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HER HOUR UPON THE STAGE: A STUDY OF
ANNE BRACEGIRDLE, RESTORATION ACTRESS

by

Julie Ann Farrer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

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1965

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Julie Ann Farrer

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INTRODUCTION

It has always been for me a personal source of regret that so much dramatic art is wasted, so to speak, on the unknowing times. The performances of many actors and actresses have often been of greater creative value and artistic invention than the efforts of the playwrights themselves. Yet the annals of history preserve, for all time, the written word, while the sound and emotion of great acting is lost with its moment. Only the scant impressions of the casual playgoer survive to bring back a faded view of what glory the stage must have known when great talents graced its boards.

The stage of Restoration England produced some of the most exciting moments the theatre has ever known. Its sophisticated comedy has never known a rival. But the playwrights owed much of their success to the consummate abilities of the acting companies which presented their plays. Men and women of vital talent and ready wit presented the Restoration's brand of theatre before noisy, rowdy, and fun-loving audiences.

Surrounded by the glamor of their trade and dozens of admirers, women of the theatre were subject to varying degrees of praise, condemnation, and scandal. Not the least-mentioned name among those connected with the theatre and all of its connotations is that of Anne Bracegirdle, an actress from 1680 to 1707.

Mrs. Bracegirdle was a woman of alluring beauty and superior talent. Her contemporary reputation rested both upon her roles on the stage and upon her unblemished private character. At a time when the word actress was nearly synonymous with prostitute, Mrs. Bracegirdle enjoyed an

unbelievably virtuous reputation. Indeed, her reputation was unbelievable. Although her platonic friendships were many and varied, no one actually believed her innocent. Yet the audiences were always abounding with her admirers, unrequited but loyal.

Many men of wit and circumstance were enamored of Anne Bracegirdle. Among them was the talented playwright, William Congreve. In the company of Congreve, she may have established herself as his mistress for many years. For her he created half a dozen of his finest roles.

Anne Bracegirdle's stage career was long and varied. Her repertoire included nearly a dozen Shakespearean roles plus the selected leading feminine parts in other popular plays of the period. She so enthralled her audiences that it was said by a contemporary, Anthony Aston, that "she never made an exit but that she left the audience in an imitation of her pleasant countenance."

Surprisingly little has been written about this Restoration queen of the stage and hearts. That not a single biography of her life exists seems doubly strange when one discovers that other acting contemporaries have been completely treated in a score of scholarly and well-written biographies.

I have dedicated my research efforts to rectifying this unfortunate slight to a talented actress. In the course of this study, I hope that the curtain can be lifted for a few moments, the lights can come up on a now-silent stage, and one may be able to experience the sound and fury of a distant but vital artist's HOUR UPON THE STAGE.



Figure 1. Anne Bracegirdle as Semernia.. (Reprinted through permission of Kegan, Paul, Trubner and Company)

ENTER: THE ACTRESSES

It was a September afternoon in 1656. Oliver Cromwell and his pious purity still sat at the head of the British government. On this day there was a law-defying excitement in the air near Aldersgate Street. The people bustled themselves into Rutland House, where they would break the law and shed their black Puritan cloaks and display the fashionable clothing popular on the Continent. There they would break the law and see a play, and what was even worse, they would see a woman acting in a drama.

They gathered, and the excitement intensified: perhaps Cromwell's police had been told about the performance, perhaps all in attendance would be arrested before the afternoon was over, perhaps someone had told that today's play would feature a woman, perhaps...well, perhaps a lot of things. But how could these fears dampen the spirits of such a new and exciting first?

The lights dimmed; the curtain went up on the small, eleven-foot stage. The play, written by and performed in the house of Sir William Davenant, was The Siege of Rhodes; and the woman carrying a script (because she had been unable to memorize her lines) was Mrs. Coleman. She was "fat and pleasant" and not a very good actress. Nevertheless, she was a woman, married and respectable, and she was saying the lines set down for the heroine.¹

¹Macqueen-Pope, W., Ladies First: The Story of Woman's Conquest of the British Stage (London, 1952), pp. 25-26.

The roof did not collapse that day; God did not come riding down from the heavens in his golden chariot to damn all mortals in attendance; Mrs. Coleman did not turn into a prostitute; and on top of all this, Oliver Cromwell did not even condemn the event; he never knew it had taken place.

Thus, in comparative obscurity, a new English theatrical tradition was born. What was to prevent other women from performing also? Only Cromwell. And when Charles II became king, many other women followed in the path of Mrs. Coleman. King Charles actually took concrete action in bringing about this revolutionary process in the theatre. The King's warrant granted to Davenant and Killigrew on August 21, 1660, not only gave them permission to use his name in the establishment of their theatrical company, but it also stipulated that from thenceforth all women's roles should be played by women.² Never again would audiences have to be satisfied with the beauty and tenderness of a balcony scene acted by two Romeos. The pattern had been set, and even a king'd edict had been issued; the rest was left for time to bring to fruition.

Although audiences as a whole welcomed the arrival of the actress with open arms (both literally and figuratively), the theatrical producers were somewhat plagued with the problem of just where to obtain their new players. Few self-respecting ladies even attended the theatres, and none of them would deign to entertain the masses with the bawdry then current in most of the popular dramas. And yet the duties of an actress required more than the lower-class English woman could offer,

²Wilson, John Harold, All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration (Chicago, 1958), p. 4.

for it was necessary that female players possess not only some degree of beauty but an ability to read and memorize, some talent in the areas of singing and dancing, and a pioneer willingness to try their luck in a new profession. Education prevented lower-class women from becoming actresses, and social pressure restrained the upper classes. The choice, then, was limited to a narrow stratum of society between the acceptably respectable and the unacceptably disrespectable. As a result, most of the early actresses were either orphans who had received some education, such as Elizabeth Barry and Moll Davis, or else they disguised their family ties in order not to disgrace their relations. Some used fictitious names and thereby assigned themselves to permanent obscurity as did Mrs. Clough, Mrs. Norton and Mrs. Price.³

Soon women were lured to the boards in the hope of securing a husband or a permanent position as a rich man's mistress. Those who became mistresses were many, but those who were able to secure permanence were few, most of them suffering disgrace and abandonment in pregnancy and disease. Unfit for stage work then, they found that the only occupation left to them was prostitution. It was true that many early actresses, as the fire-and-brimstone preachers had promised, did eventually find their way to the London brothels.

Very early the norm was set, and the reputations of all actresses were somewhat pre-cast in the hard-to-break molds of "easy women." Wilson has said that "by the 1680's the tradition that every actress was at least a part time 'lady of pleasure,' leading a rich and glamorous life, had become firmly established."⁴ By the time of the height of

³Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁴Ibid., p. 17.

Restoration theatre, then, women's roles were being played by a rather talented breed of high-class prostitutes.

Shady as their off-stage lives might have been, English actresses were a popular theatrical feature. Their questionable reputations may even have been responsible for the increasingly large crowds which attended the plays. For it is true that the audiences did flock to see their presentations. By October of 1664, only eight years after Mrs. Coleman's first performance, so popular was the actress that the stage was experiencing a complete reversal of its acting tradition. Whole plays were being acted by women.⁵ For the Englishmen, newly freed from the bonds of forced Puritan morality, there was a certain rowdy enjoyment in witnessing beautiful women looking embarrassed and shy in tight-fitting, men's clothing as they acted in the ribald comedies. And with the bawdry pleasure came the fun-loving crowds, and this meant plenty of money in the business.

⁵Gilder, Rosamond, Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre (London, 1931), p. 170.

SETTING THE STAGE

Following the debut of Mrs. Coleman in 1656 and prior to Anne Bracegirdle's entrance onto the stage in 1680, much changed in England's theatrical world. A brief introduction of the audiences, the plays, and the actors is probably in order.

By the late 1670's, theatres had begun to cater to a select and noisy clientele. They and their rowdiness were much unlike the super-sophisticates and intellectuals who patronize the stage today. Restoration audiences were composed primarily of two types: (1) young gallants whose interest in theatre was primarily social, and (2) the so-called vizard-masks, young women, whose interest in theatre was nil, but whose interest in young gallants was very real. In addition, there were orange sellers and other pedlars who continually shouted advertisements of their wares. This latter group, although not part of the audience, did add appreciably to the noise and confusion of any theatrical production; their voices often rivaled and even surpassed the intensity of those on the stage. The vocal prowess of the young gallants must not be discounted, however. They came to the theatre for an afternoon of displaying their cleverness, sometimes proving rather witty opponents even for the actors themselves. But witty or not, they were always loud. Their frequent vocal interruptions were distracting for the few in the audience trying to concentrate on the drama. And most of the vizard-masks, when not engaging in the conquests of a particular young man, were always in conversation with friends. Thus, all Restoration productions were sure to be loud and confusing, even if they were nothing else.

Fighting and quarreling were also regular features during productions. Nicoll makes reference to a particular event which occurred at the Dorset Garden playhouse when "Langbaine saw Mr. Scroop killed by Sir Thomas Armstrong during a performance of Macbeth. Quarrels, in point of fact, both among the actors and among the spectators, were of frequent occurrence."⁶

In addition to the many features which could distract one's attention from the stage, there were also ample interests for the young wits up front. Upon payment of a slight fee (over and above the half-crown required for admittance), a young man could go backstage and even to the ladies' tiring-house. There he could enjoy a pleasant afternoon of chatter with the actresses when they were not performing out front. And, of course, the females of the theatrical business did nothing to discourage any would-be "keepers." Gilder describes the particular attraction of the actresses in this way:

...wits and gallants who pursued them behind the scenes, who lolled in the boxes, or flirted with the orange girls in the pit and gallery, looked upon the newly made actresses as little more than public women, an attitude which the ladies themselves were far from discouraging. The only difference these dashing sparks saw between the actresses on the stage and the professional vizard-masks in the audience was that with the former the glamour of the theatre added piquancy to the adventure, and the pursuit of pleasure could be elegantly tricked out on the pretention of patronage to art.⁷

Whether for better or for worse, it is certainly a fact that the Restoration audiences were almost entirely responsible for the type of drama which was written and produced during the age. For the theatre of

⁶Nicoll, Allardyce, A History of Restoration Drama 1600-1700 (Cambridge, England, 1940), p. 17.

⁷Gilder, p. 150.

seventeenth century England was very much a business proposition. The audiences determined what was successful and what was not; hence, art catered to, and was dependent upon, the whims of the masses who demanded wit and vulgarity in comedy and blood and bombast in tragedy.

The individual companies often added little touches to their performances in order to satisfy the lusty tastes. If they could pack the house by inducing a young girl of five or six years to sing a suggestive song, by dressing a beautifully shaped actress in tight-fitting men's clothes, or by adding a spicy prologue to an only mildly suggestive plot and thereby fill the stage and pit with admiring throngs--why, so much the better. A playwright or a member of the cast would sometimes construct a prologue or epilogue to call attention to some actress and her fresh attractions and to the fact that she was available for extra-professional engagements. Most often these appended bits of bawdry were intended to be spoken by women, usually by the most popular actresses, and frequently when they were dressed in men's clothing. The prologues and epilogues were, in Wilson's opinion, "designed to give full scope for coquetry and suggestiveness, and so that a clever young woman could coax an audience into a good humor."⁸

Following the prologues, which were often suggestive, came the plays which were also written to please the tastes of the audiences. About the works of the playwrights themselves, Nicoll has suggested--and he may have a valid point--that art was considered a "gentleman's toy" where "well-bred indifference was displayed. . . in the penning of a comedy and a tragedy or two. . ." He points out that "There was, there-

⁸Ibid., p. 89.

fore, from these men no attempt to express great ideas, because there was no definite sincerity, no individuality of utterance. . ."⁹ Although it is possible to take some exception to this statement, it must eventually be conceded that Restoration comedy was most certainly a "gentleman's toy," serving as a sort of parade-ground for clever social wit and double-entendre. Late seventeenth-century tragedy, on the other hand, was almost ludicrous in its riotous rant and booming bombast: serious indications that the playwrights probably did not really believe what they were writing. And because the gentlemen wits were more clever than heroic, their comedies have proved to be of more lasting literary and dramatic value.

But whether the play was a comedy or a tragedy, one sweeping statement can be made about all Restoration dramas: they were not subtle. The comedy has tended to mellow with time, but in its own day it was garishly profane; the tragedy today seems quite lofty when read, but by modern standards it would approach the ridiculous in the over-acted manner of portrayal during the seventeenth century.

Yet the Restoration plays managed to send thousands away from the theatres thoroughly entertained or very much moved by the wit and beauty they had experienced. And when all else is said and done, that remains the single most important criterion for judgment of successful theatre.

The people responsible for the production of Restoration drama led strange and interesting lives. Yet if the truth were known, there was probably more hardship than glamour in a player's life.

The work was difficult, and the pressure was maddening. Few plays ran longer than two or three performances; most of them opened and closed

⁹Nicoll, pp. 19-20.

on the same afternoon. When this was the case, another play had to be rehearsed the next morning and presented that same afternoon.

Each company, therefore, naturally tended to rely heavily on old favorites: Shakespeare, Jonson, Marlowe, and Beaumont and Fletcher. Comparatively few new plays were presented in a given year.

Just as the companies often used their repertoire, actors had resorted to playing "types." These were characters or roles which they could play well with little rehearsal. Hence, only the very best actors were equally adept at both comedy and tragedy.

As is readily evident, acting was not an easy occupation. It required a sharp memory and a great deal of stamina in addition to God-given ability.

In addition to his talents in these areas, an actor had to possess a certain willingness to sacrifice, for Restoration players were paid very little in comparison with modern standards. Apprentices, the youngest and most inexperienced members of the companies, received nothing except, of course, their training. They often spent several months learning their trade.¹⁰ Hirelings, as the young but slightly more experienced actors were called, received a small sum but "were practically in a state of peonage."¹¹ These young actors were given the smaller parts and were forbidden to move from one company to another. A good experienced male actor received about 50s. a week (approximately \$50 in terms of purchasing power in 1960). But this salary was drawn only in working weeks, of which there were not more than thirty or thirty-five in a single year.

¹⁰Wilson, p. 38.

¹¹Ibid., p. 37.

The rest of the time he went without pay.¹²

Women were paid much less. Wilson claims that "If a young actress made good, she was put on the payroll at 10s. to 15s. $\sqrt{\$10}$ to $\sqrt{\$15}$ a week. . .An experienced actress could command 30s. $\sqrt{\$30}$ a week."¹³ Even as great a star as Elizabeth Barry only received 50s. a week plus a guarantee of £70 (\$1400) a year from a benefit performance.¹⁴ Thus, the life of an actor was not easy, and more than that, it was certainly not lucrative. Probably the low salaries, as much as anything, encouraged and almost forced actresses to secure outside incomes.

But low salaries and difficult work could not dampen the spirits nor diminish the desires of this rare breed of performers. They were probably best described as a sensual lot, interested, most of all, in satisfaction and in enjoying themselves thoroughly for as long as the money held out. Wilson's statement is generally descriptive of their type:

With some exceptions, . . .the actors were indeed a drinking, quarreling, swaggering, wenching crew, living hand-to-mouth and avoiding the debtors' prison only by virtue of their royal master's protection. The young actress was thrown into daily contact with this raffish lot. The solid, substantial men of both companies had homes of their own. . .and families to whose pleasant circles they retired after the day's work was done. The lesser fry lived in lodgings near the theatres and spent their nights--sometimes with the women of the stage--drinking and gaming in the taverns and dives of Covent Garden or in little blind alehouses or bawdy-houses in Moorfields, Whetstone's Park, or the dark alleys opening off the Strand, houses kept by such notorious ladies as Mother Temple, Mesdames Cresswell, Gifford, Moseley, and Stratford, and that famous bawd, Betty Buley. Like the libertines and rakes who swarmed in the tiring rooms, the players knew intimately the dank sewers of the London into which, from time to time, some careless or foolish young actress disappeared.¹⁵

¹²Ibid., p. 38.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 33-34.

Although the actor's profession required a great deal of personal sacrifice, not all of its members were as dedicated as they might have been. Gilder describes the females of the business as being particularly difficult to control:

They were forever dashing off on private business, handing over their parts to some more stolid sister who at the moment had no lover to divert her from her duties. They were fond of appearing in public in their stage costumes, which were far more elegant and beautiful than anything they themselves could afford. The Restoration actress played everything in "modern dress" and those clothes were often a gift to the theatre from a lady patroness of the arts. The temptation for a pretty actress to slip out to an evening rout in the Duchess of York's coronation robes, in which she had been playing her part all the afternoon, was practically irresistible, and scoldings were of little avail when it came to the poignant question of making an effective appearance.¹⁶

Nor were the male players easily kept in check. Pepys mentions that Thomas Killigrew, manager of the King's Company, admitted that he was forced "to keep a woman on purpose at 20s. a week to satisfy 8 or 10 of the young men of his house, whom till he did so he could never keep to their business."¹⁷

And yet, in spite of their wayward reputations, much credit must be given the Restoration players, for they seem to have been a remarkably talented lot.

They were well-trained actors in the arts of rhetoric, movement, and gesture. Their lines were delivered in beautifully modulated voices, usually at full volume, and their roles were, by modern standards, grossly over-played. Nevertheless, their ability was responsible, in many cases,

¹⁶Gilder, p. 147.

¹⁷Pepys, Samuel, The Diary of Samuel Pepys 1668-69, ed. Henry B. Wheatley (New York, 1942), January 24, 1669, p. 162.

for successful productions even when the scripts themselves would hardly bear the burden of vocal utterance.

Thus, with the audience noisily in place, the play, suggestive or bombastic, was ready for production, and the actors, with both questionable reputations and talent securely in place awaited their cues. It was time for the entrance of Anne Bracegirdle.

EARLY OBSCURITY

On an undertermined day, sometime between 1663 and 1675,¹⁸ a daughter was born to Justinian Bracegirdle.¹⁹ This child was destined to become one of England's most illustrious female theatrical personalities.

The first few years of Anne Bracegirdle's life are shrouded in obscurity and conjecture. If Justinian was indeed her father, she was a native of Northamptonshire.²⁰ But as one sees from the following statement by Curll, her parents were of minor importance after her birth, for she very soon left them:

It is not any Matter of our Enquiry by what Means a Gentlewoman of so good an Extraction came upon the Stage,

¹⁸Controversy continues to surround the facts concerning Anne Bracegirdle's actual birth date. Since there are no existing records of the event, the only leads are accounts of her first stage appearance. Edmund Curll, in his History of the English Stage (London, 1741), states that she appeared in Otway's The Orphan in 1680, before she was six. This would make her year of birth 1675. Later, however, John Fyvie, in his book, Tragedy Queens of the Georgian Era (London, 1909), states that Anne Bracegirdle was probably closer to sixteen or seventeen in 1680 when she played the page, since her death records claim that she was 85 when she died in 1748. This would fix her year of birth at 1663. To add further confusion to the already muddled affair, W. Macqueen-Pope in Ladies First: The Story of Woman's Conquest of the British Stage (London, 1952) states that Mrs. Bracegirdle first appeared in a play called Mustapha in 1674 at the age of six. If this be correct, the date of her birth was 1668.

¹⁹There is also slight disagreement on her parentage. One of Congreve's biographers, John C. Hodges, in his book, William Congreve, the Man (New York, 1941), asserts that she was the daughter of Richard Bracegirdle and his second wife, Dorothea Chetwynd, of Wolverhampton and Ridsley, respectively. Most other scholars, however, list her father as Justinian Bracegirdle.

²⁰Dictionary of National Biography (New York, 1908), II, 1049.

since the best Families have been liable to the greatest Misfortunes, amongst which was that of her Father, in being bound, and suffering for Others. But it may be some kind of Alleviation to say, that in the Scene, wherein Providence had consigned her Fate, she had the good Fortune to be well placed, when an Infant, under the Care of Mr. Thomas Betterton and his Wife, whose Tenderness she always acknowledges to have been Paternal.²¹

Because of his large family and his recent financial ruin, Mr. Bracegirdle entrusted the young Anne to the care of the famous actor and producer, Thomas Betterton, and his wife. The fact that Anne's father knew the Bettertons well enough to entrust his daughter to their care would indicate that the Bracegirdle family was of a high social standing and that the story of the sudden financial setback was indeed the reason for the family's decision to allow the Bettertons to assume the care of their young daughter.

"There is, however, another story," according to Macqueen-Pope, "that she was the daughter of a man who made and let out coaches in Northampton and that her father was actually a coachman himself."²² Betterton, however, lends credibility to the former version, and he ought to know. He claimed that Anne was the daughter of gentle folk of good extraction.²³

Nevertheless, whether her parentage was aristocratic or peasant, it is certain that the Bettertons did rear the young Anne and that under their care she was trained for a career in the theatre.

²¹Curl, Edmund, as quoted in Lucyle Hook, "Anne Bracegirdle's First Appearance," Theatre Notebook, XIII (1959), 134.

²²Macqueen-Pope, W., Ladies First: The Story of Woman's Conquest of the British Stage (London, 1952), p. 102.

²³Ibid.

At the age of six she participated in her first play, Mustapha,²⁴ in which she played the part of a page to Mrs. Elizabeth Barry's interpretation of Isabella, Queen of Hungary. Both young ladies were making their stage debuts that night.²⁵ Later the two would co-star in producing some of England's finest theatrical moments. Still later in both of their careers, Anne Bracegirdle would replace Mrs. Barry as the favorite of London audiences. Yet their beginnings were humble and their debuts hardly noteworthy. Six years later, however, the two again appeared together as star and page, this time in Thomas Otway's tragedy, The Orphan, produced in March, 1680.

Just exactly what the young Anne Bracegirdle did between 1680 and 1688 is uncertain. Lucyle Hook claims that she appeared in Thomas D'Urfey's play, Commonwealth of Women, in August, 1685, playing the small role of Clita and speaking the epilogue. The dramatis personae of the production did not specifically identify the actress portraying Clita and only listed her as "Miss Nanny." Since it was the practice during the Restoration period to refer to all younger girls (until about age 13) as "Miss" and all women older than that "Mrs." (which stood for mistress and had nothing to do with a woman's marital status), Hook deduces that "Miss Nanny" could have been no one else but Anne Bracegirdle.²⁶ If this theory is correct, one may assume that during these years the young actress was probably an apprentice or hireling at the Theatre Royal, preparing herself for what would soon blossom into a

²⁴Pepys, Samuel, The Diary of Samuel Pepys 1668-69, p. 162.

²⁵Macqueen-Pope, p. 94.

²⁶Hook, Lucyle, "Anne Bracegirdle's First Appearance," Theater Notebook, XIII, (1959), 135.

brilliant career.

Having survived her apprenticeship, young Anne Bracegirdle emerged from her relative anonymity in 1688, when her name appeared with the acting company at the Theatre Royal. By then the young actress must have shown considerable ability and artistic growth, for she had graduated from the parts of a page to named roles in two of that season's productions: she appeared in Mountfort's The Injured Lovers in March and in Shadwell's play, The Squire of Alsatia, during May of 1688.²⁷ But what is more important, she was appearing with Mrs. Elizabeth Barry, star of the company, whose name had, since the two women's obscure debuts, become the most popular in all of London theatre. The friendship of Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Bracegirdle had begun years before, but the two became fast and devoted partners who acted together from that time forward.

The following year, 1689, brought the young actress at least two more roles and also her first prologue.²⁸ For her ability in speaking the appended statements at the beginning and end of most plays, she soon became famed.

The rising number of prologues entrusted to women was indicative of their increasing popularity. Wilson verifies Mrs. Bracegirdle's ability in these Restoration theatrical conventions:

Of the women who became actresses before 1689, at least twenty-six were entrusted with one or more prologues and epilogues. Of those, Anne Bracegirdle was easily the champion, with at least nine prologues and twenty-one epilogues to her credit.²⁹

²⁷Wilson, p. 123.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 89-90.

This vast number is indicative of both her popularity and ability. Summers claims that she was "for Prologues fam'd," and "saved many a piece whose fate was trembling in the balance."³⁰

The young Anne Bracegirdle had made her theatrical debut and had impressed actors, managers, playwrights, and audiences. She had been given larger and more important roles as a result and had proven herself versatile and creative. Her ascent to the position of one of England's greatest women of the theatre was about to begin.

³⁰ Summers, Montague, The Restoration Theatre (London, 1934), p. 182.



MRS. BRACEGIRDLE

Figure 2. Mrs. Bracegirdle of Kenneth W. Sanderson Collection.
(Reproduced through permission of Keggan, Paul, Trench,
Trubner and Company)

THE RISE TO FAME

After proving her versatility in both acting and "Prologues fam'd," Anne experienced an almost phenomenal rise to fame and popularity. She acted at least a full dozen different roles, in 1690 probably inheriting the parts of a retiring member of the company, Mrs. Boutell. As was the custom in Restoration theatrical companies, younger players first imitated the older actors and then later took over the parts themselves. The seasoned actors set the standards, but if younger talents could surpass them, the parts were handed to those of superior ability.³¹ This practice was probably responsible for the very high quality of acting during the Restoration period. Self-contained, egotistic actors were non-existent. Each performance demanded the most of an actor, and if he could not maintain the high quality, he was replaced. The young Mrs. Bracegirdle probably proved superior to her seasoned predecessor, Mrs. Boutell, and was therefore entrusted with her roles.

Anne Bracegirdle's rapid rise to fame can be attributed, in part at least, to her unblemished private character. Says Wilson, "She" was not only beautiful, but as 'the Romantic Virgin' she was a perennial curiosity."³²

To Restoration audiences, the notion of a virgin actress was just as paradoxical as that of a pure prostitute; the two simply did not go

³¹Avery, Emmett L., Congreve's Plays on the Eighteenth-Century Stage (New York, 1951), p. 158.

³²Wilson, p. 90.

together. And yet there was Anne Bracegirdle, an actress of fame, beauty, and ability whose private character refused to sink to the level of her predecessor. Whether she was cold and distant by nature, as some have suggested, or whether she was indeed a moral woman will, of course, never be known. However, that she did not lack for suitors is certain. From wealthy lords to mere peasants, they flocked in adulation; yet she showed none of them special favor. But she was always courteous and friendly. Macqueen-Pope records the following incident regarding her attested virtue:

She was most punctilious in her manners and always did the right thing, and said the right thing. The Earl of Burlington, thinking to please her, sent her a very handsome gift of china. It was delivered by his footman, together with a flowery, flattering letter, protesting his affection. Mrs. Bracegirdle read the letter. Indeed, she kept the letter. But she told the footman that a mistake had been made and that he should not have brought the china to her. Not doubting, the flunkey did as he was bid, and the Countess received the unexpected gift of china from her husband. She was delighted at the surprise and profuse in her thanks. There is no record of what the Earl said or did. Doubtless he realized that he had escaped from a very difficult position.³³

During these years of Mrs. Bracegirdle's rising fame, 1690 and 1691, Colley Cibber knew her well, and years later he recorded his impressions in a tribute to his life-long friend:

Mrs. Bracegirdle was now but just blooming to her maturity; her reputation as an actress gradually rising with that of her person; never any woman was in such general favour of her spectators, which, to the last scene of her dramatic life, she maintained by not being unguarded in her private character. This discretion contributed not a little 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 favorite amongst them. And though she might be said to have been the universal passion, and under the highest temptation, her constancy in resisting them served but to increase the numbers of her

³³Macqueen-Pope, p. 102.

admirers; and thus perhaps you will more easily believe, when I extend not my encomiums on her person beyond a sincerity that can be suspected; for she had no greater claim to beauty than what the most desirable brunette might pretend to. But her youth and lively aspect threw out such a glow of health and cheerfulness that, on the stage, few spectators that were not past it could behold her without desire.—It was even the fashion among the gay and young to have a taste or tendre for Mrs. Bracegirdle. She inspired the best authors to write for her and two of them, when they gave her a lover in a play, seemed palpably to plead their own passions and make their private court to her, in fictitious characters. In all the chief parts she acted, the desirable was so predominant that no judge could be cold enough to consider from what other particular excellence she became delightful.³⁴

Her virtue was admired, even if it was not exactly the vogue among women in her profession. John Doran describes an interesting event which shows just how much she was esteemed by three lords for her "difference:"

The most singular testimony ever rendered to her virtue occurred on the occasion when Dorset, Dovenshire, Halifax and other peers were making of that virtue a subject of eulogy, over a bottle. Halifax remarked, they might do something better than praise her; and thereon he put down two hundred guineas, which the contributions of the company raised to eight hundred,—and this sum was presented to the lady, as a homage to the rectitude of her private character.³⁵

But the uncontested popularity and novelty of Anne Bracegirdle could not go unchecked. In spite of her reputation and ability, she was the subject of many lampoons, jokes, and, of course, skeptical attitudes concerning her virginity. The following dialogue by Charles Gildon was entitled A Comparison between the Two Stages (1702) and

³⁴Cibber, Colley, as quoted in Edmund Gosse, Life of William Congreve (London, 1888), pp. 36-37.

³⁵Doran, John, Annals of the English Stage from Thomas Betterton to Edmund Kean (New York, 1856), I, 117.

was typical of the skeptics' attitudes:

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---

Critic: I do; but if I were to be sav'd for believing that single Article, I cou'd not do it; 'Tis all, all a Juggle, 'is Legerdemain; the best on't is, she falls into good Hands, and the secrecy of the Intrigue secures her, but as to her Innocence, I believe no more on't than I believe of John Mandevil.³⁶

Jonathan Swift also had a somewhat skeptical opinion of Mrs. Bracegirdle's supposedly pure reputation. In 1724 he wrote in a letter to Charles Ford, "I sometimes think D. Wharton intends to take my Advice of fancying to have Virtue. I remember Mrs. Bracegirdle got more by acting that part than any of the more abandoned Playhouse females, there is a sort of Contrast in it."³⁷

But the beautiful and much-publicized Mrs. Bracegirdle was the desired object of one not quite so harmless as Gildon and Swift and not quite so noble, praiseworthy, and honest as the Earl of Burlington, Colley Cibber, or Lord Halifax. Such an unsavory suitor was Captain Richard Hill, whose attraction to Mrs. Bracegirdle's restrained beauty and pure reputation was responsible, in 1692, for the death of one of the finest young actors and playwrights of the time, Will Mountfort.

³⁶ Gildon, Charles, as quoted in Wilson, p. 127.

³⁷ Swift, Jonathan, The Letters of Jonathan Swift to Charles Ford, ed. David Nichol Smith (Oxford, 1935), p. 107.

Mrs. Bracegirdle had appeared in three of Mountfort's plays³⁸ and had acted opposite him in a countless number of other productions; the two were close friends. And the idea of her unknowing responsibility for the young Mountfort's death undoubtedly plagued Mrs. Bracegirdle throughout her life.³⁹

Captain Hill was in love with Anne Bracegirdle, but she had treated him rather coolly. He knew of her virtuous reputation but did not believe that the tales going around about her purity could possibly be true. "He thought," says Macqueen-Pope, "that she used it as a cloak and that underneath that appearance of virginity was a passionate woman. . . So he decided to carry off the actress by force, if necessary."⁴⁰ Having this in mind, he conceived a plan which would win for him the affections of Mrs. Bracegirdle. Soon he deduced, however, that the beautiful actress was, in reality, in love with Will Mountfort. Hill had seen them play many passionate scenes together and was certain such emotion could be nothing short of the "real thing." He, therefore, decided that he must include Mountfort's death in his scheme.

Hill talked with his unsavory friend, Charles, Lord Mohun, about the plan. Mohun had been tried for murder twice before but had been acquitted by his influential friends when he had solemnly sworn never to get in trouble again. He was a rake, however, and naturally willing to help Hill in a venture which promised excitement and trouble. With no pangs of conscience, the two laid their plan; December 9, 1692, was to be the night of its execution.

³⁸See appendix.

³⁹My narrative of the Mountfort affair is derived from Macqueen-Pope, pp. 103-105, passim.

⁴⁰Macqueen-Pope, p. 103.

Mrs. Bracegirdle figured into their plot this way: When the actress left the home of the Pages (friends with whom she would be dining that night), six hired men were to seize her, put her into a waiting carriage nearby, and drive away.

But the scheme was not executed as planned. Mrs. Bracegirdle screamed and fought when the men tried to abduct her; the actress's two escorts from the Page family fought bravely; and the six hired men were forced to flee when a crowd gathered. Among those looking on as members of a curious crowd were Lord Mohun and Captain Hill. They gallantly offered to take Mrs. Bracegirdle the rest of the way to her home, and the two former escorts agreed. The actress reached her home safely but was suspicious of both Mohun and Hill. She watched them as they lingered in the street outside her home, lolling against the buildings and drinking from a flask. She remembered that Hill had often pursued her and that he had several times cursed Will Mountfort in her presence, claiming that the actor was his rival and the reason for his lack of success with Mrs. Bracegirdle. Deciding that perhaps Mountfort was the one in danger, she dispatched a messenger to warn him against Hill. The actor received the message, but because he felt Mrs. Bracegirdle to be in more danger, he set out for her house nearby. When he came upon the two assailants, he greeted Lord Mohun with an embrace, as was the fashion, for the two were well acquainted, and Mountfort did not suspect the young lord. As they embraced, the actor whispered a few words of warning against Captain Hill to Lord Mohun. "And little did he know," says Macqueen-Pope, "how true his last words were, for whilst Mohun held him tight in a Judas-like embrace, Hill ran his sword through the

actor's body and dropped him mortally wounded to the ground."⁴¹

Having accomplished their desired end, Hill and Mohun fled, and Mountfort was carried home where he told, with his last breaths, how his death had come about. Mountfort was only thirty-three when he met his death. He was a "fine actor and a dramatist of promise."⁴² His loss was a regrettable one for both his fellow actors and the public which loved him. And Anne Bracegirdle was undoubtedly profoundly upset because of her unknowing contribution to the death of her friend and colleague.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 105.

⁴² Ibid.



The Indian Queen

1882

Figure 3. The Indian Queen from messotint by W. Vincent. (Reprinted through permission of George G. Harrap and Company)

WILLIAM CONGREVE ENTERS

The varying opinions concerning Anne Bracegirdle's true private character, her beauty and obvious ability, as well as her strange and easily-remembered name--all played a part in the ever-increasing popularity of the English actress. And yet she was undoubtedly indebted most to the playwriting ability of William Congreve for the crowning glory of her career. To his plays she contributed her finest efforts, and for her genius he wrote his finest roles.

At the time in Anne Bracegirdle's career (1693) when her ability was becoming more widely recognized, when she was "at the zenith of her charms," William Congreve's play, The Old Bachelor, was produced by the Theatre Royal. Mrs. Bracegirdle's performance in this play, according to Gosse, was "destined to prove a momentous affair; the current of her life was permanently altered by it."⁴³

Her interpretation of the play's amusing prologue was unique; it immediately set the proper light-hearted mood for what was a cleverly brilliant production. John C. Hodges has given the following account of her performance that day:

Anne Bracegirdle stepped lightly out, wove her way through the beaux on the stage, and came well to the front of the apron, close up to the "floats," to speak the Prologue. Swinging out to the center of the stage on "her very handsome Legs and Feet," she veritably cast a spell upon the rowdy denizens of the pit. With her smiles, and her frowns, and her tears she held the swearing, gaming, frolicking pit in the palm of her hand. In the midst of her appeal for a favorable reception of the bashful young author,

⁴³Gosse, p. 36.

she pretended to forget her lines and ran off the stage in confusion.⁴⁴

In addition to speaking the prologue, Anne Bracegirdle also played the part of Araminta, who according to Taylor was "the loveliest heroine in Restoration comedy to her time."⁴⁵ It was also the role which author William Congreve followed most intently, for by the time of the first performance of The Old Bachelor, he had fallen madly in love with the creator of "that capricious heroine."⁴⁶

Unlike most of the other plays during the period, The Old Bachelor had been in rehearsal nearly six months, on and off, before its initial performance. The untimely deaths of three members of the acting company late in 1692 had forced the theatre to close for an extended period of time. As a result, Congreve and Mrs. Bracegirdle probably came to know each other very well during the play's extra long preparation for the stage. Since Restoration playwrights worked much more closely with the actual staging of their plays than do playwrights today, Congreve would have had ample opportunity to pursue the beautiful actress.

Hodges even believes that Congreve had written his undated poem, "Pious Selinda," to Mrs. Bracegirdle before the play was finally produced. If this were the case, it would indicate that their relationship had progressed during the first six months of their acquaintance. For in this none-too-brilliant offering, the playwright regretfully admitted that he had not yet been successful in winning the actress for his

⁴⁴Hodges, John C., William Congreve, the Man (New York, 1941), p. 42.

⁴⁵Taylor, D. Crane, William Congreve (New York, 1963), p. 33.

⁴⁶Hodges, p. 41.

mistress. One might also detect a note of bitterness in a love that, for one reason or another, could never be consummated:

Pious Selinda goes to Pray'rs
 If I but ask the Favour;
 And yet the tender Fool's in Tears,
 When she believes I'll leave her.

Wou'd I were free from this Restraint,
 Or else had hopes to win her;
 Wou'd she cou'd make o^f me a Saint,
 Or I of her a Sinner.⁴⁷

The artistic collaboration of Congreve and Mrs. Bracegirdle was most clearly a tremendous success. The Old Bachelor was a triumph; it ran for fourteen consecutive performances (a singularly uncommon feat in Restoration drama).⁴⁸ And even before its last performance, Congreve had begun work on his next theatrical offering, The Double-Dealer. In this play, Anne Bracegirdle would portray the virtuous heroine, Cynthia. It is certain that Congreve wrote both the play and the role especially for her.

Such an intimate relationship between actor and playwright was not uncommon in the Restoration theatre. In fact, playwrights were usually commissioned by a single theatrical company to write only for its troupe. Ultimately the plays were not only written for the particular stock company, but were also fashioned specifically for the individual actors who presented them. Wilson has indicated that

[There] . . . is a mass of evidence to show that most of the Restoration dramatists knew and associated (often intimately) with the players, tried in general to fit their plays to the capacities of an acting company, chose or helped to choose the casts for their own plays, and wrote

⁴⁷Congreve, William, as quoted in Hodges, pp. 44-45.

⁴⁸Hodges, p. 42.

parts for actors and actresses who were popular, personally favored, or typed. Under such conditions, it was almost inevitable that the players should influence the playwright.⁴⁹

The second production of the Congreve-Bracegirdle team, The Double-Dealer, was not so warmly received as The Old Bachelor had been. In this new play Congreve had attempted to give his audience something more polished, because he was very much aware of his mistakes in The Old Bachelor. His second play preserved the unities, offered more dynamic characters, and presented a finer quality of wit. Yet the pit and the gallery were less entertained by his improved ability; the satire seemed too biting for most of them. They could not laugh at something which resembled their own actions so closely. Critics generally were much less kind than they had been to The Old Bachelor. Only a few of the most discerning theatre patrons and friends of Congreve realized what the playwright had attempted to do. Congreve was discouraged, but he was not defeated.

The relationship between Mrs. Bracegirdle and Congreve did not diminish during this time. Cibber was undoubtedly correct in assuming that Congreve was pleading his own passion for the alluring actress through the character of Mellemont in The Double-Dealer.⁵⁰ Contemporary mention was also made of Congreve's habit of watching his favorite actress from a side box in the theatre with his hat drawn over his eyes: He would "ogle his dear Bracilla [Mrs. Bracegirdle], with sneaking looks under his hat, in the little side box."⁵¹ Away from the theatre,

⁴⁹Wilson, p. 97.

⁵⁰Cibber, Colley, as quoted in Hodges, p. 45.

⁵¹Preface to Animadversions on Mr. Congreve's late answer to Mr. Collier, as quoted in Taylor, p. 137.

Congreve also saw a great deal of her. They often rode together, and Cibber claims that they dined together "almost every day."⁵²

Mrs. Bracegirdle, however, was probably not as unrelenting as some contemporary opinion and Congreve's poem would lead one to believe. Hodges quotes a contemporary source which claims that she was "not a cool, unfeeling beauty. She was only too 'tender' toward the young dramatist who showed 'his assiduity by following' her and who was 'the most entertaining sort of animal imaginable.'"⁵³

At any rate, the relationship, it is certain, was not discouraging to Congreve, for he was to write his best plays in the future. And until Congreve had written his best comedy, Mrs. Bracegirdle still awaited her greatest triumph.

Love for Love was Congreve's clever comedy which opened the new Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre on April 30, 1695. It was a stunning success, running within one performance of The Old Bachelor's record for popularity with thirteen consecutive performances. The play was so successful, in fact, that Congreve was made a share-holder in the new theatrical company. He also received a commission to write exclusively for the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre and to produce at least one play a year.⁵⁴ Anne Bracegirdle played the role of Angelica in this play, managing to captivate and thrill the London audiences.

After three clever and very successful comedies, Congreve began work on his first and only tragedy, The Mourning Bride. In early 1697

⁵²Cibber, Colley, as quoted in Hodges, p. 49.

⁵³Brown, Tom, as quoted in Hodges, p. 45.

⁵⁴For more detailed information concerning this production and circumstances surrounding it, see "Anne Bracegirdle, Woman and Actress."

this new play was brought to the stage of the Lincoln's Inn Fields. Although it was difficult for audiences to imagine the witty Congreve as a tragic dramatist, they soon realized that the highly successful comic playwright could also be an equally successful writer of tragedy. The Mourning Bride played thirteen consecutive performances⁵⁵ and was generally considered to have pleasantly surprised London playgoers.

Hodges writes of Congreve's only tragedy:

The Mourning Bride was Congreve's most popular play. Charles Gildon even called it the "greatest Success. . . that ever I can remember on the English Stage." It was naturally the most profitable for the author; for Congreve now had, in addition to his regular benefit night, a full share in the profits of the company. The play continued popular during Congreve's period and throughout the whole of the eighteenth century. Although it dropped out of the theatrical repertoire over a hundred years ago, the lines "Music has Charms to sooth a savage Breast," and
 Heav'n has no Rage, like Love to Hatred turn'd,
 Nor Hell a Fury, like a Woman scorn'd
 live on as part and parcel of our speech today.⁵⁶

Anne Bracegirdle's role in the tragedy was, of course, as Almeria, the leading lady. But the Bracegirdle touch was not nearly so consummate in tragedy as it was in comedy. Taylor gives the following account of her performance, which was apparently eclipsed by that of her senior, Elizabeth Barry, whose polished ability in tragic roles was never rivaled:

Mrs. Barry, who was specially suited to tragedy, found one of the great parts of her career in Zara, . . . the most convincing character in the play because her emotions run too deep to be noisy. The rich mellow voice, the passion and sympathy at Mrs. Barry's command, made her Zara a memorable performance. She outshone Mrs. Bracegirdle who was admirably adapted to her part written especially for her and had given her the finest single poetic passage in

⁵⁵Hodges, pp. 58-59.

⁵⁶Hodges, p. 59.

the drama.⁵⁷

In 1700 Congreve contributed his greatest and last work to the theatre. The Way of the World was his most nearly perfect comedy, which showed that Congreve had taken great great pains in polishing its wit to a sparkling lustre. But unfortunately his audience had not grown as rapidly in appreciation as the young writer had in ability; they did not greet his greatest play with the enthusiasm it deserved.

Connely claims that Congreve felt so disappointed that he appeared before the curtain after a performance of The Way of the World and announced to the audience that he would write no more for the theatre because the people were unworthy of his talent.⁵⁸ Although this dramatic account of Congreve's farewell to the stage is probably apocryphal, it is true that the brilliant wit never again wrote for the theatre. Most biographers, Hodges and Taylor among them, feel that his integrity forbade his making a bastard of his art just to please the rabble. He knew that his ability had surpassed his audience and that further ventures would only prove unsuccessful and unappreciated.

But The Way of the World was Mrs. Bracegirdle's greatest performance. Downes, the prompter at the Drury Lane, said of the comedy and her acting: "Twas curiously acted; Madame Bracegirdle performing her Part so exactly and just, [that she] gained the applause of Court and City."⁵⁹ It was also said by an observer of the time: "When she acts Millamant,

⁵⁷Taylor, p. 50.

⁵⁸Connely, Willard, Brawny Wycherley (New York, 1930), p. 107.

⁵⁹Downes, as quoted in Avery, p. 72.

all the Faults, Foibles, and Affections of the agreeable Tyrant are venially melted down into so many Charms and Attractions of a conscious Beauty."⁶⁰

Congreve's exit from the stage brought the end of an artistic relationship. Anne Bracegirdle had been, throughout Congreve's dramatic career, his most important influence. Just why the two were never married remains a mystery. Various biographers have expressed their opinions on the subject and they also present a variety of theories as to just what the Congreve-Bracegirdle relationship involved. Gosse, a late nineteenth-century biographer, has described it this way:

According to the universal tradition of the age, this cold and discreet actress deviated from the path of discretion, if ever, only or almost only in favor of Congreve, for whom, at all events, to the day of his death, she preserved a close and affectionate friendship. It was for her that in every instance Congreve wrote the leading parts in his dramas, and he seems to have indulged his own feelings for the actress by invariably making her play the part of an admired and courted queen of beauty.⁶¹

Some have asserted that Mrs. Bracegirdle was Congreve's mistress.⁶² And others have claimed that she bore him a child. For instance, Anne, Viscountess of Irwin, wrote the following in a letter to her father in 1728 after Congreve's death and the subsequent announcement that the Duchess of Marlborough had been appointed executrix of his estate:

The young Duchess has made herself very particular upon Mr. Congreve's death: he left her executrix, by which she gets 7000 pounds, in wrong, I think one may say, to a great many poor relations he had, and some say a son by Mrs.

⁶⁰Contemporary opinion quoted in Avery, p. 72.

⁶¹Gosse, p. 27.

⁶²Connely, p. 56.

Bracegirdle.⁶³

Taylor, who has written one of the most recent studies on Congreve, has even evolved an elaborate rationalization as to why the two were never wed:

That they were not married was possibly Congreve's fault as well as his misfortune. There is every reason to believe that their mutual interests and love warranted their marriage and she would doubtless have made him an admirable wife; but despite her spotless reputation and personal charm, she was an actress, and actresses, in that day of austere standards, did not become the wives of men in social position. He [Congreve] became increasingly ambitious to improve this position until it became almost an obsession. Furthermore, Mrs. Bracegirdle was six or seven years his senior, so that the disparity between their ages and spheres of life would, to his mind, make him appear rather ridiculous should they marry.⁶⁴

Still others of Congreve's biographers have maintained that the relationship remained platonic out of respect to Mrs. Bracegirdle's wishes and that Congreve was the victim of a love that was never consummated.⁶⁵ They cite Congreve's poem, "Pious Belinda," and claim it expresses his impatience and near disgust with their lingering affair.

There is, however, other material written by Congreve suggesting that the playwright entertained no real hope or desire of carrying the friendship beyond a platonic one. In 1700 Congreve, with two of his friends, visited Europe. In a postscript to a letter which he sent to his landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Porter, he states:

⁶³Congreve, William, Letters and Documents, ed. John C. Hodges (New York, 1964), p. 261. Subsequent references to this book will be cited as Letters.

⁶⁴Taylor, pp. 37-38.

⁶⁵Ashton, Anthony, a contemporary of Anne Bracegirdle and source for many on-the-spot reactions to happenings in Restoration theatre, as quoted in Gosse, p. 168.

My humble service to my neighbor, your mother, Mrs. Anne, Mr. Travers. . . Poor Charles is just writing to Mrs. Anne and straining very hard to send something besides the Ballad to please her much.⁶⁶

The "Mrs. Anne" referred to is undoubtedly Anne Bracegirdle, who was Congreve's neighbor on Howard Street. The fact that Congreve expresses no feeling of rivalry between himself and "Charles" would indicate that the two were only platonic admirers.

The Congreve-Bracegirdle relationship, whatever it was, undoubtedly produced extensive correspondence. It was probably well guarded at the time and later destroyed, for there now remains not a single letter. This is an unfortunate situation and is partially responsible for the many and varying opinions concerning their relationship.

William Congreve later became enamored of Henrietta, the Young Duchess of Marlborough, to whom he eventually left the bulk of his estate. Yet the friendship between the actress and the former playwright seems to have remained cordial. There are numerous occasions when her name is mentioned in his correspondence, and he always speaks kindly of her. Although in the forty-four letters to his friend Joseph Keally, Congreve never mentioned Anne Bracegirdle's name, he referred to her at least seven times in a way that was clear to Keally.⁶⁶

And yet perhaps the actual details of the relationship are not so necessary as they are curious. That which is of essence here is that their artistic union was successful in producing some of the greatest theatre to emerge from the Restoration period.

⁶⁶Letters, no. 4.

⁶⁷See Letters, nos. 8, 14, 24, 30, 31, 34.

ANNE BRACEGIRDLE, WOMAN AND ACTRESS

After the tragic deaths of Will Mountfort and two other members of the company, Leigh and Nokes, in December of 1692, the general popularity of comedy declined. Singers and dancers began to attract the crowds. They began to encroach upon the actors' hitherto-unchallenged adulation. With this popularity shift came more difficult times for the underpaid actors. Their salaries began to decline as those of the singers and dancers increased; their benefits became fewer and their working conditions more difficult. In a desperate effort to economize even further, managers began to hire younger and cheaper actors for their dramatic productions. The experienced and long-established actors were given fewer roles; the hirelings received more and better ones. It was at this time that Anne Bracegirdle was offered the roles of her long-time friend, Elizabeth Barry. But Mrs. Bracegirdle, says Taylor, "splendidly refused to profit by the misfortune of her friend."⁶⁸

Both actors and audiences were dissatisfied with this policy of substitution. Jealousy disrupted friendships among actors, and discontent was high in audiences when old regulars no longer appeared in the roles with which audiences had associated them for years. The actors finally organized to combat this situation under the leadership of Thomas Betterton, and though they solicited a compromise policy from the managers and patentees, their efforts met no success.⁶⁹

⁶⁸Taylor, p. 60.

⁶⁹Hotson, Leslie, The Commonwealth and Restoration Stage (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 294-295.

Then on December 22, 1694, two years after the trouble had begun, the theatre was closed because of the illness of Queen Mary. The actors took advantage of the time to gather support for their cause. With the help of the Lord Chamberlain and other influential aristocrats, Thomas Betterton, Mrs. Barry, and Mrs. Bracegirdle were granted an audience with King William on March 25, 1695. On this occasion they received permission to establish a new and separate theatrical company. The monopoly was now broken, and the Leslie Tennis Courts were soon pressed into service for the new theatre. The Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre was born.⁷⁰

Rosamond Gilder has assessed the value of this move in terms of the growing importance of English actresses and also in terms of the influence it had on the career of Anne Bracegirdle:

When Mrs. Barry and Mrs. Bracegirdle were made sharers with Betterton in the organization of the Lincoln's Inn Fields Company in 1695 and were named on equal terms with the actors in the license granted to the new group, the position of women on the stage was definitely established. She [Anne Bracegirdle] had won her final economic equality, and we see her at the head of the procession of English actresses, clothed in the splendor of Dryden's poetry, the strength of Wycherley's comedy, the glitter of Congreve's wit, looking at this distance like Millamant herself as she sweeps on to the stage in that most perfect picture of the Way of this particular World: "Here she comes i" faith full Sail, with her Fan spread and Streamers out, and a shoal of Fools for tenders."⁷¹

The new theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields opened its doors on April 30, 1695, with an extremely successful production of Congreve's new play, Love for Love,⁷² in which Mrs. Bracegirdle with her "cool

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Gilder, p. 172.

⁷²Hodges, p. 52.

aloofness" and "gay vivacity" was a perfect Angelica. This role was one of Mrs. Bracegirdle's finest creations, rivaled only perhaps by her interpretation of Millamant in Congreve's "supreme tribute to her."

Love for Love was a tremendous success. The audience of London was determined to love whatever the Lincoln's Inn Fields presented, because they wanted to encourage the actors in revolt.⁷³ And encourage them they did! The play ran for thirteen consecutive performances, which in those days was a gigantic success. The Lincoln's Inn Fields theatrical venture met with initial success and continued to enjoy good houses until at least 1698.

Anne Bracegirdle's membership in the Lincoln's Inn Fields company was no small factor in its success, for she attracted many to the converted tennis courts. Although she is primarily known today for her appearances in Congreve's plays, she was probably more famous in her own day for her mastery of the popular "breeches roles," which were common vehicles for the clever and well-shaped actresses of the day. So popular was the theatrical practice of dressing a lady in man's clothing that playwrights exhausted virtually every conceivable plot line to permit the leading lady to play at least part of the time dressed as a man. If the plot itself was lacking a breeches role, often a prologue or epilogue was appended to make use of the popular device.

Anne Bracegirdle's first appearance in a breeches role had been in 1689, when she had acted the part of the Indian Queen in Behn's play, The Widow Ranter. Later, in 1692, she pretended to be ashamed of her men's

⁷³Ibid.

clothing while speaking the prologue to D'Urley's play, The Marriage-Hater Match'd. From this clever and unusual interpretation early in her career, she went on to create eleven more of these roles including the finest of Shakespeare's women in breeches.⁷⁴

The successful breeches actress had to possess certain attributes.

Mrs. Bracegirdle obviously satisfied the requirements, as Wilson asserts:

Obviously a successful actress had to have shapely legs. As William Mountfort said in the prologue to D'Urley's The Marriage Hater Match'd when his companion, Anne Bracegirdle, pretended to be ashamed of her appearance in boy's clothes,

That's very strange, faith, since thy Legs are straight;

For if thou hadst a thousand Lovers here,

That very Garb, as thou dost now appear,

Takes more than any Manto we can buy,

Or wir'd comode, tho' Cocked Three Stories high.

Mountfort's judgment is confirmed by Anthony Ashton, who asserted that modest Anne was "finely shap'd, and had very handsome Legs and Feet; and her Gait, or Walk, was free, man-like, and modest, when in Breeches." To play breeches parts, then an actress had to have youth (or the appearance thereof), a good shape, "handsome Legs and Feet," and the ability to walk with a "free, man-like, and modest" gait. A good stock of impudence was a help, too.⁷⁵

Ashton comments further upon Mrs. Bracegirdle's physical appearance:

She was of lovely Height, with dark-brown Hair and Eyebrows, 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 a fine set of even white Teeth; never making an Exit, but that she left the Audience in an Imitation of her pleasant Countenance.⁷⁶

In addition to her physical beauty, she apparently possessed more than a usual amount of humanitarianism, as Macqueen-Pope asserts:

⁷⁴See Appendix.

⁷⁵Wilson, pp. 75-76.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 126.

[Although Mrs. Bracegirdle⁷⁷ lived in greater comfort and style than most actresses, always going to and from the theatre in her sedan chair, . . . she was very charitable and would go into Clare Market, then a rough slum filled with the poorest of the poor, and a notorious and noisome place, to give money to the most needy people she could find. She was beloved there, and woe betide anyone who tried to molest her when any of her faithful Clare Marketers were in sight! They would cheer her in the street.⁷⁷

Mrs. Bracegirdle was loved in the slums and cheered in the theatre, and she of all the actors and actresses during the Restoration was probably the most respected morally. Yet she was once arrested and fined for using obscene language in a play.

The saucy freedom enjoyed by the English theatre immediately after the Restoration became offensive and tiresome after about thirty-eight years. People, as a general rule, desired a little less suggestiveness in the entertainment. Jeremy Collier's A Short View of the Immorality and Profaness of the English Stage (1698) was extreme in its attack, but nevertheless was representative of some reactions to the ribald English theatre.

As an unfortunate result of Collier's pamphlet, a new occupation developed for dwellers in the underworld. Their job consisted of attending all theatrical production and informing against the actors when they used immoral or profane language. As a result of their work, Betterton, Barry, Mrs. Bracegirdle, and three others of their company were arrested on charges of profanity. The following indictment and evidence was used in 1701 against the six and is an example of just how "pure" the English had become:

⁷⁷ Macqueen-Pope, p. 106.

The above mentioned did, between the 24th day of June and the 7th day of March on the 13th year of William's reign, present a certain obscene, profane, and pernicious comedy entitled The Anatomist or Sham Doctor in which were contained the following obscene and profane words: "I'm sure he left his breeches long ago the devil take him, a curse on his systol and dystol with a pox to him, the devil fly away with him, the devil pick his bones." The actors are further charged with having presented The Provok'd Wife, from which a number of quotations are given, including the following: "But more than all that, you must know I was afraid of being damn'd in those days, for I kept sneaking cowardly company, fellows that went to church and said grace to their meat, and had not the least tincture of quality about 'em--woman tempted me, lust weaken'd me and the devil overcame me; as fell Adam, so fell I," To this, as to the other indictments, the actors pleaded, through their attorney Simon Harcourt, not guilty.

It appears that the policy adopted by the actors was that of delay. . . These records inform us merely that the cases dragged on into the reign of Anne and that the actors had considerable success in securing delays.⁷⁸

After Queen Anne was crowned, in 1707, the actors sent a petition to her asking that the rules of obscenity be clarified. Since the Licensing Act supposedly allowed for the deletion of all obscene material, they wanted to know why it was still possible for the individual actors to be fined. Queen Anne answered their petition, but not before Anne Bracegirdle and Thomas Betterton were fined.⁷⁹ The Queen, although interested in the theatre's reform, later demonstrated her love for it by imposing so many difficulties upon the informers that the would-be purists were forced to abandon their occupations.⁸⁰ When this occurred, the theatres were once again liberated, and both actors and playwrights

⁷⁸Krutch, Joseph Wood, Comedy and Conscience after the Restoration (New York, 1957), pp. 171-173.

⁷⁹No one seems to know the amount of the fine.

⁸⁰Macqueen-Pope, p. 105.

worked in relative freedom. This artistic freedom seemed to improve the quality of the productions, and the "period of purity" seemed to refine the vulgarity.

THE EXIT AND AFTER

Because of the severe criticism to which the theatre was subjected after the initial attack by Collier, both London theatrical companies experienced hard times; there were small audiences, few new plays, and almost no playwrights of worth. The result was small-profit seasons for all concerned. In order to exist at all, the two companies were forced to consolidate as a means of survival. This union took place in 1707, and the result was a bitter one for the star of Lincoln's Inn because this union brought together the two leading ladies, Anne Bracegirdle of Lincoln's Inn Fields and Anne Oldfield of the Theatre Royal. They had long been competing against each other in their private companies for first place in the public's adulation, but now they were to be working together, and a showdown was inevitable. Taylor gives the following account of how the rivalry was settled:

Mrs. Oldfield had risen rapidly in ability and reputation and was now at her prime, while the years were beginning to take their toll of Mrs. Bracegirdle. The two actresses decided to settle their rivalry by performing the same part on successive nights. Each played Mrs. Brittle in The Amorous Widow. When a preference was shown for Mrs. Oldfield, and when Swiney /the theatrical manager/ gave her a benefit earlier in the season than Mrs. Bracegirdle, the heroine of Congreve's plays retired from the stage on February 20, 1707. This account of her sudden and early retirement has never been proved and may be apocryphal, but it bears the cast of probability. It is substantiated by an anonymous poem appearing in the Muses Mercury for May, 1707:

At length, O Nymph, forget injurious Rage,
Revive the Town, and raise the sinking Stage;
Be anything. . . your grace your ev'ry Part,
In you 'tis natural to gain the Heart.
Let not a Man provoke you to depart,
Who like a tyrant rules Apollo's Art.

But above all, think how the Mourning Bride
 To endless Times her weeping Form must hide,
 Or dragged to Light by some officious Friend,
 Move faint Regard, and only not offend,

.....
 Your Congreve begs, with notes, like Orpheus blest,
 Ev'n Rocks the Thracian's Harmony confest.⁸¹

This story of the Oldfield-Bracegirdle showdown is by no means substantiated, although it would have been a feasible method for settling a popularity contest in which the two were most certainly engaged. Macqueen-Pope has suggested another method by which the controversy may have been settled:

She [Mrs. Oldfield] challenged the great Mrs. Bracegirdle, but there was no direct contest for the Queenship of the Stage. Mrs. Bracegirdle was twenty years older than Mrs. Oldfield at the time. She was not going to be defeated in public in a contest for popular favour. Nor was she going to see parts which had for so long been her own given over to a younger rival, whilst she stood down or played inferior roles. So she retired gracefully in 1707 when the Oldfield tide was in full strength. There are stories that the two fought it out, each playing the same role on successive nights, but no evidence of this can be found in reliable sources, and it does not sound a bit like either of them.⁸²

The exact method by which the older actress embraced retirement is perhaps unimportant. More important is the fact that she retired in favor of a younger and probably more talented Mrs. Oldfield. Just as Mrs. Bracegirdle had taken over the roles of her senior, Mrs. Boutell, some seventeen years before, so now expediency was demanding another similar succession.

With that, the gifted "Diana of the Stage," Anne Bracegirdle, quietly strode off the boards and away from the glory of her profession

⁸¹Taylor, pp. 195-196.

⁸²Macqueen-Pope, p. 151.

with the dignity and poise she had so many times brought to the characters she portrayed. Perhaps that day was a sad one for the devoted actress; or perhaps she felt relief. But whatever the emotions of the moment, a soul whose being was rooted in her art could not have escaped the slight warmth which would have come to her as she contemplated the even greater glory which would be attained during the career of her successor, Anne Oldfield. The actor who is devoted to his art cares little about his own personal sacrifice, as long as there is reason to believe that from the sacrifice comes a further progression toward the unattainable goal of ultimate perfection. And sad as the exit may have been for Anne Bracegirdle and her admiring throngs, one cannot be depressed very long, for Mrs. Oldfield was that one step closer to perfection, and that is always ample justification for the shifting of the spotlight.

Some two years after her exit, however, Mrs. Bracegirdle was lured back to the theatre for one final glorious hour. On April 7, 1709, she went back to the love of her life for a single performance of one of her most famous parts, Angelica, in Congreve's Love for Love. The performance was for Betterton's benefit, and as Taylor points out,

It was the last occasion in his life when Congreve might pay her tribute, which he did by writing a new prologue for her. The epilogue by Rowe, spoken by Mrs. Barry, was printed and given out in the theatre, but the prologue has since been lost.⁸³

Elizabeth Barry, her old friend and stage partner, played with her that night. Both had come from virtual retirement to pay homage to the man they both so admired. Betterton died a year later, and with him the dramatic tradition of the seventeenth century also passed away.

⁸³Taylor, p. 205.

In the years following her retirement (and there were more than forty of them), the relationship between Congreve and Mrs. Bracegirdle dwindled into nothingness. The former playwright found interest in the younger Henrietta, Duchess of Marlborough. Alexander Pope in his Moral Essays hints that the young duchess was Congreve's mistress: "She sins with poets through pure love of wit."⁸⁴ Such may have been the case, for it is true that Congreve left the Duchess in his will the bulk of his estate. And much "to the scandal of posterity," says Gosse, "he left only ~~£~~200 to Mrs. Bracegirdle, a proof, it is certain, that her former ascendancy over him was now at an end."⁸⁵

And the former actress? Despite her exit from the theatrical world, Mrs. Bracegirdle continued to be surrounded by the cleverest wits of the day and in particular Robert Leake, Earl of Scarsdale, who seems to have replaced Congreve in her affections, although there is still no evidence which would lead one to conclude that she ever abandoned her chastity. All indications are that the later Mrs. Bracegirdle was just the same as the younger one: generous, fair, and beloved.

One can almost imagine two old stage personalities, Cibber and Mrs. Bracegirdle, as they chatted over tea and discussed modern theatre in what was the last recorded event of Anne Bracegirdle's life:

That she was of a nice, generous nature is shown by the fact that when old Colley Cibber was disparaging the young Garrick, whom she had at that time never seen, she tapped him on the elbow and said, "Come, come, Cibber, tell me if there is not something like envy in your character of this young gentleman. The actor who pleases everybody must be a man of merit." Old

⁸⁴Pope, Alexander, Moral Essays, ii, 76.

⁸⁵Gosse, p. 168.

Colley stared, took snuff, laughed, and said generously,
"Faith, Bracey, I believe you are right. The young fellow
is clever."⁸⁵

At the age of eight-four, Anne Bracegirdle died, leaving behind
her a history of glory upon the stage and love among the people. Fittingly,
she was buried in Westminster Abbey.

⁸⁵ Macqueen-Pope, p. 108.

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APPENDIX

ANNE BRACEGIRDLE'S ROLES

<u>Role</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Play</u>	<u>Date</u>
Page	Boyle	Mestapha	1674
Page	Otway	The Orphan	Mar., 1680
Autelina	Mountfort	The Injured Lovers	c.Mar., 1688
Lucia	Shadwell	The Squire of Alsatia	May, 1688
Indian Queen ^a	Behn	The Widow Ranter	c.Nov., 1689
Biancha & prologue	Mountfort	The Successful Strangers	c.Dec., 1689
Marcellia	Powell	The Treacherous Brothers	Feb., 1690
Julia	Crowne	The English Frier	Mar., 1690
Rosania & epilogue	Shadwell	The Ambrous Bigotte	spring, 1690
prologue	Dryden	Amphitryon	Oct., 1690
Cleomira	Settle	Distress'd Innocence	Nov., 1690
Urania	Powell	Alphonso King of Naples	Dec., 1690
Charlotte & pro.	Southerne	Sir Anthony Love	Dec., 1690
Clara	Shadwell	The Scowrers	c.Dec., 1690

^aIndicates a breeches role.

This list includes only the first time Mrs. Bracegirdle enacted each different role. In many cases she would have acted certain roles as many as a dozen times during her career.

The rewritten Shakespearean plays appear here with their eighteenth-century titles and authors when available.

Maria & epi.	Mountfort	King Edward III	c.Dec., 1690
Miranda	Harris	The Mistakes	c.Dec., 1690
Satatira	Lee	The Rival Queens	c.Dec., 1690
Mirtilla	D'Urfey	Love for Money	c.Dec., 1690
Tamira	D'Urfey	Bussy D'Ambois	c.Mar., 1691
Emmeline & epi.	Dryden	King Arthur	May, 1691
Mrs. Sightly	Southerne	The Wives Excuse	Dec., 1691
Eurione & epi.	Brady	The Rape	Feb., 1692
Cleora & epi.	Dryden	Cleomenes	Apr., 1692
Amidea	Rivers	The Traytor	May, 1692
Pheobe ^a & pro.	D'Urfey	The Marriage Hater Match'd	Je., 1692
Clara & pro.	Shadwell	The Volunteers	c.Nov., 1692
Lady Trickitt & epi.	Southerne	The Maid's Last Prayer	Jan., 1693
Fulvia & epi.	D'Urfey	The Richmond Heiress	c.Feb., 1693
Araminta & pro.	Congreve	The Old Bachelor	Mar., 1693
Mariana	Wright	The Female Virtuoso	c.Apr., 1693
Cynthia & pro.	Congreve	The Double-Dealer	Oct., 1693
Victoria & pro.	Southerne	The Fatal Marriage	Feb., 1694
Celidea	Dryden	Love Triumphant	Mar., 1694
Clarismunde	Settle	The Ambitious Slave	Mar., 1694
Marcella	D'Urfey	Don Quixote	c.Aug., 1694
Angelica & epi.	Congreve	Love for Love	Apr. 30, 1695
Lauraria	Banks	Cyrus the Great	c.Dec., 1695
Angelica ^a & epi.	Granville	The She-Gallants	c.Dec., 1695

Mrs. Perslew	Dilke	The Lover's Luck	Dec., 1695
epilogue	Dryden, Jr.	The Husband His Own Cuckold	c.Feb., 1696
Flora	Dogget	The Country-Wake	c.Apr., 1696
Bassima	Manley	The Royal Mischief	c.Apr., 1696
Christina	Motteux	Love's a Jest	Je., 1696
Charlot ^a	"Ariadne"	She Ventures and He Wins	c.Sept., 1696
Almeria & epi.	Congreve	The Mourning Bride	Feb., 1697
Sanserre	D'Urfey	The Intrigues at Versailles	c.Feb., 1697
Venus	Motteux	The Loves of Mars and Venus	c.Mar., 1697
Bellinda, pro., epi.	Vanbrugh	The Provok'd Wife	May, 1697
Mrs. Beauclair ^a	Pix	The Innocent Mistress	c.Je., 1697
Camilla	Hopkins	Boadicea	c.Nov., 1697
Briseis	Grantville	Heroic Love	c.Dec., 1697
Ariana	Pix	The Deceiver Deceived	c.Dec., 1697
Placentia & epi.	Motteux	Beauty in Distress	c.Apr., 1698
Felicia	Trotter	Fatal Friendship	c.May, 1698
Isabella	Pix	Queen Catherine	c.Je., 1698
Louisa	Pix	The False Friend	c.May, 1699
Locris ^a	Hopkins	Friendship Improv'd	Nov., 1699
Iphigenia	Dennis	Iphigenia	Dec., 1699
Almira & epi.	Smith	The Princess of Parma	? 1699
Isabella	Gildon	Measure for Measure	c.Feb., 1700
Millamant & epi.	Congreve	The Way of the World	Mar., 1700
Amistris & epi.	Rowe	The Ambitious Step-Mother	c.Dec., 1700

Fulvia ^a	Burnaby	The Ladies Visiting Day	c.Jan., 1701
Guinoenda	Gildon	Love's Victim	c.Apr., 1701
Cytheria	Pix	The Double Distress	c.May, 1701
Portia	Grantville	The Jew of Venice	c.May, 1701
Selima & epi.	Rowe	Tamerlane	c.Dec., 1701

Amintas ^a	?	The Fickle Shepherdess	c.Mar., 1703
Caesario ^a	Burnaby	Love Betray'd	Mar., 1703
Orinda	Boyle	As You Find It	Apr., 1703
Lavinia & epi.	Rowe	The Fair Penitent	c.May, 1703

Abra-Mule & epi.	Trapp	Abra-Mule	Jan., 1704
Irene	Dennis	Liberty Asserted	Feb., 1704
Mariana & epi.	Rowe	The Biter	Dec., 1704
Julia & epi.	?	Squire Trelooby	? 1704

Angelica ^a	Centlivre	The Gamester	c.Jan., 1705
Flippante	Vanbrugh	The Confederacy	Oct., 1705
Semanthe & epi.	Rowe	Ulysses	Nov., 1705

Oriana	Grantville	The British Enchantress	Feb., 1706
Phillis	Motteux	The Temple of Love	Mar., 1706
Mrs. Ford	Shakespeare	The Merry Wives of Windsor	Apr., 1706
Laura ^a	Pix	The Adventures in Madrid	c.Je., 1706
Cordelia	Tate	King Lear	Oct. 30, 1706
Lucinda	Centlivre	The Platonic Lady	Nov., 1706
Zoradia	Manley	Almyna	Dec., 1706
Ophelia	Shakespeare	Hamlet	Dec., 1706
Melantha	Cibber	The Comical Lovers	n.d.

Portia	Shakespeare	Julius Caesar	Jan. 15, 1707
Levinia	Rowe	Ciaus Marius	Feb. 18, 1707
Rutland	Banks	The Unhappy Favourite	Feb. 20, 1707
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Angelica	Congreve	Love for Love (for Betterton's benefit)	Apr. 7, 1709
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