

Gender and Sexuality in the Time Period

by Zach Elton

*"The world is changing. A woman can be an actress, a playwright, a poet, a libertine, a spy."
- Nell Gwynne, Or,*

With these words, Nell Gwynne excitedly reflects on the changing times. Charles II has just been crowned King of England, and she is optimistic about her prospects as an actress and a woman in this new age. In response to the strict Puritan rules of the decade before, the Restoration under the rule of Charles II saw an explosive movement of sexuality and gender expression, especially in the theater. For one of the first times in England, women were allowed to write plays and perform on stage. Aphra Behn, *Or*'s protagonist, was one of the first women playwrights and was the first to earn her living as one.

There was a certain duality that came along with women gaining the right to write plays and perform on stage. On the one hand, it meant playwrights such as Aphra Behn could give more agency to her female characters. In fact, she would often create strong female

leads who were unafraid to have their voices heard. These characters were intellectually equal to their male counterparts, and did not back down from quarreling with them. On the other hand, male playwrights began incorporating more scenes of sexual harassment and sexual violence into their works. While scholars today condemn these scenes for their violence against women, the male audience during the time found these scenes titillating. These sequences often did not further the plot; instead they were used as a way to entice the audience and comment on the sexual happenings in Charles II's court.

King Charles II's sexual escapades were well known throughout England. The seductions and infidelities that happened among the members of Charles's court was common knowledge, as were his affairs with women such as Barbara Villiers and Nell Gwynne. Restoration comedies did not shy away from satirizing his sex life. The comedies were full of jokes about impotence, overly sexual men, and sexually frustrated wives.



THE COURT OF KING CHARLES II.

The rake was a stock character who symbolized overly sexual men, often from the upper class, in these plays. According to Diane Maybank in "An Introduction to Restoration Comedy," the rake was "seductive, witty and arrogant; he represented a flattering type of male prowess and drive, much admired in court circles." He was a character who was sexually explicit and bawdy. Through him, the playwright could discuss and explore sexuality in a way that largely wasn't talked about in everyday life, at least not in the lower and middle classes.

Another common trope in Restoration comedies was the "gay couple." This was a man and a woman who were equally witty and independent. They spent their time teasing their partner to see if they were a viable candidate to marry. The man was usually headstrong and seductive, while the woman was flirtatious and independent. The women in these relationships had equal, if not superior, wit to their male counterparts, and, at least on stage, they had the freedom to outshine their partner. They could express their intelligence, and sexual freedom throughout the play, but they also always ended up married by the end. Though the playwrights could probe and discuss a woman's place in society within the confines of the play, they also had to resolve their plots in marriage to bolster the social norms and reassert the patriarchy.

This period introduced the trope of "trouser roles," also known as "breeches roles." These parts were written as the male hero of the show, but the part was performed by a woman; if a trouser role were in an opera, the woman would be a soprano. Because the female performers were in pants, these roles were seen as highly erotic; this is mainly due to the women's exposed legs and slightly revealing shirt. Nell comments in *Or*, on how the male audience members are obsessed with looking at her body, saying, "They love me in the breeches parts so they can all look at my legs."

There are primarily two types of trouser roles. The first type is a female actor who plays a male character for the entire performance. In this type of role, the audience is supposed to fall under the illusion that this is a man, and the true gender of the actress is never revealed during the context of the performance. The second type of trouser role is a female actor playing a female character who, during the course of the show, takes on the persona of a man. By the end, though,



A WOMAN PREPARES FOR A BREECHES ROLE.

it is revealed that the character is female. In both cases, the audience knows that the true gender of the actress is female; however, when wearing a man's disguise, the women were able to adopt the privilege, power, and influence of a male character.

These roles were not accepted by everyone. Puritans condemned the roles for promoting sexual immorality because the men in the audience could see a woman's leg. The roles were also condemned for promoting homosexuality because many of the trouser roles characters had young female love interests. In addition, because these women were wielding the power of men, some critics of the time thought it gave women an unrealistic and immoral idea of a woman's place in society—which at the time was completely submissive to their male counterparts. Though women could express their freedom and wit on stage, when the play ended, they had to assume their submissive place in the patriarchy once more.

Though there was an explosive movement of gender and sexual expression during the Restoration, it would be a few hundred years before the fight for equality really began. However, women in this time period, such as Aphra Behn and Nell Gwynne, paved the way for future playwrights, actresses, and women to fight for their rights.