

History of the Restoration

by Zach Elton

*"All our time abroad, O, how I longed
To sail for London, our beloved town...
But now that I at last have come to roost
What do I find but grandeur's sad decay
And my own state much like in disarray
Languishing unransomed and alone
Abandoned by the great who late I served."
- Aphra Behn, Or,*

With these words, Aphra Behn bemoans what has happened to the great city of London during her lifetime. She has lived through the English Civil War, and, in time, she has watched the King get overthrown. Over a decade later, the echoes of war still haunt the city, people are starving and dying, and she is trapped in a debtors' prison. This is not the city she once loved. She remembers her life under King Charles I's reign, and longs for the rightful king, Charles II, to take the throne. Little does Aphra Behn know at the beginning of the play that Charles II is about to become king.

The period known as the Restoration began with the coronation of Charles II in 1660, officially restoring the Stuart monarchy to the English throne. When Charles II took power, he ushered in a new age of political, social, and artistic advancements; however, to fully understand the importance of the Stuarts returning to power, we must first understand the English Renaissance.

Most historians would say that the English Renaissance began in 1485 when the War of the Roses ended and Henry VII took the throne, beginning the Tudor dynasty. Britain flourished under the reign of the Tudors for over 100 years. The height of the Renaissance was said to be during Queen Elizabeth's reign from 1558 to 1603, when the country was producing an incredible amount of literature, music, and theater. This time period produced playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and, most famous of all, William Shakespeare.

When Queen Elizabeth died childless, she was succeeded by James I, the child of her cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots. James I's coronation officially ushered in the Stuart dynasty. During James I's time on the throne, the country dealt with financial trouble and the constant



OLIVER CROMWELL.

threat of war. When he died in 1625, his son, Charles I, ascended to the throne, but Charles I's time in power was even more tumultuous than his father's. There were tensions among England, Ireland, and Scotland that resulted in the First Civil War; Charles I ordered two failed expeditions into France; and he had continuous conflicts with Parliament over his excessive spending. He even went so far as to dissolve multiple Parliaments and ruled without one for many years. There was also a growing division among Catholics, Anglicans, and Presbyterians, so when Charles I married a Roman Catholic woman even though he was a practicing Anglican, there was widespread unrest. This political and religious division led to the Second Civil War in 1648 where Oliver Cromwell, one of Charles's opponents in Parliament, overthrew him. After Charles I was captured, he was put on trial for high treason against the realm of England and was soon beheaded outside of the Banqueting House in Whitehall, London. His sons, Charles II and James II, fled the country.

Following Charles I's death, there was an 11-year period called the Interregnum, or the period between two kings, where different government factions ruled, headed by Oliver Cromwell. During this time, the Puritans took control of Parliament and enforced strict rules on the rest of the country. They advocated against the lavish lifestyle that Charles I had led, and encouraged people to be more reserved. They banned gambling and theatrical events because they saw these to be immoral, and they even banned Christmas and Easter

celebrations because they were perceived to be too extravagant.

The Interregnum ended with the ascension of Charles II, the son of Charles I. Charles II was only eight years old when the Second Civil War broke out, and he escaped into exile. As a teenager he spent time in France and Scotland before being called home to take the throne. With the return of Charles II, the Restoration Period began. The time period covers the reigns of Charles II and his younger brother James II. After Charles II took the throne, he passed the Indemnity and Oblivion Act on August 29, 1660, which pardoned all past treasons against the king, but it specifically excluded those involved in the trial and execution of his father. Thirty-one of the 59 judges who signed the death warrant against Charles I were still alive; these men were hunted down and put on trial for their crimes except for a lucky few who escaped to America. Charles II also passed the Clarendon Code and the Act of Uniformity in 1662, officially restoring the Anglican Church as the national Church of England. This ushered in the return of traditional holidays and festivities, such as Christmas and Easter services.

While strict minimalism was the style during the Interregnum, the return of the Stuart monarchy brought a return to the lavish lifestyles that were experienced in Charles I's reign. Much like his father, Charles II spared no expense on clothes, art, parties, and entertainment. Within months of his coronation he reopened theaters and commissioned two new theaters to be built for him. They were named the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane and the Dorset Garden Theatre, and many of the best plays of the time were produced there. One of the first female playwrights, Aphra Behn, wrote during this time period, as did William Wycherley

and William Congreve. In strict contrast to the former Puritan way of life, the plays had an emphasis on gender and sexual expression that was rarely seen on English stages before this time. The infidelities happening in King Charles II's court were well known throughout England. He had multiple affairs with women such as Nell Gwynne and Barbara Villiers, and the playwrights of the time did not shy away from jokes about his love life.

Though his sexual escapades were well known, by the time he died, Charles II had no legitimate Protestant heir to the throne. After his death, his brother James II became king. When James II was living in France, he had converted to Roman Catholicism and maintained his religion when he took the throne. Many of the primarily Protestant English people were wary. When James's wife, who was also Roman Catholic, gave birth, the people feared that a Roman Catholic dynasty was going to be established. This led to the Glorious Revolution, where William of Orange, a distant relative of James II, invaded with the support of the Protestants in Britain. James II was overthrown in the coup and was forced into exile in France, where he died in 1701.

The exile of James II in 1688 is seen by many as the end of the Restoration Period; however, some historians say the time period lasted through the death of Queen Anne in 1714. While this time period was brief, it was certainly tumultuous. Aphra Behn responded to the chaotic world around her through her writing. Though she was on good terms with King Charles II, she didn't shy away from commenting on the issues plaguing England under his reign. Hidden behind her beautiful poetry, her plays contained a commentary on politics, religion, class, gender, and sexuality.



THE COURT OF KING CHARLES II.