Women in the Restoration

I. Feminism
- feminist: a political position in support of the new women’s movement (from the late 1960’s)
- origins: consciousness raising
- feminism struggles not so much for political power as for position in the symbolic order, not so much against men as against patriarchal ideology
- in literary criticism: two main directions:
  • feminine theory: studies the construction of femininity
  • female criticism: focuses on women (writers or characters)

II. The Role of Women in the Restoration Theatre (Actresses and Playwrights)

1. Social background: challenges to authority in the Restoration period:
   • monarchist authority (Locke’s theory of the state)
   • religious authority (dissenters, deism)
   • familial authority (new degree of support for the cause of divorce, new laws in women’s favour)

   - changes in the Restoration theatre:
     • indoor theatres
     • movable perspective scenery
     • actresses
   - 8 December 1660 Margaret Hughes played Desdemona in Killigrew’s production of Othello; two years later a royal warrant was issued decreeing that women were to play female roles
   - previously female roles were played by boy actors (e.g. Edward Kynaston, famous boy actor, played his last female role in 1661)

3. The controversial position of the actress
   - social:
     • a stage career meant the loss of respectability but women of the genteel class were needed
     • the social standing of the actress was relatively low and insecure but they could get close to court and king, and were held in high esteem by theatre-goers, could have fame
   - in the eyes of the audiences:
     • actresses primarily sex objects (e.g. breeches roles)
     • but a new opportunity for the representation of female experience: women were given a voice
   - in the company:
     • they had a subordinate role to their male
     • but they could gain fame, an opportunity to excel + high financial reward from admirers
   - in the drama:
     • general tendency of exposing women for sexual exploitation
     • but the presence of the female body on the stage made it possible for the best dramatists to present and explore women’s sexual feelings in new ways

4. The influence of actresses on the development of drama
   - Restoration theatre was primarily an “actors’ theatre”
   - two specific changes that can be traced back to the special talent and character of individual actresses:
     • shift from “heroic tragedies” to “she tragedies”: Elizabeth Barry
     • the popularity of the “gay couple”: Nell Gwyn
Mirabell and Millamant from the *Way of the World*—a late example of the gay couple: the proviso scene

**MILLAMANT** (...) Ah, I'll never marry, unless I am first made sure of my will and pleasure.

**MIRABELL** Would you have 'em both before marriage? Or will you be contented with the first now, and stay for the other till after grace?

**MILLAMANT** Ah, don't be impertinent. My dear liberty, shall I leave thee? My faithful solitude, my darling contemplation, must I bid you then adieu? Ay-h, adieu. My morning thoughts, agreeable wakings, indolent slumbers, all ye DOUCEURS, ye SOMMEILS DU MATIN, adieu. I can't do't, 'tis more than impossible—positively. Mirabell, I'll lie a-bed in a morning as long as I please.

**MIRABELL** Then I'll get up in a morning as early as I please.

**MILLAMANT** Ah! Idle creature, get up when you will. And d'ye hear, I won't be called names after I'm married; positively I won't be called names.

**MIRABELL** Names?

**MILLAMANT** Ay, as wife, spouse, my dear, joy, jewel, love, sweet-heart, and the rest of that nauseous cant, in which men and their wives are so fulsomely familiar—I shall never bear that. Good Mirabell, don't let us be familiar or fond, nor kiss before folks, (...) Let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while, and as well-bred as if we were not married at all.

**MIRABELL** Have you any more conditions to offer? Hitherto your demands are pretty reasonable.

**MILLAMANT** Trifles; as liberty to pay and receive visits to and from whom I please; to write and receive letters, without interrogatories or wry faces on your part; to wear what I please, and choose conversation with regard only to my own taste; to have no obligation upon me to converse with wits that I don't like, because they are your acquaintance, or to be intimate with fools, because they may be your relations. Come to dinner when I please, dine in my dressing-room when I'm out of humour, without giving a reason. To have my closet inviolate; to be sole empress of my tea-table, which you must never presume to approach without first asking leave. And lastly, wherever I am, you shall always knock at the door before you come in. These articles subscribed, if I continue to endure you a little longer, I may by degrees dwindle into a wife.

**MIRABELL** Your bill of fare is something advanced in this latter account. Well, have I liberty to offer conditions:—that when you are dwindled into a wife, I may not be beyond measure enlarged into a husband?

(...)

**MILLAMANT** Oh, horrid provisos! Filthy strong waters! I toast fellows, odious men! I hate your odious provisos.

**MIRABELL** Then we're agreed. Shall I kiss your hand upon the contract? And here comes one to be a witness to the sealing of the deed.

(...)

**MILLAMANT** Fainall, what shall I do? Shall I have him? I think I must have him.

**MRS. FAINALL** Ay, ay, take him, take him, what should you do?

**MILLAMANT** Well then—I'll take my death I'm in a horrid fright—Fainall, I shall never say it. Well—I think—I'll endure you.

**MRS. FAINALL** Fie, fie, have him, and tell him so in plain terms: for I am sure you have a mind to him.

**MILLAMANT** Are you? I think I have; and the horrid man looks as if he thought so too. Well, you ridiculous thing you, I'll have you. I won't be kissed, nor I won't be thanked.

5. Two actress careers: Nell Gwyn and Elizabeth Barry

**Eleanor "Nell" Gwyn** (or Gwynn or Gwynne) (1650-1687)
- childhood and background: father disappeared early, mother ran a bawdy house (brothel)
- hired as an "orange-girl" in the playhouse of the King’s Company (around 1663)
- at 14 she became an actress (taught by Charles Hart [Hart also started his career as a boy actor])
- became a star of Restoration comedy (May 1665, she appeared opposite Hart in James Howard's comedy *All Mistaken, or the Mad Couple*, their first "gay couple")
- 1667 she became the kept mistress of Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst but returns to the stage within the same year
- April 1668 her love affair with the King started (she gave birth to the King’s first son by her in 1670)
- returned to the stage again in late 1670 (in Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada*) but 1671 was her last season
- died in 1687

**Elizabeth Barry** (1658-1713)
- family background: father was a barrister with some eminence, but ruined for fighting against Cromwell for the royal cause; Lady Davenant patronizing Elizabeth
- an anecdote holds that the 17-year-old Barry at first performed so unskillfully that she was fired from the company several times, but was transformed into a brilliant actress by the coaching of her lover, John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester; from 1675 to 1682 she played in the Duke’s Company
- 1780: playing the role of Monimia in Otway’s *The Orphan* earned her the epithet “famous Mrs. Barry”
- from 1682 to 1695: the United Company
- from 1695-1709: in Betterton’s company (one of the original patent holders was Barry)
- 1709: she retired from the stage
- Barry achieved remarkable public approval and business success for a single woman in London in the late 17th century

6. Female authors
- women started to publish literature for the first time in the Restoration period: e.g. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1673) and Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661-1720)

**Aphra Behn** (1640-1688)
- 1663: visit to Surinam; on her return marriage to Johan Behn (1664); widowed in 1665
- 1666: introduced to the Court; employed by Charles II as a spy in Antwerp
- 1668: Charles II fails to pay her for her services or for her expenses, she gets into debtor’s jail;
- released in 1669; from 1670: she writes for a living; she wrote poems, at least 18 plays (the most famous is *The Rover*), and novels (the most famous is *Oroonoko*, 1688)
- a successful career as a writer
- Virginia Woolf’s assessment: “All women together, ought to let flowers fall upon the grave of Aphra Behn... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.”

III. The question of value
- without feminism, this female criticism would probably not have been produced
- but the value of the literary productions of these women has been called into question
- what female criticism emphasizes is the implicit or explicit feminism in these texts
- but problems:
  - Is it not reductive always to trace the same pattern of political struggle against patriarchy in any literary work?
  - Does the presence of such politics make these texts better works of art?