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ALBION’S “CHASTE LUCRECE”: CHASTITY, RESISTANCE, AND THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION IN THE CAREER OF ANNE BRACEGIRDLE

By all indications, the public persona of the late Restoration actress Anne Bracegirdle was built on the speculative foundation of maidenhead. A leading ingénue of multiple talents, Bracegirdle played significant roles in comedy, tragedy, and music-drama from her debut in 1688 to her retirement in 1707. In comedy, Bracegirdle specialized in marriageable young women of rank, wit, and fortune.\(^1\) In serious drama, Bracegirdle often played the pathetic heroine, a virtuous woman stalked by a predatory man.\(^2\) Though primarily an actress, Bracegirdle also called upon her impressive soprano voice in many entr’actes and the occasional musical part.\(^3\) A first-rank player and hardworking company member from very early in her career, Bracegirdle played some eighty roles over a nineteen-year span that kept her consistently before the public eye. Despite Bracegirdle’s constant appearances on the stages of Drury Lane, Dorset Garden, Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and the Queen’s Theatre in the Haymarket, few extant sources identify the qualities that typified her playing; commentators rarely discuss her acting as a discrete set of practices, aptitudes, or characterizations. Rather, prodigious evidence attests to the public’s obsession with Bracegirdle’s reputation for virginity.\(^4\) Called the “Romantick Virgin,”\(^5\) the actress was thought to be chaste, and many writers focused attention on her sexual virtue. Indeed, Bracegirdle’s chastity seems to have been the cornerstone of her fame. As Colley Cibber wrote, her star status rose in conjunction with her reputation for purity:

[Upon her debut], she was just then 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 Dramatick Life, she maintain’d by not being unguarded in her private Character. This Discretion contributed not a little to make her the Cara, the Darling of the Theatre.\(^6\)

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As Cibber implies, the unlikely spectacle of a virgin actress fascinated late Restoration theatregoers. Playhouses were frankly sexualized spaces, and the sex lives of actresses a common topic of town gossip. In this context, Bracegirdle’s moral vigilance was exceptional. Early in her career, she narrowly escaped sexual assault in a highly publicized incident that involved a member of the House of Lords. She later rebuffed a parade of well-known suitors, including the playwrights William Congreve and Nicholas Rowe and several peers of the realm, most notably the dashing and rakish Robert Leke, Earl of Scarsdale. London took note of Bracegirdle’s persistent refusals, and chastity quickly became the defining feature of her public image.

Bracegirdle’s reputation generated multiple responses and interpretations. For many men, her moral vigilance seems to have generated its own erotic frisson. “Tho’ she might be said to have been the Universal Passion, and under the highest Temptations,” writes Cibber, “her Constancy in resisting them served but to increase the number of her Admirers.” For these spectators, Bracegirdle’s chastity seems to have intensified the gaze directed at her. Cynthia Lowenthal rightly points out that many similar contemporary descriptions of Bracegirdle construct “her virginal status with an emphasis on sexual possibility.” In a related vein, some satirists indulged their sexual fantasy by questioning the veracity of Bracegirdle’s reputation. The anonymous author of A Comparison between the Two Stages, probably Charles Gildon, called her chastity an act of “legerdemain,” the product of good PR and a fortuitous choice of discrete partners. Women also admired Bracegirdle for her virtue. The protofeminist poet Sarah Fyge Egerton, for example, figured Bracegirdle’s virginity as a sign of independence. Egerton penned an ode to the actress “who’s triumphant Virtue doth declare, that Women can withstand the fatal Snare Of vast Temptation, when she’s Young and Fair.” For Egerton, a persistent critic of male—female relations and in particular the institution of marriage, Bracegirdle’s chastity may have demonstrated the actress’s personal and social power, her ability to survive outside the institutions that normally restricted women’s possibilities of self-determination. Despite multiple proposals from a parade of suitors of good and ill intent, Bracegirdle stayed single throughout her life. With few exceptions, London venerated its “Diana of the Stage,” rewarding her with praise and applause.

According to Anthony Aston, Bracegirdle’s virtue also garnered at least one substantial financial bonus. Aston relays an oft-cited story about a group of Lords who sent Bracegirdle an enormous pot of cash to demonstrate their high regard for her chastity:

Her Virtue had its Reward, both in Applause and in Specie; for it happen’d, that as the Dukes of Dorset and Devonshire, Lord Halifax, and other Nobles, over a Bottle, were all extolling Mrs. Bracegirdle’s virtuous Behaviour, Come, says Lord Halifax—You all commend her Virtue, & c. but why do we not present this incomparable Woman with something worthy her Acceptance? His Lordship deposited 200 Guineas, which the rest made up 800, and sent to her, with Encomiums on her Virtue.
As is often true of Aston’s anecdotes, it’s unlikely he witnessed these events directly. The tale is probably an urban legend he heard second- or thirdhand. Some of the details (as, for example, the amount of money collected) may be exaggerated. However, the story is highly plausible, and the kernel of it probably trustworthy. These three men were unquestionably friends, likely to be sharing a bottle: Dorset was Halifax’s chief patron at court; Dorset and Devonshire were long-standing cohorts from the court of Charles II. Halifax was a well-known, generous patron of the arts, the sort of person likely to drum up financial rewards for a popular actress.15

While this entertaining anecdote enlivens many theatre-historical accounts of Bracegirdle’s career, theatre historians have neglected its ideological overtones. Dorset, Devonshire, and Halifax were not just three besotted fans with extra cash and a spirit of whimsy. They were three of the most powerful politicians in England. Chief advisors to King William III, they numbered among the chief architects of crown policy in the 1690s. Prominent Whigs, they all served in Parliament and in various ministry offices through William’s reign.16 This tale suggests that Bracegirdle’s popularity may be connected to the political history of England. Bracegirdle’s career coincided with a precarious, potentially explosive moment in England’s public life. She debuted in 1688, the same year that the Glorious Revolution drove James II to France and placed William and Mary on the throne. On 5 November of that year, William of Orange and his army landed at Torbay at the invitation of Whig (and a few Tory) Lords. In the version of the story constructed by Williamite mythologists and bequeathed to subsequent generations by English national memory, William came in defense of Protestantism, liberty, and property.17 The reigning monarch, James II, was an activist Catholic suspected of inadequate regard for the constitutional rights of his subjects. Purportedly, William came to redeem England from a lurking despot whose sense of monarchical privilege veered toward absolutism. William’s armies crossed England attracting supporters along the way. On 23 December, James escaped across the channel to France. A hastily elected Convention assembled on 22 January 1689 to establish the terms of the succession. After three weeks of politicking and debate, the Convention proclaimed that James had “abdicated” and that “it hath pleased Almighty God to make [the prince of Orange] the glorious instrument of delivering this kingdom from popery and arbitrary power.”18 The Convention declared William and Mary monarchs. They accepted the throne on 12 February, agreeing to rule jointly, with William as the putative administrative and military head of state.19

During and after the revolution, Devonshire, Dorset, and Halifax moved in the highest circles of power.20 The two older men, the Duke of Devonshire (William Cavendish) and the Earl of Dorset (Charles Sackville), fought for William in the revolution and played leading roles in the Convention that brought it to a close: Devonshire was one of the seven Peers who signed the document inviting the prince of Orange to invade and a principal advocate of the Declaration of Rights in the House of Lords; Dorset served as liaison for Princess Anne after she defected from her father and declared her support for William and Mary. The younger man, the Earl of Halifax (Charles Montagu), was an
overpowering debater who very quickly became the most powerful Whig in the
House of Commons. He was a member of the Whig junto, the cadre of Lords
that wielded a lion’s share of domestic power through the latter half of the decade.
All three held ranking government posts. For most of the decade, Devonshire
served as Lord Steward; the Lord Steward ran the king’s household, exercising
authority over the members of the court-royal. Dorset filled the office of Lord
Chamberlain, the second-highest ranking post in the court; among other duties,
the Lord Chamberlain regulated the playhouse and other public representations.
Halifax was a Lord of the Treasury, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and
eventually First Lord of the Treasury, the government’s chief financial officer; the
principal advocate of William’s controversial fiscal policies, he helped establish
the national debt and the Bank of England. All three men served terms as Lord
Justices, members of the executive committee that governed England when
William was on the Continent fighting against the French.

Given the politically charged circumstances of England during Anne
Bracegirdle’s career, a story about three Whig power brokers and their friends
ponying up over eight hundred pounds for a virtuous actress ought to be situated
amid the partisan political struggles that brought these men together and occupied
their attention in the wake of the Glorious Revolution. What prompted these
world-makers to send an actress a sum reported at the equivalent of eight years’
salary for maintaining a chaste reputation? In fact, theatrical and political
contexts that surround this story suggest that the gift Halifax and his cronies gave
Bracegirdle rewarded more than her sexual restraint; rather, it acknowledged her
ideological contribution to the reign of their patron, William III. In fact, intense
propagandizing marked William’s tenure. Though the revolution itself was
famously peaceful and widely acclaimed, internal divisions marked his reign.
The Dutch king had a taciturn personality lacking in Stuart élan, and he was not
personally popular with members of his court: his command of English was
shaky, and his understanding of English polity lacking in nuance; he disliked
ceremonial duties and performed them laconically. Many of his policies proved
unpopular: abroad, a series of campaigns against the French frequently called him
to the Continent to lead the forces of the Grand Alliance into battle against Louis
XIV; at home, he requested unpopular taxation to pay for these expensive military
forays. He further funded his military ambitions via a new system of public credit
that amassed an enormous and widely decried national debt. Most seriously,
William’s claim to the throne was tenuous, and intimations of usurpation
common. Tories, by and large, rejected the proposition that a sitting king could be
legally deposed and regarded William’s kingship skeptically. In the extreme wing
of the Tory party, an active Jacobite presence at home colluded with James II
abroad to plot William’s overthrow, staging an abortive assassination attempt in
1696. Even many Whigs, William’s principal supporters, had trouble justifying
the revolution within the parameters of English constitutional law. Although
William’s authority was never seriously in jeopardy, the legality of his title as
King Regnant remained suspect. Amid national anxiety about the stability and
legitimacy of William’s reign, the crown’s sympathizers endeavored to build
popular support for the new and not especially likeable Dutch monarch. The shear
bulk of material that spread a pro-Williamite message suggests that nurturing endorsement of the crown was an urgent political imperative. Prior to the invasion, “William and his English and Dutch friends had made the most concentrated effort in England’s history to shape the opinion of a broad spectrum of society in favor of the prince” writes Lois Schwoerer.27 After the revolution, efforts to provide William with a wide base of public support continued. Representations in many media sought to legitimize the sitting monarchs. Countless tracts, broadsides, odes, ballads, commemorative medals, prints, sermons, and even playing cards disseminated images of James as a Catholic tyrant and William as England’s Protestant savior.28

Through the nineties, the theatre also helped legitimate William’s reign, and I am going to argue that Anne Bracegirdle’s reputation for chastity functioned symbolically within the terms of this revolutionary discourse to support the crown. Broadly speaking, English theatre in this era exhibited a Williamite bias.29 The king himself evinced no personal interest in the theatre, but that did not stop theatremakers from grappling with the implications of his rule. “On the stage, as elsewhere,” writes Derek Hughes, “the Revolution was justified and interpreted in various ways.”30 Dramatists endeavored to make ideological sense of the de facto regime in stories of oppression, rebellion, and deliverance. Drama imported narratives of abdication and succession from histories of the revolution. Plots about resistance to persecution flourished, and many playwrights celebrated the overthrow of tyrants. Other plays continued the assault on James; anti-Catholic jeremiads were welcomed to the stage, as were anti-French and anti-Spanish dramas. Few plays adopted a critical stance toward the government,31 and the upcoming generation of playwrights, including Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar, embraced Whig ideals. For its part, the court encouraged plays sympathetic to revolution principles. Indeed, one of Dorset’s first acts as Lord Chamberlain was to remove the Catholic, Jacobite, and Tory John Dryden from his place as Poet Laureate, replacing him with the Protestant, Williamite, and Whig Thomas Shadwell.32

In the context of dynastic justification that marked much theatre of the 1690s, Anne Bracegirdle’s reputation for chastity also mediated public response to William’s rule. From early in her career, Bracegirdle’s reputation for personal virtue combined with her many characterizations of virginal maidens to form a peculiarly transfixing public persona. Her chastity became a common topic of innuendo, admiration, and speculation, and playwrights wrote her many roles that exploited the piquant possibilities of her forbearance.33 For men like Halifax, Devonshire, and Dorset, her persona also intersected with key tropes of revolutionary discourse. Generally, the court sought to build ideological support for the sitting monarchy and squelch suspicions that it was neither valid nor permanent. Bracegirdle’s career course combined with her individual history and a prominent thread of her repertoire to transform her into a symbol of national purity in support of the throne. Over many years and in a range of representations, Bracegirdle’s virtue figured the virtue of the Williamite nation. The actress became an exemplary subject of William’s England, her maidenhead a corporeal sign that the revolution was both necessary and just.
Much recent scholarship suggests that formations of nation and nationality frequently, perhaps inevitably, intersect with constructs of gender and sexuality. The influential volume *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, for example, demonstrates that artistic, juridical, and sexual discourses often intersect to produce psychic and material effects for people who fall within their imaginative or legal purview. Such rhetorical conjunctures propose and police subjectivities, establish and enforce communal standards, and map psychic as well as national borders. The section “Spectacular Bodies” particularly pertains to Bracegirdle’s reputation for virginity. Some culturally privileged bodies function as paradigms of nation building; they exhibit characteristics associated with national ideals or possess abject qualities that articulate the limits of national community. Either way, “spectacular bodies” dramatize principles of inclusion and/or exclusion that facilitate ideologies of national unity. The editors argue that such unity is often modeled on gendered or sexualized norms that conjoin national and libidinal economies. “Newspapers, films, novels and theatre all create sexed bodies as public spectacles, thereby helping to instill through representational practices an erotic investment in the national romance.” The bodies of women are especially likely to function as spectacular bodies; the trope of woman-as-nation is an obsessive feature of nationalism beginning in its incipient phase in the early-modern period and continuing to this day.

The convergence of national and sexual rhetoric was an especially potent nexus for the high political culture of late Stuart England. Broadly speaking, sexual virtue was a promising metaphor for the postrevolutionary reign of William and Mary. The king and even more emphatically the queen disapproved of the licentiousness associated with the reigns of Charles and James Stuart and encouraged a chastened, more businesslike court. Charles II and to a lesser degree James presided over a notoriously freewheeling milieu at Whitehall, and the Stuart brothers were routinely represented as predatory libertines; they had reputedly jeopardized England for, in the words of one moral reformer, their “impure pleasures.” Supporters of the revolution commonly associated the vices of Charles and James with foreign threats: “We have reason to believe this deluge of profaneness that had overspread the nation did not merely proceed from the incognitancy of men’s minds and the impetuosity of their lusts, but that there was a most pernicious design at the bottom of it, formed and fomented by Rome and France, to prepare the way for popery and tyranny.” William and Mary, by contrast, claimed the moral high ground as a marked characteristic of their reign and an outcome of 1688. The day after the Convention proclaimed William king, he wrote the Bishop of London proclaiming his commitment to moral reform as a means to ensure national security:

We most earnestly desire and shall endeavor a general reformation of manners of all our subjects as being that which must establish our throne and secure to our people their religion, happiness, and peace, all which seem to be in great danger at this time by reason of that overflowing of vice which is too notorious in this as well as other neighboring nations.
The king and queen patronized societies to reform manners, and the queen
lay behind initiatives to discourage adultery, fornication, gambling, swearing,
and drunkenness. Though William did keep one mistress, he did so discreetly,
with all the requisite indications of embarrassment, and the court traded upon
the virtue of the queen to develop a reputation as a center of moral reform. A
sermon preached upon her death conveys the impact of the turn to piety: “the
Court, that is usually the centre of vanity and voluptuousness, became virtuous
by the impression of her example.” Upon her death, William continued the
court’s commitment to these causes. In 1698, for example, he urged Parliament
to “employ your Thoughts about some good Bills . . . for the further
Discouragement of Vice and Profaneness.” Moral reform and chaste living
became preeminent signifiers of the postrevolutionary court.

More potently and specifically, Bracegirdle’s representations of chastity,
both onstage and off, functioned within revolutionary rhetoric to mediate
attitudes toward the reign of William III. I’ll start with Bracegirdle’s repertoire
because evidence suggests that it established a semantic matrix through which
theatregoers interpreted her offstage behavior. The actress performed in a
multitude of plays that addressed national conflicts via tropes of gender and
sexuality. Recent critical histories of this period by such eminent scholars as
Richard Braverman, Douglas Canfield, Derek Hughes, and Susan Staves, have
demonstrated that Restoration romance plots had an ideological basis in
social antagonisms. Continuing a common structure of English drama since at
least the Elizabethan era, late seventeenth-century plays conflate stories of
monarchical succession with romantic scenarios: tales of shifting alliances,
ministerial infighting, palace revolt, and family betrayal intermingle with
stories of courtship, marriage, adultery, and seduction. Typically, a male
character’s desire to rule the state expresses itself through his attempts to woo,
wed, or otherwise attain union with a female character who embodies the
nation. “Dynastic politics,” writes Richard Braverman, were “manifest as sexual
politics because the quest for a settlement was played out in terms that
refigured the body politic as a feminized body.” In responding to their suitors,
female characters gave shape and voice to the nation’s experiences,
lamentations, and aspirations.

The connection between Bracegirdle’s performances of chastity and the
Glorious Revolution arose at one such nexus of national and erotic plotting.
Both leading up to and following the Glorious Revolution, female chastity, and
in particular chastity in peril, emerged as a decisive, ubiquitous dramatic trope.
Stories of rape, attempted rape, seduction, and forced marriage became generic
staples of drama. In this mode of metaphoric political advocacy, the sexual
integrity of a female character stood in for the political integrity of the nation.
Several related stories energized revolutionary politics. Most commonly, a
corrupt aristocrat violates a woman’s virtue either by raping her or coercing her
into an unwanted nuptial ceremony. Almost as frequently, a female character
resists the advances of a despotic noble, thwarting his tyranny and (in most
cases), uniting with her designated love at play’s end. In both cases, the
vicissitudes of imperiled virginity authorized revolution, either by expressing the
suffering of the populace under arbitrary monarchy or by provoking its legitimate resistance to abuse.

From 1688 to William’s death in 1702, Anne Bracegirdle became the nation’s most noted performer of women assaulted by the nobility. In tragedy, it was her stock in trade; well over half of her known serious repertoire is made up of pathetic heroines who fall victim to or repel a high-born sexual tyrant. Elizabeth Howe goes so far as to claim that “Anne Bracegirdle actually specialized in having her virgin innocence taken from her.” Certainly, stories of rape, attempted rape, and forced marriage recurred across her career. In most instances, the sexual suffering or resistance of Bracegirdle’s character figured national concerns in some way. Almost every Whig-sympathetic serious dramatist of this period wrote her at least one such role; William Mountfort, Thomas Shadwell, Elkanah Settle, Peter Motteux, John Crowne, John Bancroft, George Powell, Thomas Durfey, William Congreve, Charles Hopkins, Mary Pix, and Nicholas Rowe all provided characters who resist the advances of an amorous aristocrat. Even the Jacobite John Dryden cast Bracegirdle as a sexual victim who embodies William’s Britain in King Arthur, the former laureate’s one apparent attempt to curry favor with and accommodate the new monarchs.

Bracegirdle’s characterizations of imperiled maidens spanned William’s intervention into English politics. Such a performance actually launched her career shortly before the revolution. For her debut in 1688 in Mountfort’s tragedy The Injur’d Lovers, Bracegirdle played Antelina, a piteous young woman raped by a despotic king. The rape of her character motivates the male characters in the play to take up arms in rebellion against an arbitrary monarch: “My sword against my sovereign I draw,” proclaims her fiancé, rousing his men to arms. This performance occurred a few months prior to William’s invasion and was one of many anti-Jacobite representations that helped turn public sentiment against James and prepare the ideological groundwork for bloodless revolution. Her final role in the king’s lifetime found her in the ultimate Williamite play, Nicholas Rowe’s Tamerlane. She played Selima, the virginal daughter of the despot Bajazet. Throughout the play, Bajazet offers his child as a sexual prize to Tamerlane’s generals if they will betray their leader. In the climax of the play, Tamerlane rescues Selima from her murderous, pimping father, the constitutional ruler vanquishing the tyrant. Such representations of William as a disinterested savior of virtue were used throughout his reign to legitimize the Revolution Settlement.

One of Bracegirdle’s most influential performances perfectly exemplifies her contribution to postrevolutionary propaganda; she played Almeria in William Congreve’s The Mourning Bride, the most renowned Williamite play of the 1690s. Congreve cast her as a maiden threatened with sexual violation to trope the nation suffering under the tyranny of James II. Congreve was a committed Whig and, as his biographer John Hodges has written, “a kind of poet laureate for the principles of the Revolution.” In 1695, he was awarded a government sinecure in faith that he would continue to support the crown with his pen. In 1697, he fulfilled this expectation with his lone tragedy, The Mourning Bride. The play takes place in the fictional kingdom of Granada, an unmistakable evocation of England under James II. The central conflict between the tyrant
Manuel and his daughter and son-in-law Almeria and Alphonso suggests the dynastic struggle between James II and William and Mary, culminating in a foreign invasion that restores peace and concord in a manner that clearly evoked the revolution. Congreve scholars have long recognized the partisan message of this play: Maximilian Novak argues that Congreve created “a Whig myth of rebellion against a tyrant as an antidote to the Tory myth which Dryden spent some thirty years erecting;” Richard Braverman situates the play amid political pamphleteering, showing that it “sounded the Whig myth of the Revolution at the same time that like-minded apologists were revising history to justify the Williamite succession.” The timeliness of the play did not escape Congreve’s contemporaries. Fellow Whig Sir Richard Blakemore called it “the most perfect tragedy that has been wrote in this age.” London theatregoers rewarded its pertinence with overwhelming attendance; the initial production was an extraordinary hit. According to Downes, it “had such success that it continu’d acting uninterrupted 13 Days together.” It immediately became a stock play and was performed frequently. During Congreve’s lifetime, it was his most admired work; “this play,” wrote the author of A Comparison between the Two Stages, “had the greatest success, not only of all of Mr. Congreve’s, but indeed of all the plays ever I remember on the English stage.”

The play trumpeted the ideals of the revolution to great acclaim, and Bracegirdle’s performance of virginity in the title role featured prominently in its political allegory. Almeria’s sexual chastity is one of the play’s central figures—one of the most discussed topics in the play and the principal trope for the English nation. The play opens with Almeria lamenting her fate; the daughter of the tyrannical King Manuel, she pines at home while her father wages war on neighboring Valentia. Almeria confesses the source of her dolor to her waiting woman, Leonora; while visiting Valentia on a diplomatic mission, she secretly married the rival prince, her father’s enemy, Alphonso. They wed hastily onboard a ship fleeing from Manuel’s attacking forces. After reciting their vows, the ship crashed against the rocks, sending her husband to a premature death: she “in one day, was wedded and a widow.” Crucially, their marriage went unconsummated, and she remains a virgin. Compounding her woes, Manuel plans to wed Almeria to Garcia, the son of his favorite minister, Gonzalez, upon his return from the wars. The first act ends with the triumphant return of the conquering Manuel, who immediately offers his daughter to Garcia as a reward for loyal service.

Almeria’s misery is complicated by the entrance of Osmyn, a Valentinian prisoner of war who Manuel brings captive to suffer in the dungeons of Granada. Osmyn reveals himself to be the disguised Alphonso, her husband. As it turns out, Alphonso survived the shipwreck only to be taken captive by Manuel’s forces. In Act II, Almeria and Alphonso meet by happenstance in his prison cell. After an emotional reunion, they lament her impending nuptials. Alphonso bewails the cruel irony of their unconsummated union:

Thou wilt know, what harrows up my Heart.
Thou art my Wife—nay, thou art yet my Bride!
The Sacred Union of Connubial Love,
Yet unaccomplish’d; his mysterious Rites
Delay’d: nor has our Hymenial Torch
Yet lighted up, his last most grateful Sacrifice;
But dash’d with Rain from Eyes, and swail’d with Sighs,
Burns dim, and glimmers with expiring Light.59

Almeria’s woes are thus multiplied. While she is overjoyed that her husband lives, her sexual virtue is now doubly threatened. Her marriage to Garcia will both force her into unwanted union and compel her to commit adultery. Through a contrived bit of plotting, Congreve frames specific attention on Almeria’s chastity, conferring a seemingly impossible marital identity upon her; she is simultaneously a maiden and a bride, her virginity an overactive sign of virtue under siege. Almeria’s marital fate thus propels the play. Will she fulfill her vow to her husband, resist her father’s tyranny, and maintain her sexual purity; or will her despotic father oblige her to violate her vow and offer her maidenhead to the son of a political crony as a reward for his obeisance?

Throughout the play, Congreve employs Almeria’s chastity as a sign of England’s peril at the hands of James II. While Manuel’s cruelty to his domestic political enemies is often mentioned, most of the onstage wailing is done by Almeria and Alphonso. Thus, the king’s despotism is dramatized via the sexual rhetoric of forced marriage; the audience hears about the king’s political tyranny, but sees his paternal tyranny compelling his daughter into an unwanted wedding and forbidding her alliance with her beloved. Caught between Manuel and Alphonso, she (literally and frequently) faints under the weight of her father’s despotism, steadfastly refusing her father’s will and remaining loyal to her marriage. In the political allegory of the play, Almeria embodies the English body politic, caught between the tyrant James and the deliverer William. Almeria’s suffering articulates the suffering of the nation. Her final face-off with Manuel occurs on the day she is set to wed Garcia. Almeria pledges to undergo torture rather than betray her husband: “To the remorseless Rack I would have given this weak and tender Flesh, to have been bruised and torn,” she vows. Her resistance to her father’s threats supports the notion that the nation need not capitulate to tyrannical rule, but ought to oppose it.

The conclusion of the play further underscores its revolutionary sympathies. Alphonso escapes and, in a clear allusion to the Glorious Revolution, leads a successful invasion to rescue Almeria from her marital fate. The restoration of their marriage concludes the play and functions as a sign of the nation’s deliverance from arbitrary rule. Alphonso’s final speech focuses on Almeria’s chastity and conflates their impending nuptials with their political virtue:

Let us that thro’ our Innocence Survive,
Still in the Paths of Honour persevere;
And not from past or present Ills Despair:
Blessings ever wait on vertuous Deeds;
And tho’ a late, a sure Reward succeeds.60
The “sure Reward” to which Alphonso refers is in fact the sexual union of husband and wife. At evening’s end, husband and wife exit to consummate their love, her virginity saved by and for its proper master, their virtuous marriage a sign that the nation has withstood and been delivered from overweening absolutism. Through the political rhetoric of the romance plot, Congreve suggests that revolution has rescued England from tyranny and redeemed its political virtue by settling rule upon its present king and queen, the righteous William and Mary.

In the propagandistic flurry of the 1690s, such performances of chastity imperiled (and sometimes delivered) were recognizably partisan interventions into English political affairs. Sexual assault as a dramatic trope for absolutist tyranny was a staple figure of Whig rhetoric from the party’s inception through their years spent justifying the Glorious Revolution. The Whigs coalesced into a formal opposition in the Exclusion Crisis era of the late 1670s and early 1680s when Shaftesbury and his allies sought to exclude the Catholic Duke of York (later James II) from the lineal succession. Richard Braverman has identified a subgenre of Whig political drama at this time that agitated against James via stories of sexual assault; he calls these plays “the Lucrece plays” after the pivotal character in Nathaniel Lee’s banned tragedy *Lucius Junius Brutus*, in which Tarquin’s rape of Lucrece rouses the populace to rebellion resulting in the abolition of monarchy and the advent of republican government. The trope also occurred in revolutionary political pamphleteering. In his 1688 broadside *An Enquiry into the Measure of Submission to the Supreme Authority*, for example, the activist clergyman and Williamite propagandist Gilbert Burnet wrote that, if maintained in its full power, James’s standing army would eventually “from single rapes and murders, proceed to a rape upon all our liberties, and a destruction of the nation.” Burnet wrote this pamphlet to buttress William’s invasion of England; it was printed in Holland prior to crossing the channel and disseminated by the army immediately upon landing at Torbay. The use of sexual assault as a metaphor for political despotism reached its theatrical apogee at the height of Bracegirdle’s success in the drama of the late 1690s when national endorsement of the revolution was most fervent. “From mid-1696 onwards, indeed,” writes Derek Hughes, “there was an open season on rapist tyrants.” Hughes locates this trend in “the increased support for William following the disclosure earlier in the year of the plot to assassinate him.”

It is important to recognize that these performances of violated virtue did not always take seriously the violence of rape. Jean Marsden demonstrates that Restoration representations of rape often eroticize the victim, presenting her as the object of a fetishistic gaze. “Such scenes are fundamentally voyeuristic, depending for their effect on the audience’s role as voyeurs.” Common signifiers of ravishment include rumpled clothes, disheveled hair, bare feet and shoulders, and tears. The Restoration stage framed actresses performing these actions as sexual spectacles, their representation of pathos apiece with a sexualized display of themselves. Such roles gave short shrift to women’s experiences in sexual assault, and the political aims of Whig tragedy exacerbated this failing. By and large, Whig tragedies preferred their revolutionary message
to the experiences of their female characters. The pivotal scene of Congreve’s *Mourning Bride*, for example, devotes prodigious text to Alphonso’s frenzy at the thought of Garcia usurping his marital privilege (his outrage motivating him to break free and lead the forthcoming rebellion), but indicates few of Almeria’s thoughts and feelings about her forthcoming forced marriage. Such dramas challenged political hierarchies but reified sexual hierarchies, upending governmental authority but maintaining male privilege.

Stories of sexual assault may have been especially potent for late seventeenth-century Whigs because they could be made to dramatize a central tenet of Whig ideology: the defense of property. Susan Staves makes the unsettling argument that rape became a prominent metaphor for political tyranny because English law conceived and prosecuted rape as an attack on the property of fathers and husbands. Throughout the seventeenth century, rape, particularly the rape of a virgin, was considered a form of theft. In the logic of the day, rape robbed a young maiden of what she needed to make a good marriage. By implication, it robbed her father of a valuable asset that might be used to form a beneficial and perhaps remunerative alliance, or her husband of his rightful possession of her person. Examining rape convictions in late seventeenth-century England, for example, Nazife Bashar notes that “only the rapes that had in them some element of property, in the form of virginity, ended in the conviction of the accused.” The upper-class English Whigs who fomented the Glorious Revolution were driven to rebellion primarily in defense of their rights as property-holding Englishmen. But, given that so many of the dramatic traditions that influenced seventeenth-century playwrights trafficked in sexual scenarios, the threat of rape could be more provocatively incorporated into plays than the perils of unauthorized taxation.

Onstage, Bracegirdle’s stage representation of virginity under siege often functioned as a Williamite trope for the fate of the nation. This service to the crown alone would probably have earned her the gratitude of Whig leaders like Montagu, Cavendish, and Sackville. In addition, devastating events in Bracegirdle’s own life echoed the contours of her repertoire, rendering her an especially apt performer to embody the nation under the new regime. Early in her career, Bracegirdle had narrowly escaped sexual abduction at the hands of a young army captain and a member of the House of Lords in a widely known case that also resulted in the murder of the actor William Mountfort. The publicity aroused by this assault permanently attached itself to Bracegirdle’s reputation. As her career progressed, she continued to refuse increasingly powerful, high-ranking suitors who presumably sought her as a mistress: Lord Lovelace, the married Lord Burlington, and most impressively the Earl of Scarsdale all wooed her to no avail. Her offstage reputation and her repertoire began to blend into an intensely fetishized representation of imperiled chastity. Bracegirdle herself became an icon of female resistance to aristocratic presumption.

Bracegirdle’s reputation for exceptional chastity began on a tragic note. On 9 December 1692, the eighteen-year-old Captain Richard Hill, assisted by his friend, the fifteen-year-old Lord Mohun, assaulted Anne Bracegirdle as she
walked home with her mother, her brother, and an escort named Mr. Page. With the aid of several hired thugs, the two men tried to force Bracegirdle into a coach and carry her into the country. There, Hill hoped to persuade Bracegirdle to accept a proposal of marriage. According to at least one version of the story, Hill planned to “violate” Bracegirdle, presuming that after being raped she would have no choice but to wed him.73 Bracegirdle’s own account of the assault conveys its violence:

Just as I came to the Place where the Coach stood, two Soldiers came and pulled me from Mr. Page, and four or five more came up to them, and they knocked my Mother down almost for my Mother and my Brother were with me. My Mother recovered, and came and hung about my Neck, so that they could not get me into the Coach.74

With the help of her companions, Bracegirdle freed herself and protested loudly enough to summon a large crowd. The abduction aborted, Hill insisted on escorting Bracegirdle and her mother to their home. Once the women were safely inside, they watched as Hill and Mohun paced back and forth with swords drawn. The two men issued repeated requests to enter the house and beg Bracegirdle’s pardon, but she refused them entry. Eventually, the night watch approached the two men parading about in the dark, but Mohun challenged their authority: “I am a Peer of England. Touch me if you dare.”

Fifteen minutes later, the actor William Mountfort appeared. Hill believed that Mountfort was Bracegirdle’s lover and the chief impediment to his overtures. Earlier that week, he had sworn to take revenge on the actor for obstructing his passion. It appears that Mountfort had learned of the attack and come to discern Bracegirdle’s well-being. Although the ensuing details are disputed, it is clear that Mohun and Mountfort, who knew one another, exchanged greetings and began a conversation. Soon thereafter, Hill stabbed Mountfort. Witnesses offered contrasting accounts of the altercation. Some implied that while Mohun distracted Mountfort, Hill stabbed him. As Mountfort himself testified on his deathbed, “My Lord Mohun offered me no violence, but while I was talking with my Lord Mohun, Hill struck me with his left hand, and with his right hand run me through, before I could put my hand to my sword.”75 Other witnesses reported that Hill and Mountfort entered into swordplay, attacking and parrying several times before Mountfort’s sword broke, presenting Hill with an open target. One way or the other, as Mountfort lay bleeding Hill fled. Mohun promptly dropped his sword and surrendered to the watch. The next afternoon, Mountfort died of his wounds.

News of the abduction attempt and killing spread quickly. Surviving letters and news reports confirm that people from various tiers of society knew about the events, and that public opinion went strongly against the perpetrators. The assault and murder remained active before the public eye for the next few months. Though Hill was never captured, Mohun was tried three months later for his role in the murder of Mountfort. He was acquitted by the House of Lords in a heavily scrutinized verdict. The assault surfaced over the rest of the year in Albion’s “Chaste Lucrece”
range of representations: the trial transcripts were published and disseminated; ballads lamented Mountfort’s early death; doggerel verse satirized the mourning over the player; an anonymous novel clearly based on the incident, entitled *The Player’s Tragedy* appeared that summer. That spring, Thomas Durfey alluded to the assault on Bracegirdle in *The Richmond Heiress*, in which her character, Fulvia, thwarts three abduction attempts by a fortune-hunting Lord. The assault by Hill and Mohun remained an active part of Bracegirdle’s reputation throughout the decade; her escape from assault by Mountfort’s killers is mentioned in extant sources as late as 1702.

The story circulated as a tale of noble power grievously abused. A number of accounts utilized the narrative structures of Whig tragedy, with Bracegirdle herself cast as an imperiled heroine like those she played onstage. Some versions even misconstrue important details to strengthen this narrative, stating either that Lord Mohun himself killed Mountfort, or, more commonly, that Mountfort was slain while rescuing Bracegirdle from sexual assault. The parliamentary chronicler Narcissus Luttrell, for example, records a tale that emphasizes Mohun’s perfidy and Mountfort’s heroism:

Last night lord Mohun, captain Hill of colonel Earle’s regiment, and others, pursued Mountfort the actor from the playhouse to his lodgings in Norfolk Street, where one kissed him while Hill run him thro’ the belly: they ran away, but his lordship was this morning seized and committed to a prison. Mountfort died of his wounds this afternoon. The quarrel was about Bracegirdle the actress, whom they would have trapan’d away, but Mountfort prevented it, wherefore they murdered him thus.

Presuming that Luttrell relates the story as he heard it, this story echoes the narrative contours of Whig tragedy. While the account is not a straightforward parable of royal tyranny, as is, for example, Congreve’s play *The Mourning Bride*, the inventions, confabulations, and omissions present in this version of the tale shape the events of the assault into a highly Whiggish parable: Luttrell casts Mohun as the leading character so that the story conveys a message of nobility gone bad; he exaggerates the villainy of the murderers, declaring that they “pursued” Mountfort and that one of them “kissed” him, Judas-like, prior to Hill’s attack; he claims the state “seized and committed” the offending Lord; he (wrongly) credits Mountfort with having “prevented” the attempt to kidnap Bracegirdle, constructing him as a heroic savior of an endangered maiden. In the literary and political context of the 1690s, this brief tale of attempted rape, resistance, and murder recalls the narratives that justified revolution in the Whig tragedies that Bracegirdle and Mountfort performed. Lamentably, Luttrell also replicates the tendency of the genre to minimize women’s experience in sexual assault; he leaves out Bracegirdle’s own resistance to Hill and Mohun (she actually saved herself) and renders her a passive object in an argument between men.

William and Mary’s response to Mountfort’s murder and Mohun’s trial probably added an additional dynastic dimension to the reception of these
events. Mountfort was an outspoken critic of James II and a vehement supporter of the revolution.82 He was buried with royal fanfare. Luttrell reports that the royal organist Henry Purcell and choristers from Whitehall performed his funeral anthem with over a thousand people, including “a great many Gentlemen,” in attendance. Though the actual numbers may be exaggerated, the presence of court musicians suggests that the monarchs publicly joined in mourning the actor’s passing. The trial itself touched directly upon revolutionary principles. Prior to the trial, the defendant’s mother approached the king to plead mercy for her son. Eschewing favoritism, William invoked the legal process. She “went to the king to intercede for her son,” reports Luttrell, “but was told ’twas a barbarous act, and that he would leave it to the law.”83 William, of course, had come to England (he claimed) to defend the rule of law. Mohun’s arrest gave the king an opportunity to demonstrate his deference to the institutions and mechanisms of the English legal system. The diarist John Evelyn recorded that William attended the trial and, like the judges that assisted the Lords with the particularities of English law, thought Mohun guilty: “After 5 days Trial, and extraordinary contest, was the Lord Mohun acquitted by the Lords of the Murder of Mountford [sic] the Player, notwithstanding that the Judges (from the pregnant witnesses of the fact) had declared him guilty [. . .] and the King himself present some part of the Trial and satisfied they report that he was culpable.”84 In insisting that Mohun stand trial and then deferring to a judgment that acquitted him, William performed the legal principles that justified his invasion five years earlier.85 At year’s end, the queen recorded her own distress at the verdict, citing it as evidence of “so universal a corruption (the whole nobility giving such a proof of it in their behavior at Lord Mohun’s trial).”86

I am suggesting that Bracegirdle’s well-publicized escape from a rape attempt functioned analogously to her stage characterizations of virgins threatened by the nobility. Her repertoire contained many references to the Glorious Revolution; this cornerstone event of her public persona was easily interpreted as a comparable exhibition of revolutionary principles. If other theatregoers followed Luttrell’s tendency to read Bracegirdle’s life through the lens of her performances, her representations, onstage and off, of imperiled chastity worked in tandem through the 1690s symbolically to authorize William’s reign. Certainly her acting frequently asserted prorevolution political values. Her continuing rebuffs of dishonorable nobles throughout her career added to the impact of these performances and may well have taken on its own national valence. An ode to Bracegirdle by the Williamite poet Sarah Fyge Egerton suggests the political possibilities of her reputation for virginity. “To Marcella,” titled after Bracegirdle’s character in Thomas Durfey’s Don Quixote (and quoted earlier) praises the actress at length for maintaining her sexual virtue amid the temptations of the theatre. One couplet in particular stands out for its ideological implications: “Of all your Sex Great Albion must prefer You the chaste Lucrece of her Theater.”87 Albion is, of course, a mythic name for England, and, as I suggested above, the Lucrece story had an identifiable provenance in Whig letters as a justification for revolution. In the England of William III, a living, highly visible Lucrece was valuable to the crown. Better
yet, Bracegirdle was a Lucrece that had maintained her virtue and lived to tell the tale. As a symbolic embodiment of the political values affirmed by the new governing bloc, Bracegirdle appealed to audience members needing to convince themselves and an equivocal populace that the Glorious Revolution was necessary and that their current king was in fact the legitimate ruler of England.

Looking again at the biographies of the three Lords with whom we began further attests to the political dimension of Anne Bracegirdle’s ongoing reputation for chastity. Though all Whigs, Halifax (Montagu), Dorset (Sackville), and Devonshire (Cavendish) were members of different generations with very different ideas about the proper alignment of masculinity, sexuality, and politics. The older men, Sackville and Cavendish, were aging rakes now in their late fifties or sixties who had lived profligate, libertine lives in the loose court of Charles II. Described by one contemporary as “dissipated and licentious,” they were good friends and frequent reveling companions. Sackville was a leading wit through the 1660s and 1670s; Cavendish was “famous for Debauchery, Lewdness &c.” and rumored to have seduced “more women than any Five Keepers of Quality besides.” They both numbered liaisons with actresses among their well-known affairs. Most famously, Sackville immediately preceded Charles II as the bed partner of Nell Gwynn; they lived together for some time at his estate, and he was rumored to have relinquished the actress to the king in exchange for his first earldom. Cavendish had abandoned one longtime mistress to devote himself to “tempting an Actress [Anne Campion] out of the Play-House.” Montagu, by contrast, belonged to a younger, more staid generation. In his late twenties or early thirties, he was in essence a self-made man. The younger brother in a ranking family, he made a quick fortune on a combination of family connections, hard work, and a rare understanding of public finance. The chief patron of Joseph Addison, he later underwrote one of the most influential reformers of manners of the early eighteenth century.

I see the exchange among Halifax, Devonshire, and Dorset as an incident in the micropolitics of Whig life. The chastened court of the 1690s disapproved of the sort of sexual license upon which Dorset and Devonshire had built reputations for virulent masculinity and established themselves as political insiders. Further, it associated their libertinism with popishness, Jacobitism, and absolutism. “It followed,” writes Dudley Bahlman, “that virtuous men were true patriots and a rake was automatically a traitor to his country and an enemy of Protestantism.” Daniel Defoe nicely articulates the perceived connection between revolution principles and stricter morality in his 1702 poem Reformation of Manners:

To States and Governments they both extend,
Vertue’s their Life and being, Vice their End:
Vertue establishes, and Vice destroys,
And all the Ends of Government unties:
Vertue’s an English King and Parliament,
Vice is a Czar of Muscow Government:
Vertue sets bound to Kings, and limits Crowns,
Vice knows no Law, and all Restraint disowns:
Vertue prescribes all Governments by Rules,
Vice makes Kings Tyrants, and their Subjects Fools:
Vertue seeks Peace, and Property maintains,
Vice binds the Captive World in hostile Chains:
Vertue’s a beauteous Building form’d on high,
Vice is Confusion and Deformity.94

Typical of the younger generation of Whigs at the turn of the century, Defoe figures “Vertue” as the ground of constitutional government and “Vice” as its destruction by the forces of tyranny. For inveterate womanizers like Dorset and Devonshire, the moralistic climate of the nation called into question their political commitments. It challenged their devotion to the revolution.

In this light, Halifax’s admonition to reward Anne Bracegirdle for her chastity takes on a surplus meaning. As Aston reports the encounter, Charles Montagu pushes the older gentlemen to put their money where their mouth is: “Come, says Lord Halifax—You all commend her Virtue, & c. but why do we not present this incomparable Woman with something worthy her Acceptance?” In effect, Montagu invites his older friends to demonstrate their admiration for a sort of virtue not valued in the prerevolutionary court. In the reforming tenor of the 1690s, it was politically advantageous for Dorset and Devonshire to show that, in spite of their dissolute histories, they acknowledged the superiority of the present age. Patronage itself, of course, is a form of performance with important symbolic consequences; the patron claims a share of the work he patronizes and buys rights of association with it. Adding their guineas to Anne Bracegirdle’s pile of coin, Dorset and Devonshire purchased a bit of her virtue for themselves. They rewarded a person whose behavior exemplified the new morality of the postrevolutionary court, and in so doing helped secure their ongoing place in it.

A final piece of royal propaganda demonstrates Bracegirdle’s symbolic value to the regime of William III in conclusive visual terms. Bracegirdle appears in Godfrey Kneller’s monumental portrait of William on horseback landing at Torbay (Fig. 1). This large, allegorical painting was commissioned by the court in 1697 to commemorate the Treaty of Ryswick, the document that sealed William’s victory in his first war with the French. After a series of sketches and intermediate works, the portrait was completed in 1701. It commemorates William disembarking on the English coast in 1688 on his way to rout the armies of James II. In his book Sir Godfrey Kneller and the English Baroque Portrait, J. Douglas Stewart unpacks the significance of the painting in detail.95 Kneller’s portrait, argues Stewart, is a visual panegyric, confirming William’s legitimacy and proclaiming England’s greatness. Kneller loads his painted hymn with the classical Roman images that circulated in support of William’s regime. Via a number of iconographic references, he identifies William with Caesar Augustus, the head of the Roman Empire at one of its most powerful moments. The key icon may be found inscribed on a scroll flown overhead by one of the accompanying cherubim. A quotation from Virgil’s fourth
Ecologue, it reads “PACATUMQUE REGIT PATRIIS VIRTUTIBUS ORBEM,”—“and he reigns over the pacified world with the virtues of his ancestors.” The fourth Ecologue is a Messianic hymn predicting the end of the Age of Iron under the tyrannical rule of Saturn and the birth of a child who will institute a glorious new Age of Gold. Most commentators identified this child as Caesar Augustus. The Kneller portrait proclaims William as Augustus’ true heir. It celebrates a glorious new time of peace, prosperity, and territorial expansion in which England will extend its beneficent imperial hand with a reach comparable to that of Rome.

In what has hitherto been treated as an interesting but innocuous footnote to theatre history, two of the allegorical figures in the painting, the goddesses Ceres and Flora, are portrayed by Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle. Barry was Bracegirdle’s senior by some twenty years and the most admired tragic actress of her lifetime. Her ability to express pathos was legendary. She and Bracegirdle were frequently paired together, with Barry taking the part of an older, sexually experienced woman, and Bracegirdle creating a trademark imperiled maiden. The pairing in Kneller’s painting continued this pattern. Ceres was the goddess of agriculture, overseeing the harvest and assuring fertility; Flora was the goddess of flowers, a herald of beauty and springtime. In Kneller’s painting, Ceres and Flora are England’s welcoming committee. Barry performs Ceres, kneeling to offer a bouquet of produce and an olive branch to William, and Bracegirdle performs Flora, gazing into the distance while her young assistant strews flowers at his feet. As the goddesses of agriculture and flowers, Ceres and Flora represent the land of England. In their visages, the island welcomes William to its shores.

Kneller’s representation of Ceres and Flora also exploits the rhetoric of imperiled virtue. Casting Barry and Bracegirdle as Ceres and Flora invited a dense web of possible associations and interpretations. Generally speaking, baroque allegory traffics in the accumulative possibilities of multiple, simultaneous meanings. Walter Benjamin, perhaps the twentieth century’s foremost theorist of baroque form, points out that images in these works do not by and large function as symbols with fixed, singular referents. Rather, baroque allegory encourages the spectator to generate shards of meaning that converse with one another. The form does not aim at univocal significance so much as it presents well-known tropes in explosive combinations. “It is a common practice . . . of the baroque,” writes Benjamin, “to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification.” So the power of a painting like Kneller’s arises less from its straightforward celebration of the central figure than from the wealth and variety of thoughts about him generated by the endlessly signifying details that fill out the edges of the painting.

Kneller’s representation of Ceres and Flora overlays mythological references, recent English history, and perhaps even playhouse gossip to add to its Williamite message. While the meanings I propose are by no means the definitive, “correct” interpretation of the Barry–Bracegirdle fragment, they
are a possible string of associations that correlate with other evidence I have presented. First off, Ceres was Saturn’s daughter. In the painting’s central allegory, Caesar Augustus (William) vanquishes Saturn (James II). Hence, as Saturn’s daughter, Ceres alludes in part to James’s daughter Mary. Kneller suggests that William’s invasion of England delivered Mary from the tyranny of her father, countering Jacobite sympathizers that accused Mary of betraying James. In addition, and I suspect more powerfully, Roman mythology

Figure 1.
Sir Godfrey Kneller, *William III on Horseback*, 1701. At bottom right, Elizabeth Barry as the kneeling Ceres and Anne Bracegirdle as Flora. RCIN 403986, cat. no. OM 337 HC 25. The Royal Collection (c) 2002, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.
emphasized Ceres’ outraged protest against the rape of her daughter, Proserpina, by Hades, the god of the underworld. Hades hoped to marry Proserpina, but she refused him. One day as she was out gathering flowers, Hades abducted her in a chariot, spiriting her to his kingdom underground. There, he raped her. Her mother, Ceres, excoriated Proserpina’s father, Zeus, for permitting the rape. Eventually, Ceres persuaded Zeus to recover their daughter from Hades’ kingdom, though because Proserpina had eaten four pomegranate seeds in the underworld she was obliged to remain with Hades four months of the year. In the staging of the painting, Barry’s suppliant posture suggests that Ceres pleads with William to recover her daughter, or alternatively, that she thanks the king for a rescue already effected. Either way, Ceres casts William as the redeemer of a ravaged land. The emotional force of the image can only have been multiplied by Barry’s own widely appreciated ability to unleash a torrent of woe.

Anne Bracegirdle’s Flora may also refer to this story, though through a curious displacement her image implies that, under William’s leadership, England is already recovering from the devastating effects of its metaphoric rape by James Stuart. On first glance, it seems unusual that Kneller does not include Proserpina herself in the painting. Given the metaphoric meaning of rape in the rhetoric of dynastic succession, her image could certainly have been used to advantage. And Flora is a minor figure in the Roman pantheon, lacking in provocative associations. However, it is conceivable that Bracegirdle’s presence in the painting called up the memory of Proserpina’s rape. In an uncanny resemblance, Hades’ abduction of Proserpina recalls Richard Hill’s attempted abduction of Anne Bracegirdle. In both stories, a man wants to marry a woman that refuses his proposals, and to secure her, attempts a violent kidnapping in a horse-drawn carriage. The painting cites Proserpina’s suffering twice over, first through Ceres and second through Bracegirdle. The combination renders Proserpina a present absence in the painting, a memory of tyranny past. However, Proserpina’s and Bracegirdle’s stories end very differently: in the mythological fable, Hades’ abduction succeeds, and he rapes Proserpina; but in the well-circulated theatrical anecdote, Anne Bracegirdle escapes to become one of England’s most admired virgins. By substituting Flora for Proserpina and casting the personally virtuous Anne Bracegirdle in this role, Kneller effectively removes the taint of Proserpina’s rape from William’s rule. Because of the Glorious Revolution, the painting implies, ravished maidens have become luminous virgins. By extension, it suggests, England no longer suffers the effects of royal tyranny but enjoys the benefits of unimpeachable virtue. Rescue supersedes rape as the apposite trope for the state of the nation.

When Halifax, Dorset, Devonshire and their friends sent Anne Bracegirdle a bursting sack of guineas with “encomiums on her virtue,” they were not simply congratulating a remarkable woman for her forbearance. They were acknowledging a coworker in their efforts to legitimate the crown of their king, William III, and appropriating a symbolic piece of her virtue for their own use in the chastened circumstances of his court. I am not claiming these men were necessarily conscious of the symbolic connections that motivated their offering. Frequently, ideologies function unconsciously, arising from systems of meaning

108
and value that may not be apparent to the people who participate in them. I am, however, arguing that Bracegirdle’s sexual constancy signified within a tropic system that analogized the new political order in the sexual relations between noblemen who abused their privilege and common women who resisted their attack. The cash these members of the Whig leadership sent to Anne Bracegirdle affirmed their commitment to the ideals she represented and gave them the opportunity to perform their social power united behind the new regime. Given Anne Bracegirdle’s overwhelming popularity through the years of William’s reign, it seems likely that many Englishmen used her for a similar purpose. Her virtue was both sexually enticing and politically efficacious. The combination was, at least for the Whigs, irresistible.

ENDNOTES

1. She premiered such roles as Belinda in Vanbrugh’s The Provok’d Wife, Millimant in Congreve’s The Way of the World, and Angelica in Centlivre’s The Gamester.

2. She created, for example, Emmeline in the Dryden—Purcell semiopera King Arthur, Isabella in Pix’s Queen Catherine, and Selima in Nicholas Rowe’s Tamerlane.

3. As the goddess Venus in the Congreve—Weldon masque The Judgement of Paris, for instance, she called up her impressive soprano voice and, according to Congreve, “performed to a miracle.”


12. It is important to acknowledge that a countertradition questioned Bracegirdle’s ongoing chastity. For a summary of this literature, see the Bracegirdle entry in the Biographical Dictionary. She was especially linked to William Congreve, and even rumored to have born him a child. A particularly lewd example of the attack on Bracegirdle’s reputation may be found in Tom Brown’s “Letters from the Dead to the Living,” in Amusements Serious and Comical and Other Works, ed. Arthur L. Hayward (London: Routledge, [1702] 1927), 436.


14. Ibid., 2: 305.

15. The actual date of Halifax’s challenge to his friends is an intriguing question. Halifax came into his title in 1700, Dorset died in 1706, and Devonshire in 1707, so it must have been between 1700 and 1706. Aston was in the Americas from late 1701 to 1704 (Biographical Dictionary, 1: 152–3). So the event from which this story developed probably occurred either in 1701 or between 1704 and 1706. I incline toward the 1701 date insofar as it accords more fully with the reading of Bracegirdle’s symbolic relationship to William III, which I develop through this essay. It is also possible that the event occurred during Aston’s absence but that the story was still circulating upon his return to England.


20. I have relied principally upon Macaulay, vols. 3–6, for information about these men. See also Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse 1660–1714, ed. George deF. Lord et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963–75) in which they are frequently mentioned.

21. There were actually two Lords Halifax during the reign of William III, George Saville, Marquis of Halifax who died in 1695, and Charles Montagu, who received the title at the rank of Baron in 1700. Evidence suggests that Aston refers to Montagu: Sackville was Montagu’s patron at court, and they were close friends, likely to be sharing a bottle; Cavendish and Sackville were long-standing cohorts from the court of Charles II. In addition, Montagu was well known as a generous patron of the arts. If Aston refers to Saville, my claims about the relevance of Whig politics remain valid. Though a political trimmer, Saville was a Whig for most of his political career, a supporter of William III, and an important actor in the revolution. He chaired the revolution Convention and presided at the coronation of William and Mary.

22. I calculate this sum on the basis of a passage in the “Reply of the Patentees to the Petition of the Players” that, in 1695, Bracegirdle’s salary was fifty shillings/week. Assuming an acting season of forty weeks, she would have made a hundred pounds per year. (Evidence elsewhere in this document indicates that Bracegirdle had not yet been granted the rights to a benefit performance.) Reprinted in Judith Milhous, Thomas Betterton and the Management of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, 1695–1708 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 242. It is certainly possible that Aston exaggerates the amount of the gift for dramatic effect. Regardless of the precise number, the point is that they gave her a significant amount of money.


32. Macaulay, 3: 1333–4. Dorset had been Shadwell’s patron for some years, so there were probably also personal reasons for the selection of Shadwell.


37. This mode of analysis has been especially prevalent in Renaissance Studies. See, for example, the influential Louis Montrose “‘Shaping Fantasies’: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture” *Representations* 2 (Spring 1983), 61–94.


40. This aspect of the Glorious Revolution is treated at length in Bahlman.

41. Quoted in Bahlman, 15.


Ideology of Restoration Comedy (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), and Heroes and States: On the Ideology of Restoration Tragedy (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000); Hughes, English Drama, 1660–1700; Staves, Player’s Scepters.

45. Braverman, xii.
46. I have relied upon the list of characters in Howe, 182–3.
47. Ibid., 43.
48. The pertinent roles are Antelina in Mountfort’s The Injur’d Lovers, Lucia in Shadwell’s The Squire of Alsatia, Cleomira in Settle’s Distressed Innocence, Placentia in Motteux’s Beauty in Distress, Julia in Crowne’s The English Friar, Maria in Bancroft’s King Edward III (it is not definitively established that Bancroft wrote this play, though it is routinely attributed to him), Urania in Powell’s Alphonsos King of Naples, Fulvia in Durfey’s The Richmond Heiress, Almeria in Congreve’s The Mourning Bride, Camilla in Hopkins’s Boadicea, Isabella in Pix’s Queen Catherine, and Selima in Rowe’s Tamerlane.
49. Emmeline in Dryden’s King Arthur.
51. See Loftis, 31–4, for the play’s long association with William III.
54. Braverman, 201.
55. Quoted in ibid., 202.
57. [Gildon], 23.
59. Ibid., 357.
*60. Ibid., 384.
61. Braverman, 152–68.
63. Hughes, English Drama, 1660–1700, 430.
67. Staves, Player’s Scepters, 59. See also Marsden, 193–4.
69. Bashar, 42.
71. Cibber mentions Lord Lovelace in Cibber, 2: 304–5; Lord Burlington appears in a letter by Bracegirdle’s friend Horace Walpole; Nicholas Rowe penned a verse satire about her courtship by the Earl of Scarsdale.
72. I have not encountered any indication that Bracegirdle was noted for virginity prior to this attack. Indeed, Hill’s presumption that she and Mountfort were sexually involved suggests that chastity was not yet a widespread aspect of her public persona.

73. Cibber, 2: 342.


75. Quoted in Borgman, 140.

76. Reprinted in ibid., 158.


78. The editors of The Biographical Dictionary make the connection between this play and Bracegirdle’s escape from Hill and Mohun.

79. Tom Brown, quoted in Hayward, 378.


82. Brown (1693) in Cameron, 371–2.

83. Luttrell, 2: 638.


85. The murder of William Mountfort also provides another intriguing connection between Anne Bracegirdle and Halifax, Devonshire, and Dorset. Charles Montagu (later named Halifax) posted bail for Lord Mohun (along with the accused’s uncle) in the amount of two thousand pounds; Devonshire and Dorset both sat in the jury at his trial in the house of Peers and voted to acquit him. Bracegirdle testified against Mohun, and rhetorical ticks in her testimony suggest that she wanted him convicted.


87. Egerton, 57.


89. Quoted in Ellis, 440.

90. Cf. Mengel, 242; Ellis, 439.

91. Ellis, 440.

92. I am indebted to Joseph Roach for this phrase.


94. Ellis, 435.


96. Barry and Bracegirdle were identified by Lucyle Hook in “Portraits of Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle,” Theatre Notebook 15 (1960): 129–37.

97. An analysis of lands figured as women from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries may be found in Patricia Parker, “Rhetorics of Property: Exploration, Inventory, Blazon,” in Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property (New York: Methuen, 1987), 126–54.