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## **HOW TO REPRESENT FEMALE IDENTITY ON THE RESTORATION STAGE: ACTRESSES (SELF) FASHIONING**

**ABSTRACT:** Despite the shifting ideologies of gender of the seventeenth century, the arrival of the first actresses caused deep social anxiety: theatre gave women a voice to air grievances and to contest, through their own bodies, traditional gender roles. This paper studies two of the best-known actresses, Nell Gwyn and Anne Bracegirdle, and the different public personae they created to negotiate their presence in this all—male world. In spite of their differing strategies, both women gained fame and profit in the male—dominated theatrical marketplace, confirming them as the ultimate “gender benders,” who appropriated the male role of family’s supporter and bread-winner.

**KEY WORDS:** Actresses, Restoration, Bracegirdle, Gwyn, gender notions, deployment of alliance, deployment of sexuality.

### **Introduction: Men, Women and Changing Gender Notions**

The early seventeenth century was an eventful time for Britain, a moment when turmoil and war gave way to a strict regime, which then resulted in the return of peace and stability in the form of Parliamentary Monarchy. The 1600s saw two of the most significant events in the history of the British Isles: the Civil War and the execution of Charles I.

The Civil War was the result not just of a questioning of the figure of the Monarch, but of the discourses of truth that sustained absolutism. The deployment of alliance was

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characterised by a cruel and repressive authoritarianism, which closely followed Biblical teachings, the theory of humours and the Galenic model. In this rigidly hierarchical society that hardly allowed for any mobility “men and women were seen as very different in nature, temperament, role, status, and place on the Great Chain of Being, and these allegedly innate and natural differences were canonised in law, theology, and writings on conduct and society” (Pearson “Gendered bodies” 163).

The established church warned about the danger women posed for social order; the Bible portrayed them as the devious daughters of Eve: lustful, disobedient and irrational. The legal discourse supported all of these negative views, giving men the power to punish unruly women. The medical doctrine argued that “men and women are . . . not different in kind but in the configuration of their organs; the male is a hotter version of the female, or . . . the female is the cooler, less perfect version of the male” (Laqueur 4). This vision of women rendered them inferior to men, placed underneath them in the pyramid of power, with little chance of climbing up to position themselves at the same level.

The execution of Charles I was a key step in a process of change in these discourses of truth: the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century meant that God was no longer the centre of the Universe and the King was not the sole Head of the Government. A new order had emerged: the deployment of sexuality. The religious discourse was displaced by a secular one: a scientific method which claimed that women were not an imperfect copy of men, but an essential complement to the male sex. “Sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented. The reproductive organs went from being paradigmatic sites for displaying hierarchy . . . to being the foundation of incommensurable difference” (Laqueur, *Making Sex* 149).

Laudatory descriptions of the strengths of each sex were promoted, insisting on a seemingly positive description of the natural qualities that each possessed: women were tender and nurturing, while men were reasonable and strong. Thus, it followed that men were better suited for a public life and for the stress it entailed; women meanwhile, needed to be protected from the ugliness of the world, and their natural qualities would be better exploited indoors.

The Restoration was a turning point in the dominant notions of femininity, a period of “chronological overlap between the misogynistic tradition and the first flowering of a positive ideology

of womanhood” (Fletcher 1999: 377). The 1660s saw the struggle for permanence and dominance between both systems, a battle for leadership that could only have one conclusion: the disappearance of one of the two. And in fact, by the year 1700, Britain saw the collapse of the deployment of alliance and the triumph of the deployment of sexuality that survived well into the twentieth-century.

### **The Merry Monarch and the Arrival of the Actress**

Such was the ideological panorama that Charles II found upon his arrival to the British Isles in 1660; the Merry Monarch would be remembered, rather than for his politics, for his contribution to the development of drama in Britain. After a hiatus of eighteen years, Charles reopened the playhouses and it was not long before women took over the stage, changing the face not just of British drama, but of British society forever.

For centuries women had been banned from the stage on the basis that they did not need their natural vanity to be flattered by being admired and revered as goddesses on stage. Another consideration was that women who were allowed outdoors, unchaperoned, would soon have less than reputable relations with men. The feudal system clearly saw that nothing was to be gained from allowing ladies onstage and that, in fact, it was a most dangerous concession.

What changed in 1660? There seem to be a number of factors that eased the emergence of women onto the stage. On the one hand, the intervention of the King and his Court Wits seems to have been essential in the process: “Charles II was more closely involved with the public theatre, as opposed to the court theatre, than any other English Monarch” (Howe 23). Furthermore, they were no strangers to the presence of women onstage: not only had they witnessed the Queen performing at Court, but, while in exile, they found that women had been acting for years, a custom they imported to Britain.

“This shift in attitude can be linked to a wider change in how relationships between the sexes were defined” (Howe 23): the insistence on the natural differences between genders led to the allowing of a certain individuality for both. Still, this is not to say that actresses were readily accepted by the general public; what is more, many were the voices that raged against them, denouncing

them as unnatural women who did not fit the female ideal of either deployment.

In spite of counting on the support of the King, actresses soon became the focus of public gossip for, “although the public actress was an exception to the typical domestic female, she was subject to the same ideological constraints and her gender difference was emphasised (and enjoyed) by constant reference to her sexuality, both on stage and off” (Howe 21).

In the eyes of seventeenth-century audiences, the actress was defined by her sexuality: as soon as she abandoned the “safety” of the home, she exposed herself and her reputation, becoming a public woman in the broadest sense of the term. As Bush-Bailey points out: “anxieties arising from women working in an openly commercial and wholly public sphere quickly led to parallels with prostitution, a link that has endured for generations in patriarchal society employing the binaries of private/public, virgin/whore as its construct of femininity” (13).

The general belief was that “no ‘respectable’ woman became an actress. Society assumed that a woman who displayed herself on the public stage was probably a whore” (Howe 32). This meant that many were the men that flocked to the playhouse not to be entertained, but to approach the female actors expecting them to accept their offers.

Soon, the stories of actresses’ liaisons became more interesting than their actual talent and, “the actress’s sexuality—her potential availability to men—became the central feature of her professional identity as a player” (Howe 34). It seems that audiences attended playhouses not just to admire their ability, but to gather the latest scandals surrounding these new onstage goddesses: “Restoration society was enthralled by the actress’s craft on stage and simultaneously engrossed by the stories surrounding their sexual liaisons off stage” (Bush-Bailey 13).

The actress soon became a fiction herself, making it increasingly difficult for audiences to separate the character from her actual persona. Her status as a public figure meant that audiences soon created a whole new woman that, in most cases, did not correspond with the human being behind the make-up; as Bush-Bailey explains, “the elision between her public and private identity, the visual spectacle of her acting body on stage and the potential availability of her sexual body off stage created an ambiguous perspective” (13) of who she was.

Actresses could count on a series of roles at the time, depending on the genre; tragedies usually allowed for three types of women: the virgin-maid, the sultry temptress and the villain. But if there is one genre that Restoration is identified with, it is the comedy of manners; it is precisely this comedy that offers actresses the most interesting opportunities to either fully realise their subversive potential or to reinforce the patriarchal gender stereotypes.

Although for Howe most of the female characters created for the Restoration stage are subjected and limited by patriarchal constraints, the aim of this paper is not to analyse the construction of heroines. It is rather to show how certain performers took advantage of the identification actress/character, to create a private/public persona that would allow them to successfully navigate the male-dominated world of theatre.

### **The Immortal Orange-Seller: Nell Gwyn and the Madcap**

Restoration comedy is characterised by the creation of the “witty” couple, which “consists of a pair of lively, witty lovers whose love contains an element of antagonism—each desires the other but is wary of commitment” (Howe 66), provoking a series of amusing misunderstandings and trials. This “gay couple” is by no means the union of two conventional characters, but a struggle for power between two opinionated and active individuals who are less than willing to relinquish their freedom and independence. While in tragedies most of the women are acted upon, in the case of these comic heroines we find young outspoken women who orchestrate actions and plots to finally win the man of their choice, or even remain single.

The “gay couple” was inspired by two performers rumoured to have been an item in real life: Charles Hart and the immortal orange seller, Nell Gwyn. In fact, “the inspiration of this assertive heroine was Nell Gwyn and thus, albeit indirectly, she brought a new approach to comic love relationships between the sexes” (Howe 71). Her performances, alongside her then lover and acting mentor, Charles Hart, gained both the company and Nell great success, so that the ‘gay couple’ became the convention of the genre.

This was the beginning of her success as an actress and of her legend as an icon of the period; the fact that her acting career

only spanned seven years has not prevented her from becoming the paradigmatic image of the Restoration. In Nell Gwyn, we find the height of the identification between the real person and the dramatic persona that all actresses endured. The public fascination with her private life and her roles reached an all-time high, so much so that “the glamour and scandal of the roles she played carried over into her off-stage persona, and vice versa, never to be relinquished, neither during her lifetime nor after it” (Perry, Roach & West 64).

Although this interplay of reality and fiction put pressure on most female performers, who were immediately labelled as whores, Nell Gwyn accepted this label, making it her own. She took on the role of the madcap and became an expert at it, inside and outside of the theatre, managing to create a legend that allowed her to survive the defamation campaigns during her own time and subsequent centuries: the key to her success lies, according to Perry, Roach & West in that “Gwyn . . . fashioned her unique personality into a repeatable model for the new professional career of actress-celebrity, blazing a trail for others to follow” (71).

Although Nell was not the first actress on the British stage, it is undeniable that “she was the first starring one, and she remains the most popularly referenced” (Perry, Roach & West 71). The question is, why Nell? She was not exceptional in that “her sexuality ‘became the central feature of her professional identity as a player’” (Perry, Roach & West 71), she was, as much as any other actress, an object for men to project their fantasies upon.

The difference with Nell is that she accepted the public role given to her, appropriating and subrogating it. As Perry, Roach & West explain, “part of Gwyn’s magic resided in her ability to make her personality a conduit for the jolt of social energy” (71) that characterises the Restoration: she took the gossip surrounding her life and instead of attempting to deny the scandals, she appropriated them, fashioning her own story out of them, thus protecting herself from public shaming and carving a name for herself in the history not just of theatre, but of Britain.

Nell was, and still is, well-known for her sexual conquests; her mentor, Charles Hart, tutored her in more arts than acting, taking her as a lover when she was merely fourteen, only to be abandoned by her when Lord Buckhurst took her as mistress. Still, although these two liaisons did put her in the spotlight, it was her affair with King Charles that ultimately pushed her to the

forefront of celebrity and the episode of her life most novelists and experts still ponder about. Most portray it as a fairy—tale romance, in which Nell and Charles fell in love and lived happily ever after, trying to make the distinction between Nell, as the good—natured mistress, and the evil and ambitious concubines like the infamous Duchess of Portsmouth.

Nell's affairs with powerful men certainly gave her notoriety, but it was the way she handled the rumours surrounding her private life that set her apart from the other women who got lost in the viciousness of celebrity. While never denying or confirming any of these affairs, Nell Gwyn is known to have publicly “dubbed her royal lover, who had followed in the steps of Hart and Buckhurst, ‘Charles III’” (Perry, Roach & West 74). This pun is not merely a manifestation of her celebrated wit, but it links her even more closely to the madcaps, who do not have their virginity and purity exalted; in fact, in many instances we can find that these heroines are by no means inexperienced in sexual matters.

One example of such a character is Buckingham's Constancia, whom Gwyn interpreted to perfection; “she is not, it seems, a virgin, but her murky past is ignored or made a joke of, and she is presented as a kind of free spirit who engages in bouts of wit with the hero and wins him in the end” (Howe 67-68). Although Nell played this part long before she became a royal mistress, it seems that she appropriated the playwright's strategy, applying it to her own life, making a joke of her past and of her string of lovers, but never attempting to deny them. Furthermore, her continued friendship with Buckhurst and the memory of her stellar performances alongside Hart were immediately activated once this pun on her sexual history started circulating. With this simple line, Gwyn appropriated the qualities of the witty heroine: the ability to “improvise” jokes, and her sassiness and unabashed boldness when it came to discussing her private life, were some of the traits that Nell shared with the madcaps.

After abandoning the theatre for her royal lover, Nell did not leave the spotlight at all; in fact, it can be argued that she became even more famous and that public opinion was even more attentive to her comings and goings. Legend has it that one afternoon, while she was travelling through the streets of London, an angry mob stopped her coach having confused her with the Duchess of Portsmouth. The people of London were beyond unhappy about Charles's affair with Louise de K rouaille, a Catholic noblewoman from Brittany; both her religious views and her French origins made her an object of mistrust and dislike.

When confronted with this anti-Catholic mob, Nell made a show of her shrewdness and quick-wit, by emerging from the coach and addressing them thus: “Pray, good people, be civil, I am the *Protestant* whore” (Perry, Roach & West 67), to which the crowd answered with cheers. Distinguishing herself from the hated Duchess of Portsmouth was a clever move. This very short line hides a double dimension: on the one hand, it shows Nell’s understanding of state affairs and politics with her emphasis on her being a Protestant, rather than a Catholic, one of Kérouaille’s most hated flaws.

Nell’s identification with a whore is another crafty device; while many of the women who had affairs with the King insisted on their being women of quality even when they were public adulterers, Nell openly admits to her status as a public whore. Instead of pretending to a morality that she is betraying when bedding a married man, she openly accepts her role as a concubine, appropriating the label “whore” and turning it into a source of pride rather than shame.

In a Court where women were constantly competing for the King’s attention, having the favour of the general public was an advantage, and it was all Nell’s; she is the real-life madcap, always ready for merry banter and a witty remark. She managed to survive not just the rumours that surrounded her theatre life, but also the malicious comments at Court, using the same strategy: transferring the roles she mastered onstage to her day-to-day life, she fashioned a character that she interpreted both in public and private, performing the role of the madcap to perfection. Thus she became one of the few women to successfully navigate the agitated waters of Restoration public life and survive as an essential part of the British collective imagination.

### **The Darling of the Theatre: Anne Bracegirdle, the Romantic Virgin**

In direct contrast to Nell’s whorish reputation stands Anne Bracegirdle’s image of spotless purity, virtue and sinless innocence. As it was normally the case with women actors, Anne’s public persona both influenced and was shaped by the dramatic roles she was recurrently hired to perform. Depending on the genre of the play, she used to incarnate one of two different types of character: in tragedy, Anne ordinarily played a virtuous and



suffering heroine that often endured sexual violence but remained pure and blameless; in comedy, she was commonly depicted as an attractive and witty heiress who refused a legion of undesirable suitors until she found the husband of her choice.

Despite this genre-motivated difference, passivity was the keynote of most of Bracegirdle's characters: either as an afflicted and sexually-abused virgin or as the target of pressing fortune hunters, she almost invariably played the role of the victim/pursued and eschewed initiating agency. Many are the testimonies that corroborate and extol Bracegirdle's well-known virginal reputation. Among those, Cibber's laudatory assessment of the actress is worthy of quotation:

Never any Woman was in such general Favour of her Spectators, which, to the last Scene of her Dramatick Life, she maintain'd, by not being unguarded in her private Character. This Discretion contributed to make her the *Cara*, the Darling of the Theatre: For it will be no extravagant thing to say, Scarce an Audience saw her, that were less than half of them Lovers, without a Suspected Favourite among them: And tho' she might be said to have been the Universal Passion, and under the highest Temptations; her Constancy in resisting them, served but to increase the number of her Admirers. (135)

Anne's tenacious resistance to temptation, her proclaimed sexual unavailability, only increased men's desires. The unattainable "Romantic Virgin" was as much the object of male desire as the whore. As Cibber would later state, "in all the chief Parts she acted, the Desirable was so predominant, that no Judge could be cool enough to consider, from what other particular Excellence, she became delightful" (135). In fact, Aston described her as an extremely attractive lady:

of a lovely Height, with dark-brown Hair and Eye-brows, black sparkling Eyes, and a fresh blushy Complexion; and, whenever she exerted herself, had an involuntary Flushing in her Breast, Neck and Face, having continually a cheerful Aspect, and fine set of even white Teeth; never making an Exit, but that she left the Audience in an Imitation of her pleasant Countenance. (168)

The idea of virginity is encoded in the description of Bracegirdle's physical attributes. Solomon explains that many of the virginal heroines that hit the Restoration stage had dark eyes. Furthermore, the brightness of the actress's gaze and the freshness of her complexion connote innocence and virginity,

whereas her blushes carry associations of the first bloom of love. Besides, “the ‘involuntary’ aspect of Bracegirdle’s blushes connotes a sincerity of emotional expression that appears to verify the sexual innocence Aston refers to when he compares her to the Roman goddess of chastity” (Solomon 142).<sup>1</sup>

Bracegirdle fashioned her public persona in accordance with the construction of femininity that began to gain currency with the Scientific Revolution: Essentially virtuous, passive and kind-hearted, she was not an inferior and imperfect version of the normative male, but his spiritually equal and biologically complementary opposite. Similarly, most of the roles played by Bracegirdle were designed to suit the emerging gender ideology. Nevertheless, she also incarnated some libertine characters that indulged in unsanctioned sexual affairs and delivered licentious prologues and epilogues. Ironically, these occasional reversals of the audience’s expectations did not undermine, but rather reinforced the actress’s virginal reputation.

Several are the effects that critics have attributed to the exceptional roles where Bracegirdle’s character and her public persona were strongly disassociated. The “comic incongruities” (Solomon 136) that stemmed from such disassociation could provide the play with “a new and effective show value” (Pearson 26), frame it as social satire (Holland 157) or allow non-virginal characters to “find redemption through their actress” (Solomon 158). In any case, Bracegirdle’s embodiment of the emerging ideology of womanhood was deeply ingrained in the period’s collective imagination.

As hegemonic masculinity comes to be defined in relation to a feminine opposite, the domains of public and private become increasingly gendered spaces, and the household, women’s “‘separate but equal’ area of activity and authority” (Shevelow 3). In this context, the figure of the actress becomes essentially transgressive, posing a huge threat to the ideology of separate spheres through which masculine dominance is secured and enforced. The construction of actresses as whores, as marginal figures whose deviance reinforces hegemonic notions of gender, constitutes an effective way to contain their subversive potential. Seen in this light, Bracegirdle’s emphatically virtuous public persona mounts a flagrant challenge to the patriarchal association women/home.

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<sup>1</sup> Aston refers to Bracegirdle as “that *Diana* on the stage (168).”

Cibber tried to erase the contradiction inherent to Anne's identity by confining her to the utmost privacy, arguing that she "would rather pass her remaining Days forgotten, as an Actress, than to have her Youth recollected in the most favourable Light" (134). Nevertheless, Bracegirdle had already stepped into the "masculine" domain of public life when she performed on the London stage, to the delight of an enthusiastic audience that would soon look on her as a star.

Like Cibber before him, Anthony Aston noticed the subversive potential of Bracegirdle's public persona. In a laudatory description of the actress' charitable nature, he made the following remark: "and yet this good Woman was an Actress" (169). In defining her case as exceptional, Aston reinforces the actress/whore connection and contains the threat that Bracegirdle posed to the established gender system, validating the emerging ideology of femininity.

Though more positive, this construction of femaleness was not a shred more empowering, since it confined women to the private sphere, granting them no authority whatsoever in the public domain. Even though Bracegirdle integrated this ideology in her public persona, she also contributed to subvert it. First, as mentioned above, she posed a threat to the actress/whore association, a threat that her admirers could not manage to either contain or erase successfully. Proof of this failure is provided by the following fragment from *A Comparison between the Two Stages*:

RAMBLE: And Mrs. Bracegirdle ...

CRITIC: Is a haughty conceited Woman, that has got more Money by dissembling her Lewdness, than others by professing it.

SULLEN: But does that Romantick Virgin still keep up her great Reputation?

CRITIC: D'ye mean her Reputation for Acting?

SULLEN: I mean her Reputation for not acting; you understand me. (qtd. in Wilson 127)

This dialogue reflects the period's anxiety about women stepping into the male public sphere, an anxiety embodied by the ideologically contradictory figure of the actress. The participants equate acting with prostitution and fashion the female performer as a marginal figure whose sexual deviancy reinforces the emerging construction of femininity. Significantly, this verbal attack was launched at a moment when Bracegirdle's public

prominence was at its height. In 1695, the United Company, which had held the monopoly of the London stage since 1682, broke down as the result of internal conflicts between the autocratic manager and several players. A group of “rebel” actors signed the “Petition of the Players” and gained from the Lord Chamberlain a license to open a new theatre at Lincoln Inn Fields. In this revolt, Bracegirdle played a central role, one which male “traditional historiography has failed to investigate” (Bush-Bailey 97). Furthermore, she became, together with Elizabeth Barry, the first actress-manager of a London playhouse, gaining unprecedented influence as a theatre woman in the “male” public domain.

The typical Bracegirdle heroine embodied a positive–yet disempowering–image of femininity; attractive, virtuous and passive, she apparently reinforced the unbalanced relations of power between the sexes. Furthermore, the actress also adjusted her public persona to this construction of womanhood and, thanks to her virginal reputation, became a mere object of male fantasy and desire, “an Ornament to the Theatre” (Cibber 135). At first glance, Anne’s decision to conform to the period’s ideal of femininity seems to serve patriarchal ends. Nevertheless, through her own voice and body, she subverted the actress/whore association and managed to exert extraordinary influence in the “male” public sphere without jeopardising her virginal reputation.

### **Conclusions**

Whether portraying a whore or an angel, actresses soon became the favourite topic of gossip and rumours; still, they were the best publicity for the companies, who competed to see who attracted more people. The attitude towards the actress was, then, complex and diverse, a mixture of desire, rejection and scorn; she was an object of both fascination and abjection: audiences were repulsed and entranced by the sight of a woman on stage, who immediately acquired a special appeal, completely divorced from her actual acting skills.

“The actress’ figure proves to be a site of ideological contradiction in the emergence of dominant notions of gender and sexuality in the eighteenth century. . . . [A]s women whose profession is undeniably public, actresses resisted the assumption that feminine sexuality was the private (and passive) opposite of

masculinity” (Straub 89). To solve this contradiction that could very well threaten the balance of power in this patriarchy, some authors, both male and female, insisted on the objectification of the actresses’ bodies, constraining them to tired and stereotypical roles. It is true that “Restoration theatre literally brought the female body back from abstraction” (Findlay 191), not only as the instrument to develop her craft and her means of expression, but also, and more importantly, as her prison; drama soon takes advantage of it, using and abusing it, turning actresses into objects and reflections of male sexual desire.

Nevertheless, although it is true that many of these women were treated as objects and that scenes involving partial nudity or the display of actresses’ physical assets increased after 1660, it seems unfair to assume that none of them used this new-found voice to air grievances and complaints against a system that did not allow them any agency. This argument seems to be too limiting, refusing any possibility of these women being capable of not just *carrying* meaning, but *creating* it; it is our contention that although many female actors were used to propagate negative images of women, some others managed to realise their subversive potential, using their visibility to fashion themselves as women who defied and resisted classification.

Although Gwyn and Bracegirdle, did, to some extent, embody some misogynistic stereotypes, they also appropriated and subverted them, creating the public personas we have come to know. And it is precisely this self-fashioning that made them dangerous “gender-benders,” becoming independent women and the sole bread-winners.

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