

## 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)

#### 2. Women in the Restoration theatre (Elizabeth Howe: *The First English Actresses. Women and Drama 1660-1700*, 1992)

- 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?