Low Brows and High Profiles: Rhetoric and Gender in the Restoration and Early Eighteenth Century Theater

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Abstract
The Restoration and early eighteenth-century theaters of London formed an important mixed-gender rhetorical venue, which was acutely focused on the age-old “querrelle des femmes” (or woman question). The immediate popularity of the newly opened Restoration theaters, the new practice of casting actresses rather than actors in female roles, and the libertine social climate of London from 1660 to the early 1700s created a unique rhetorical situation in which women openly participated as speakers and audience members. Through a methodology combining feminist historiography, performance theory, Bitzer’s rhetorical situation, and Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, this dissertation reclaims the Restoration theatre as one of the earliest public, secular, mixed-gender rhetorical venues in the English-speaking world.

London theater of the Restoration and the early eighteenth century presents a feminist kairos for rereading and revisioning the actress from object to subject, from passive receiver to deliverer of performative rhetoric. Overall, the attention given to issues of femaleness in the plays of this period exceeds that of preceding and subsequent periods. The novelty of the actresses, as well as disillusionment with the male-dominated government and system of patriarchy, were major contributing factors that led to the female focus on stage. This phenomenon of female rhetoric also reflects the charisma, elocutionary skill, and visual rhetoric of the best female performers of the period, including: Nell Gwyn, Mary Saunderson Betterton, Elizabeth Barry, Anne Bracegirdle, Susannah Mountfort Verbruggen, Anne Oldfield, and Lavinia Fenton, all of whom are discussed from a rhetorical perspective in this dissertation.

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The Restoration refers to the restoration of the monarchy when Charles II was restored to the throne of England following an eleven-year Commonwealth period during which the country was governed by Parliament under the direction of the Puritan General Oliver Cromwell. This political event coincides with (and to some extent is responsible for) changes in the literary, scientific, and cultural life of Britain. During this time,
a premium was placed on the importance of human reason and on an empirical philosophy that held that knowledge about the world was through
the senses and by applying reas Restoration comedy kept all sections of its audience happy by blending wit with ‘low’ humour such as farce and
burlesque. In the 17th century, wit meant more than the ability to make people laugh. Wit was governed by a serious playfulness with words and
ideas, where language was used in an intellectually stimulating and surprising way. Such language was elegant, structured and subtle. In
Elizabethan theatre, the costumes were more lavish than the costumes in modern theatre. The scenery in Elizabethan theater was scarce
compared to modern theatre. Describe the Elizabethan stage. -The hut, which was in the canopy and was used to lower objects onto the stage -
The balcony, which was above the alcove -Entrances, which was two of each side of the stage. TODAY -Doesn't have so many areas -Main stage is
similar -Entrances are similar. What were the dates of the Commonwealth? 1642-1660. Why is the theatre called the Restoration theater?
Because it was stopped for a while the began again, so the theatre was restored. What was a Royal Patent?