Charles II was accustomed. Because of the many years Charles had spent in exile in France and the Netherlands, it was inevitable that he would have brought some of those influences back with him when he ascended the throne. In *The Restored Monarchy*, Jones articulates the potent influence of French culture on multiple levels of English Restoration

society: “The theatre closely followed French models. Dress, etiquette and manners aped French modes” (27). The underlying animosity that existed between England and France for centuries could be seen during the Restoration in the lower-class Englishmen’s resentment of the rich and overdressed “fops” who looked to France for fashion advice. The king, however, had a great appreciation for French culture and wanted to increase England’s cultural depth by reinstituting the theatre.

Charles issued two theatrical patents, essentially monopolies, one to William Davenant and the other to Thomas Killigrew. Killigrew, as the King’s former jester, and Davenant, with theatrical experience and an old patent, were the right men for the positions (Langhans 1). Davenant and Killigrew had been loyal to the king during his time in exile; Killigrew was so loyal he followed the King into exile and returned with him on the same ship in 1660. As a reward, both men received the only royal theatrical patents. With these patents, theatre was allowed to emerge from the underground and be enjoyed by the public for the first time in almost 20 years. With the power of a royal patent behind them, Davenant and Killigrew had the ability to squash out the few other theatre companies that tried to establish themselves once theatre was no longer regarded unlawful. Killigrew was given a patent to the King’s theatre, which opened for performances only two months after issuance in a modified tennis court. Davenant’s patent allowed him to be in charge of the Duke’s theatre, which also occupied a tennis court, though Davenant spent several additional months remodeling it. Davenant, with his background in court dramas, felt that elaborate scenery was important (Langhans 3). The tennis court theatres were only about 25 feet by 75 feet in size. Since the constraints of a small space were too restrictive, Killigrew made plans to build an entirely new theatre after a year of

using the tennis court. His plans allowed sufficient space for scenery, as the culture-deprived English were enthralled by Davenant's use of new technology.

As part of their patents, Killigrew and Davenant split the repertory of popular plays between them. The plays of Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, and other less famous works were divided, taking into consideration the popularity of each play. However, author and professor Michael Dobson points out in his contribution to the *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre* that Killigrew's King's Company was seen as the heir of Shakespeare's King's Men from the time of King James. On the other hand, Davenant was considered the upstart whose members were not part of the theatre that existed before the Puritans came into power. Dobson states, "it is clear that Killigrew got a decisive upper hand" when the available repertory of plays was divided (43). The King's Company had a monopoly on all of Jonson's plays, many Shakespearean works, as well as the best of Fletcher and Beaumont. When they began to perform, the companies relied heavily on these well-known plays. The King's Company became known as the "old guard" of Restoration theatre, since it possessed the lion's share of plays and actors that persisted through the Puritans. Davenant's company became known for its innovations that were a necessary step in competing with the King's Company.

Additionally, each theatre was allowed to commission new plays, a common occurrence. Many playwrights wrote parts for specific actors. Beyond extant portraits, scholars have been able to identify the appearance of specific performers because of certain dialogue about characters that were written for particular performers. The description of the character was that of the performer. Joseph Roach illustrates a worthy example.



Hoping to draw a crowd, the playwrights often created characters with the aptitudes of particular actors and actresses in mind. . . . Occasionally playwrights would put into the mouth of a male character admiring descriptions of his beloved that anatomically matched the features of the actress intended for the part. . . . Charles Hart and Nell Gwynn [sic] were well matched as witty lovers, a liaison that blossomed into the 'gay couple' pairing in a number of plays. (33)

It was advantageous to the playwright, the theatre company, and the performer to have a character described in the same manner as an actor or actress's actual appearance. Companies strived to showcase all of their best features. Eric Rothstein and Frances M. Kavenik explain it thus, "Recognizing the 'bankability' of key actors and scenic wonders, thoughtful managers and playwrights began to choose and write plays which would show off the company's sets and costumes or which featured virtuoso performers, single or paired" (59). Kavenik and Rothstein demonstrate the methods employed by the companies to use everything they possessed to their advantage. "The most radical [theatrical] innovations were. . . the introduction of actresses and the use of moveable scenery—both of which, because of their audience appeal, had very early and noticeable effects on the form of Carolean comedies" (Rothstein, Kavenik 59). One significant development was the creation of "breeches roles"—female characters who dressed as boys or men in order to display the legs of the actress, which were usually hidden behind layers of petticoats and overskirts.

Moreover, each theater employed a corps of performers, playwrights, and instructors of speech, dance, and movement. Their employment term was generally September to June. To pick up extra income, theatre artisans could travel during the summers (Langhans 4). Theatres followed the guild system as used by traders and merchants. In fact, the only real competition

to the two patent-holding companies was the company run by George Jolly, who later joined the ranks of Killigrew and Davenant to help train up new performers (1). Nell Gwyn was tutored by two well-known and respected actors, John Lacy and Charles Hart. Biographers have identified these two gentlemen as some of Nell Gwyn's first lovers (Beauclerk 66). A young woman in the theatre could do very well if she found an older, richer man to support her, help her find connections, and assist her upward climb.

An extremely important development that cannot be overlooked nor emphasized enough was the addition of women to the English stage. Ironically, as a concession to the conservative Puritans, the royal patents stated that women were to be allowed to perform onstage and be members of theatrical companies. This was a compromise Charles reached with the Puritans because they were up in arms about the titillating nature of men playing opposite young boys in romantic scenes. To the Puritans that was unacceptable because it was potentially sexually arousing. Ben Ross Schneider, Jr. makes an important point in his book, *The Ethos of Restoration Comedy*: "The opposition to and near-extirpation of the theatres by the Puritan Commonwealth made Restoration critics in reaction more conscious of the moralizing properties of the stage than they would have been without Puritan goading" (7). Homosexuality was feared, though still surreptitiously practiced, and if caught, the perpetrator could be punished by death (Forgeng 59). John Dennis, a contemporary Restoration theatre critic, defended the role of theatre as a "bulwark against sodomy" (Roach 31). This was in response to the highly opinionated theatre critics, who were greatly concerned with the potentially dangerous effects of the theatre. Jean Marsden explains that the highly sexualized nature of female roles was a "necessary evil," as Dennis believed "lust is completely natural and thus less vicious than drinking, gambling, or sodomy, and more importantly, it distracts men from their

homoerotic desires” (36). Joseph Roach writes “the royal warrants and patents responded strategically to objections to reopening the playhouses because they were likely to serve up cross-dressed boys as catalysts to ‘unnatural vice’” (31). In this way, “the objectified woman acts as a social safeguard, a means of regulating unruly male desires for the betterment of society” (Marsden 36). The Puritans could not predict the lasciviousness, debauchery, and highly sexualized theatrical climate that was to follow from allowing women to share the stage. They simply could not comprehend how the consequences of their insistence on the exclusion of cross-dressing men would affect English theatre.

On December 8, 1660, the first native actress ever to appear on the English stage performed the role of Desdemona in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Author Elizabeth Howe postulates that the actress who played this role was most likely Anne Marshall, one of the four women first added to the King’s company. Howe uses a process of elimination to end up with Marshall as the most likely Desdemona. The other three women were Katherine Corey, Mrs. Eastland and Mrs. Weaver. Mrs. Eastland is immediately crossed off the list because she does not actually appear in cast lists until 1669 and even then she played only small roles. Mrs. Weaver is eliminated because though she played larger parts, she was never a lead, and almost always performed in comedies, a genre diametrically opposed to *Othello*. The remaining actress, Katherine Corey, was “large and plain” (24) according to Howe, and “specialised in ugly, comic parts” (24). That leaves Anne Marshall, who was good looking, talented, and later performed in many tragic roles (24). In this evaluation Howe seems well reasoned and fairly certain.

Howe importantly points out that in 1662, “the casting of women in women’s roles became not merely popular choice but law” (25). This law finally edged out male performers

who continued to play female roles. Most famous is Edward Kynaston, who continued cross-dressing when actual women came on stage. He remained somewhat popular for a few years. Howe states that, “The transvestite convention, instead of being the accepted theatrical norm that it had been during the Renaissance, had become a curiosity” (25). Rich women would take him for rides in their carriages while he was dressed in all his feminine regalia. The royal patent that took away Kynaston’s ability to wear skirts in public was dated April 25, 1662. It obliquely referred to anonymous parties that had “taken offence” at men in women’s clothing, but obviously alluded to the Puritans. Those behind the patent were sure to be prepared for any attack. Howe states, “The weighty language to the patent makes the introduction of women appear as some kind of social reform. In actual fact, of course, the use of female players had the opposite effect to the one specified in the patent—a good deal of the subsequent licentiousness of Restoration drama may be blamed on the sexual exploitation of the actresses” (26). This law significantly changed theatrical culture in England for good. Shakespeare’s boys were out, and Charles’ ladies were in.

In her book *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality and the English Stage 1660-1720* Marsden defines “one of the most important advents in the history of English drama” as “the advent of the actress on the public stage” (1). Other scholars agree. Dobson states that “the advent of the female player” had a great effect on the older plays that were originally written for women’s parts to be played by boys (45). In *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700*, Elizabeth Howe celebrates that “English theatre finally relinquished a ludicrous convention many years after France, Italy and Spain (women were acting in these countries by the latter half of the sixteenth century)” (19). Between 1660 and 1689, we know of the existence of about 80 actresses (33). Howe points out that despite the success of Renaissance

boy actors (20), the shift in favoring women over boys to perform female characters was “social and cultural rather than practical” (21). The transition from boys to women went fairly smoothly, Howe explains, because “the Restoration theatre was more exclusively a court milieu than it had been in the Caroline period, [and] actresses were readily accepted by theatre audiences” (23). English actresses were not as shocking to a mostly courtly audience familiar with continental theatre. Some of the first English actresses were Katherine Corey, Anne Marshall, Mary Saunderson, Elizabeth Barry, Anne Bracegirdle, and Nell Gwyn (Roach 31). These trailblazing women weren’t always well received. Oftentimes, their reputation as an actress followed them into everyday society.

The actress-as-whore conundrum was a self-fulfilling prophecy. “Society assumed that a woman who displayed herself on the public stage was probably a whore” (Howe 32). This thought may have originated with the outspoken Puritan theatre critic William Prynne, who in his famous work *Historiomastix* “denounced as whore any Christian woman who dared to speak publicly on stage in male clothing . . .” (Rubik 5). Howe explains, “An unprotected woman would have found it impossible to avoid sexual advances if she worked in the theatre” (32). Further complicating their situation, the most successful actresses were left “unprotected” by a husband: “As exceptions to the majority of actresses Barry and Bracegirdle suggest that in order to succeed in her profession a woman had to be not only outstandingly talented and successful in a sphere which affected male profits, but also persistent, hard-headed and unmarried” (32). Even though many actresses performed while unmarried, each of them was referred to as a “Mrs.” rather than the modern term for a woman who has never married, “Miss.” The title “Miss” during the Restoration had disreputable connotations because “Miss” was short for “mistress” (Rubik 19). Women were tormented by their sexuality in a way that

their male peers never were. It was unavoidable that “the actress’s sexuality . . . became the central feature of her professional identity as a player” (34). Additionally, the actress who was supported by a lover was more scandalous than a male actor who was “kept” by an aristocratic woman (34-5). Most importantly, by emphasizing an actress’s sexuality, male society was able to diffuse the threat presented by women with public personas and voices. Howe explains that the actress as sexual object was considered simply a plaything and no longer a danger to English patriarchy.

Despite any perceived progress in women’s rights or equality brought about by the actress as the public face of Restoration women, relatively little changed in most women’s day-to-day lives. The no-consequences overindulgent culture was mostly limited to courtly men. It is significant that after Charles II returned to the throne women remained the property of their husbands (21). Divorce was only possible for women at the very highest levels of society, and even then it was only possible if the woman’s family would support her, since the woman’s husband would retain control over all her money and property. About the lower classes, Jeffery Forgeng writes, “Women and servants were essentially regarded as the feudal subordinates of the male head of the household . . .” (23), harkening back several hundred years to the countryside feudal system. In his book *Daily Life in Stuart England*, Forgeng describes the powerlessness of women:

. . . the distribution of power between the sexes in marriage was very uneven. Women had limited standing before the law, no right to participate in public office or political decision making, and restricted property rights within marriage. . . . This disempowerment left women vulnerable if they ended up with cruel husbands. (36-7)

The movement to better the lives of women got a slow start in the early 1700s with author Mary Astell's campaign for better education for women (Rubik 17), but that was a few years too late to be of use to any Restoration ladies. The area that women had most control over was the home. Forgeng states,

. . . at every level of society, women played an important role in managing household affairs, and most women contributed significantly to the household economy. They tended the home garden, managed domestic animals, and often did some wage-earning outside the home. Even upper-class women were responsible for running the household establishment. . . (37)

Restoration women were also responsible for the common duties such as cooking, cleaning, provisioning, and taking care of children (Forgeng 38). Moreover, upper-class mothers and wives had the additional responsibility of managing "charitable works on behalf of the household" (38). Women were allowed to be responsible only for things that carried little public weight or power in English society.

Within the theater, women, while an oddity and attraction that could bring in a significant amount of money, were paid half or less of what their male colleagues were. Early actresses and female playwrights, unlike their male counterparts, did not own shares in any theatre company until 1695 (Howe 29).

Restoration theatre flourished in a somewhat different way than the previous popular surge of theatre, during the reign of Elizabeth almost 60 years before. The well-behaved, attentive audiences of today's modern theatre would be shocked at the apparent lack of respect for theatre exhibited by Restoration audiences. While the raucous groundlings of Elizabethan theatres are well documented, Restoration audiences were hardly better behaved. The act of

going to the theatre was often more to be seen than to witness the unfolding of an art form. The Restoration playwright William Wycherly captured this sentiment with the words of his character, Sparkish, in the 1679 bawdy comedy *The Country Wife*: “The reason why we are so often louder than the players is because we think we speak more wit, and so become the poet’s rivals in his audience” (ed. McMillin 33). Wit was the most desired characteristic in both friends and lovers, so it is only natural that someone in the audience would have captured attention for himself by conversing loudly over the actor’s speech. Because of the seating arrangement in the theatres with the audience on three sides in thrust formation, the audience members were able to observe each other through the performers in addition to watching the show. We can speculate how distracting this could have been; the Restoration audiences didn’t mind it one bit. They enjoyed the thought that others could see them. In fact, many of the courtiers and upper- and middle-class audience members used the theatres to arrange illicit meetings (Langhans 14). Because many of the plays were old, audiences were already familiar with the plots. According to Edward Langhans, “Many playgoers then did not attend a play to find out what happens next, for they already knew many of the plots. They did not come to see *if* Hamlet would revenge his father’s death but *how* this or that actor would play a familiar part” [emphasis mine] (12). Many poems of the day poke fun at the gallants who attended the theatre to arrange assignations. Moreover, it was not uncommon to find women seeking those men in much the same manner. These situations even made their way into theatrical writing; a perfect and well-studied example is *The Country Wife*, quoted on the previous page. In the comedy, married women seek the attention of a man who spreads a false rumor around town that he is impotent in order to spend unsupervised time with unescorted women and have affairs with them.



One fact that is important to note is the noise level of audiences during the Restoration. Playgoers did not sit prim and proper during the performance. They gossiped, laughed, shouted, stood up and walked around. Langhans expresses this interesting quality of Restoration theatre: “The conventions of playgoing and performing in the 1600s provided ample opportunities for the fops and ruffians to misbehave, especially if a play was poor enough not to warrant polite attention in the first place. In a period when characters frequently spoke lines to the audience, it should not be surprising if the audience talked back” (15). Audience members also interacted with the vendors who roamed the theatre in a manner I imagine to be quite like the modern vendors at a baseball game, holding their wares on a tray while standing in front of the stage or among the audience. Performers were constantly competing with the audience and the vendors, many of them orange girls, for the attention of everyone else. Orange girls were young women, perhaps about 10-16, who sold oranges and other fruits and snacks to audience members. Many of the orange girls became prostitutes, or worked in both positions simultaneously. In fact, it is estimated that 1 in 10 women in London in the 1660s worked as prostitutes (Beauclerk 39).

Scholars believe that Restoration audiences were made up of a smaller percentage of the poorest members of society than during Elizabethan times. Many of the attendees of theatrical performances didn't go to see the show, as was established earlier. Because of this, it is thought that the poorest English citizens didn't attend performances frequently because theatre was transitioning into a form of entertainment for the rich. This is partially because when theatre went underground during the Interregnum, it was hosted primarily by wealthy people who had access to large, private spaces. When the ban on public theatre was finally lifted, it still retained an association with the middle and upper classes. The makeup of the audience took many years to become more balanced. In 1668 Pepys remarked, “Here a mighty company of citizens,

prentices and others; and it makes me observe that when I begin first to be able to bestow a play on myself [in 1660], I do not remember that I saw so many by half of the ordinary prentices and mean people in the pit” (qtd. In Langhans 13). For eight years, theatre was largely an entertainment for those at court with money, power, and connections. Restoration audiences were loud *and* rich, unlike the impoverished groundlings.

Just because the audience was mostly upper-class doesn't mean that the performers were. In fact, they were usually poor and continually near the bottom of the social ladder. However, it wasn't impossible for talented, charismatic people to climb the ladder from the bottom to the top. The somewhat primordial mixing of classes that occurred in theatres during the Restoration allowed for many liaisons, agreements, and introductions among many types of people. Orange girls and actresses, as part of the lower class, were able to make liaisons and connections with men of higher status that would help the women climb the ladder of society.

A perfect example of a Restoration rags-to-riches story is the person who best encapsulates the climate of the Restoration: Nell Gwyn. She got her start in the theatre at an early age selling fruit and other refreshments as an orange girl. She added to the ruckus of the theatre with her shouts of “Oranges! Will you have any oranges?” (Beauclerk 57). Soon after, her lively spirit, pretty face and outrageous sense of humor caught the attention of a series of lovers, some of them actors and company members at the King's Theatre, such as John Lacy and Charles Hart, both of whom helped her become an actress on the stage. Nell Gwyn was certainly not the first English actress. But she was one of the most extraordinary Restoration comediennes and actresses. She continues to be a person of interest to scholars today. Her rise to the stage gave her a platform on which to become a darling of the common people while simultaneously catching the eye of King Charles II.

In some sense, Nell Gwyn is the Restoration embodied in a person. Her meteoric rise to fame was one of the first such documented cases in English history. She was born in 1650 and only 10 years old in 1660 when Charles triumphantly returned from exile. Her early life was a rough one; working beside her mother in an alehouse left her vulnerable to many negative influences. There is evidence that her older sister Rose became a prostitute; however, we do not know if Nell herself succumbed to this fate (Beauclerk 15). We can only guess. Prostitution was a very common profession in Restoration London. Beauclerk clarifies the draw of the unappealing work in this way: “For many of the girls it was a chance to better their lot in life by becoming the mistress of a gentleman. As such, the prostitution market was the great melting pot of the time and one of the few ladders to social advancement open to women” (39). Prostitutes of the day may have tried and succeeded in climbing higher in wealth and possessions by seducing increasingly powerful men. We may not know if Nell was a prostitute as a preteen, but assuming she was a vigorous young woman, it is easy to see how she would later use her lovers to help her maneuver into her successful career.

There is evidence that as early as 1662, at the tender age of twelve, Nell took a lover by the name of Duncan, or perhaps Dungan, who was a customer at Madam Ross’s bawdyhouse or whorehouse. Their relationship lasted two years, during which time Duncan helped Nell secure a spot as an orange girl in the King’s theatre (Beauclerk 40). From there she soon met people of a higher station than herself and began her ascent up the social ladder.

As an orange girl, Nell had exposure to courtiers and other powerful people. Orange girls, Beauclerk notes, “gained an education in the idiom and manners of high society” by “acting as go-betweens for the gallants in their amorous intrigues, delivering messages to masked ladies in the audience or actresses backstage” (57). With her back to the stage, shouting

over the actors and flirting with the audience members, Nell was noticed by Thomas Killigrew who decided to train her for the stage (Beauclerk 66). He placed her in the care of two of the finest actors of the time, John Lacy and Charles Hart. While history is not specific on this point, Nell may have been the first young woman to transition from an orange girl to actress. Both Hart and Lacy had experience in theatre dating from well before the Interregnum and had also served in the Civil War. Not more than five years separated Lacy in age from Hart, who was Shakespeare's grand-nephew and a boy actor in the King's Men during Shakespeare's time. During the Interregnum, Lacy taught dancing while Hart acted in private houses, even having been arrested once. There is no evidence of a sexual relationship between Lacey and Nell, but Nell and Charles Hart became a real life couple who performed opposite each other on stage.

Once on stage, Nell, an extremely popular and well-liked actress, was highly praised for her comedic roles. Audience members such as Samuel Pepys were so impressed that modern readers easily forget Nell was only about 15 when she made her debut. It was not uncommon for women to be "poached by a rich or noble keeper," though Nell Gwyn was one of the most famous since both she and fellow actress Moll Davis became lovers of the king (Beauclerk 68). Nell's seven year career (1665-1671) was surprisingly short by modern standards. Perhaps even more astonishing are the changes she helped bring about in Restoration theatre before she left the stage at age of 21.

Nell's popularity was a far cry from the supposedly wretched "vagabonds" that the Puritans condemned (Beauclerk 41). It is thought that most actresses of the time came from poorer families who still clung to their noble origins. These women most likely changed their names to protect their families. Nell herself may have been descended from "decayed gentility" on her father's side (67).

Before a fateful dinner that would serve as the beginning of a long relationship between the king and Nell, they had crossed paths several times. A monarch enamored of the theatre was certain to have noticed its darling star, the popular and entertaining comedienne Nell, who had even performed at the palace on occasion. The story of how Charles and Nell first spent a friendly evening together comes from Beauclerk: The night they met, Nell and a fellow performer were enjoying a production from a private box. Charles and his brother James joined them, both disguised as ordinary upper-class noblemen. After the performance, the four went to a tavern for food and drink where they had a rousing time. When the bill came, neither the king nor James had enough funds to pay. Then, the story goes, Nell paid the bill, exclaiming, “this is the poorest company I ever was in!” (128). This humor helped win over the king and soon after she became Charles’ mistress.

Even though she was the mistress to the most powerful man in the land, Nell continued to perform with the King’s Company for three years after beginning her relationship with Charles. Nell bore a healthy son, also named Charles, in May 1670. This child secured Nell’s place in the king’s inner circle, as he always ensured that his many illegitimate children and their mothers were cared for. This Charles was the king’s seventh son in all and fourth son named Charles (160). As was customary, after the birth Nell entertained many visitors who were eager to see the king’s newest child. Many of her fellow actors also visited, which made Nell miss performing.

As a result of a combination of factors, including a provided staff which cared for her son, her own lack of mothering skills and deficiency of maternal instincts, a need for independence, and simply because she missed the theatre, Nell returned to the stage in December 1670. She performed in *The Conquest of Granada* by Dryden. Its opening had been

delayed to allow for Nell to give birth (181), an event alluded to in the prologue. However, Nell's return was short lived as she made no more professional appearances after 1671, when scholars mark the official end of her career.

Sometime during 1671, the king moved Nell into a fine house on Pall Mall. Nell had never made ostentatious demands on the King's time or money unlike some of his other mistresses, but Charles wanted a home for her and his son that would quiet the harpies that criticized him for allowing Nell to continue working in the theatre after their son was born. Nell was at first given a lease on the house but later, using her wit, was able to convince the king to give her the house outright. Their son Charles would later inherit a house that was full of history and great stories.

One habit of Nell Gwyn's that has endeared her to history was the fabulous dinner parties she hosted in her home at 79 Pall Mall. Firmly politically neutral, she invited anyone she found interesting to dine with her, no matter their class standing or religious tendencies. Charles often joined her, enjoying the relaxed atmosphere removed from the rules and gossiping of the court. With a regular rotation of entertaining dinner guests, many people from different social circles rubbed elbows with others with whom they didn't normally associate. In Nell's home it was possible for lower-class friends of Nell to meet the king. Nell's connection to the common people helped Charles keep their perspective in mind when making royal decisions.

In many ways, the relationship between Nell and the king was symbiotic. Nell was the King's connection to the lower levels of society, keeping him apprised of their feelings and occasionally giving advice. After she became the king's lover, Nell's performances in the theatre were enriched by the courtiers she encountered. They gave her perspective on what life

at court was really like, which influenced her performances of high-born characters for the public stage. Charles and Nell were quite similar in many ways, and this cemented their bond in a manner not observed with Charles' other mistresses. Both experienced rough childhoods that forced them to grow up quickly without much parental support. They had a mutual love of theatre and matching senses of humor. Importantly, they shared a similar life philosophy that inspired many discussions that brought them closer.

Not only was Nell talented, vivacious, and entertaining—she was also very generous. As she gained more financial support from the king, doubly secured after the birth of Charles first, and then his brother James in December 1671, she built up a wealth that she willed away at her death. Her most significant philanthropic act during her life was helping to found the Royal Hospital. It is still in existence today and is used to house retired soldiers. In her will, Nell gave her most significant holdings to her surviving son, Charles—James died accidentally as a child while being schooled in Paris. In later codicils, she made specific contributions to named people and to religious causes. She asked for £100 to be donated to debtors in order to release them from debtors' prison and buy them clothes, and requested King James to give £20 annually on Christmas day to release debtors. She donated £50 to “persons of the Roman Religion” (qtd. in Beauclerk 361) to support the poor in St. James's parish. Additionally, she bequeathed £10 per week to an unknown Lady Hollyman. It is noted that Nell's familiarity with poverty was the main motivating factor in her gifts; moreover, scholars believe that her father died in debtor's prison (361) which makes her request personal. Beauclerk describes her donations as “deeply felt gifts of a practical nature” (362). Nell's continued connection with the realities of life in the lower class made her donations all the more memorable in the lower

class's collective memory. It is a testament to her character that when she possessed power and wealth of her own she didn't disown her roots.

The remarkable trajectory of Nell Gwyn is validation of the power of one person to take every opportunity to improve her lot in life. She charmed those in power in order to succeed despite limitations placed on her because of her gender. Nell's flirtatious nature allowed her to subvert the patriarchal authority that assigned her to roles that were stereotypical and predictable. She and other actresses of the time succeeded in opening the doors to generations of women who would find fame and fortune in English-language theatre. They turned the subjugation of their gender into a positive cause, a stepping off point for more exploration and more equality, and contributed to the larger Restoration theatre community that has influenced movements and developments through to the modern day.

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Successful Restoration actresses include Charles II's mistress Nell Gwynn, the tragedienne Elizabeth Barry who was famous for her ability to "move the passions" and make whole audiences cry, the 1690s comedienne Anne Bracegirdle, and Susanna Mountfort (a.k.a. Susanna Verbruggen), who had many breeches roles written especially for her in the 1680s and 1690s. *Pinchwife* is a middle-aged man who has married an ignorant young country girl in the hope that she will not know how to cuckold him. However, Horner teaches her, and Margery cuts a swathe through the sophistications of London marriage without even noticing them. Poetic justice or, as Rymer expressed it, poetical justice, demanded that those of good character were rewarded and that the evil were punished. He was also of the view that plots should not be implausible and that dramatic works should have a moral. Rymer wasn't disconcerted by reputation and directed his criticism at no less than William Shakespeare, making some suggestions as to how the Bard could have improved *Othello*. Whilst being somewhat out of favour in some circles for his hardline stance, he did have many supporters. Notably amongst those was the celebrated poet and playwright J

The Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in the kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland took place in 1660 when King Charles II returned. The preceding period of the Protectorate and the civil wars, came to be known as the Interregnum (1649–1660). The term Restoration is also used to describe the period of several years after, in which a new political settlement was established. It is very often used to cover the whole reign of Charles II (1660–1685) and often the brief reign of his younger brother