

The Lady Scribblers

A historical comedy

By Michaela Goldhaber

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CHARACTERS

The Lady Scribblers:

MARY PIX, warm, motherly, and plump, has a great laugh, mid 30s

DELARIVIER MANLEY sexy and smart, early 30s

CATHERINE TROTTER, well educated, 15

The Rebel Actors:

THOMAS BETTERTON, a leading actor of the 17th century London Stage and a leader of the Actor's Rebellion, 60-ish

ELIZABETH BARRY, great tragedienne of the 17th century London Stage and a leader of the Actor's Rebellion, nearly 50

ANNE BRACEGIRDLE, the most popular comic actress of the 17th century London Stage and a leader of the Actor's Rebellion, mid-20s

Others:

CHRISTOPHER RICH, Grand Dictator of Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and the United Company, 50s

LORD HAMMINGTON, Lord Chamberlain to King William and Queen Mary, a large, imposing man, aristocratic, always very well dressed, 50s

LUCINDA FAIRWEATHER, another popular comic actress, 20s

GEORGE PIX, Mary's husband, a tailor, large, warm, and easy-going, 40ish

TIME: Early 1690s

PLACE: Several locations in and around London, England, including:

Graveyard at Westminster Abbey

LORD HAMMINGTON's coach

A Chocolate-House

George Pix's Tailoring Shop

Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre

The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane

ACT ONE
Prologue

Lights up on MARY PIX. She is well dressed in sober attire, which is covered by a large, much-used apron. She has smudges of flour on her face and hands. She wipes her hands on her apron.

MARY

(asks audience)

Do I have flour all over my face? I do, don't I? Well, that's not right for the Prologue.

(She wipes her face with her apron)

Better? I'll give it a try.

(She addresses the audience conspiratorially.)

Boys dress'd as ladies, 'twas the rule for years
Upon th'English stage. Ophelia's tears,
Lady M's bloody hands, Titania's misplac'd love,
All brought to life by males, 'til God above,
Or King Charles, I should say, left exile
In France, where he had rested for awhile.
His first decree on claiming back his throne
Was to open theatres closed by th'old drone
Cromwell, and his Puritan regime
Who'd spoiled England's fun, and spilled its cream.

(She draws breath to continue, but pauses and looks around. She calls offstage.)

Cathy? Della? Come along, Ladies! I know I'm not meant to do this all alone!

CATHERINE TROTTER (CATHY) enters briskly, speaking as she comes. She is a girl of 15, modestly dressed. She wears spectacles.

CATHY

To a restored Theatre rallied round
Actors, poets, managers who'd stood their ground
And a golden age of Theatre did ensue,
Fueled by witty, rude plays, the audience grew.
Soon came a surprising Royal decree,
Occasion'd by the French custom, quoth Charlie,
"The Stage must honor women, set them free
To play themselves, and no more shall one see
Boys in wigs and dresses upon the Stage,
Actresses in breeches shall be the rage!"

DELARIVIER MANLEY (DELLA) enters. She is dressed extravagantly to show off her figure, but in somber tones. She joins the others, and then speaks.

DELLA

Emboldened by women on stage there came
Female writers, emerging to make their name.
She-wits and poets raised aloft their quills,
Challenged the world to look beyond their frills
And dared to mount the stage with their brave words
Doing battle with wit, rose these bright birds.
And one soared up so high above the throng
London's laughter rang out, pealed like a gong
For Aphra Behn, the first English woman to
Earn her living writing plays, hear me true.
She made us laugh and think about the world.
She was a leader, when her flag unfurled,
Poets, Players followed, London round her whirled.

The three women take hands.

DELLA

(aside to audience)

Don't worry. The whole play isn't in verse.

MARY, CATHY, & DELLA

O grievous day! Today we bury her.
The tears do burn my eyes 'tis all a blur.

Lights shift to reveal the rest of the stage.

Scene One.

London, Westminster Abbey, 1689. A mound of earth suggests a freshly filled grave. A few stones place us in a church graveyard. MARY leads CATHY and DELLA to the grave.

DELLA

(aside to MARY)

Mary dear, you are still wearing your apron.

Embarrassed, MARY quickly pulls it off and throws it offstage. Then she addresses the grave.

MARY

Oh, Mistress Behn, we wish you peace and rest
And happiness, after a life distress'd
By service to the Stage and your Country.
With gratitude and love we mourn for thee,
Look down on us, your faithful acolytes
Protect us from Critics, help win our fights.

MARY, CATHY, & DELLA

You showed the way, and now we vow, we three,
To write for the Stage, live your legacy!

A funeral march is heard from offstage. (a snatch of Purcell's
Funeral March for Queen Mary would be ideal.)

DELLA

Now, we'll see who else has come to honor Mrs. Behn.

BETTERTON, BARRY, and BRACEGIRDLE, dressed in
mourning attire, enter together. Next come RICH and
HAMMINGTON. They join the women gathered around the
grave.

BARRY steps forward, the grand tragedienne, wiping away
tears.

BARRY

O Mrs. Behn,
We give our thanks to you for all the parts,
Witty fasc'nating people whom our arts
Did bring to life upon the London stage
Through them you'll be remember'd for an age.
I only hope that your life and work will
Inspire other women to take up a quill.
And in conclusion it is only fit
To raise the cry, " Long live the She-Wit!"

All except RICH repeat, "Long live the She-Wit!"

RICH

She-wit, says she! O never have I heard,
Such folly in the joining of a word
As “she” to “wit,” and from a tart no less,
A witLESS She, who overfills her dress,
With heaving bosoms and a panting breath
That passes for acting! ! No more, S’Death!
I’ll hear no more praise of these female wits,
Else I am ta’en with such a case of fits
That the next speaker will get it in the tits!

MARY

(steps forward and addresses RICH)

I’ve heard the tales of mean old Christ’pher Rich,
Who starves players, kicks poets in a ditch
With too much spectacle, he ruins good plays
Trusts not the poets’ words to catch our gaze.
And so it comes to me as no surprise
This ill-manner’d display before my eyes.

RICH

Women like you are writing for the stage,
Which sends Chris Rich into a blinding rage.
Behn’s dead now, I’d hoped for a spot of rest,
From she-wits, by whom I have been oppressed.

MARY

You disrespect the grave of Mrs. Behn.
And slander She-Wits for they’re outside your ken.
But you were quite content to stage her plays
For Behn filled every seat for days and days.
She filled your coffers—you cannot deny.
So hypocrite, until the day you die,
You’ll open your stage to She-Wits, hear me true,
How She-Wit Pix has made an ass of you.

BARRY

Well done.

BRACEGIRDLE

Nicely said.

RICH

I tip my hat to brilliant Mrs. Behn,
And mourn that Drury never will again
Present a new work by that sparkling wit.
These Lady Scribblers here, their work is shit!
And hear me now, I doubt that e'er you'll see
Plays by these ladies on stage at Drury!

CATHY

(Blows a raspberry at RICH.)

The Actors and RICH speak on top of each other,
interrupting.

BARRY

Now, for the Actors, speaks Mrs. Barry
Of scars from Rich that each of us carry,
You starve us, cheat us, beat us, and what's more
You desecrate the plays that we adore

RICH

(interrupting) I am the Master of the Playhouse, see,
All players, wits, and scribblers must to me

BARRY

(continuing) With cheap tricks, explosions, and such fancies
Which sully Poets' words and make us sneeze!

RICH

(continuing) Make their appeal 'fore any will behold
The fruits of their labors, how'er so bold.

BETTERTON

O Christ'pher Rich, you stand accused by me,
On behalf of the Actors, of tyranny!

RICH

It matters not to me if you are wise
Season'd men of the stage here to advise
Me on the folly of my management
You too will kiss my arse, I am no gent.
Stand down old man, how dare you to presume
To chastise me, I'll see you in your tomb.

BRACEGIRDLE

You threaten us with more brutality
But what you'd do without us, we shall see,
To save their favorite Players, crowds will climb
O'er the playhouse walls in record time
So now, we do accuse you of your crime:
Mistreatment of the Players, whom you ought
To respect, and for this you should be shot!

RICH

Players, I've tired of your little snit
Stand down or your contracts will be forfeit.

HAMMINGTON

Gadzooks! Mr. Rich, worthy Actors, and ladies! 'Do you not remember we are here to honor Mrs. Behn?

RICH

I beg your pardon, Your Lordship.

HAMMINGTON pulls out a decorated document and reads.
He enjoys being the center of attention and performs.

HAMMINGTON

King William and Queen Mary express their regrets that matters of state keep them from paying final respects to England's Great Lady of the Stage. They send by me, their Lord Chamberlain, their majesties representative to the world of Theatre, these words: (reads) Mrs. Behn, we are not often inclined to mirth, as affairs of state weigh heavy on our heads, but you have made us laugh, and for that we are grateful, and reward you with burial in this sacred place where England's great poets sleep alongside her monarchs.

RICH

God save the King and Queen!

The assembled mourners repeat, "God save the King and Queen!" HAMMINGTON returns to his place among the mourners. RICH places a proprietary arm on his shoulder.

RICH

Well done, Your Lordship. Perhaps you should consider a new pursuit. Your voice is beautifully resonant, and would surely fill my playhouse at Drury Lane.

HAMMINGTON

What a thought. Oh, how I love the Theatre! May I offer you a ride back to Drury Lane in my coach? You can tell me all about what you have in store for the season.

RICH

You are a paragon of graciousness, Your Lordship. I am certain I will find a way to return the favor.

HAMMINGTON

Right this way, Mr. Rich.

(He takes BARRY and BRACEGIRDLE's hands and lingers.)

Farewell, Mr. Betterton, Mrs. Barry, Mrs. Bracegirdle. I look forward to seeing all of you on stage again soon.

HAMMINGTON exits. RICH follows, smirking at the Players. The others are left behind at the grave, looking after RICH in disgust.

BETTERTON

Typical Rich. He dishonors Mrs. Behn's memory at her grave; threatens to throw his leading actors out of the Company rather than listen to their legitimate complaints; and then tops it all off by toadying to Hammington.

MARY

Disgraceful. He is a toad. Rich the Old Toad!

DELLA

I can't imagine Mrs. Behn putting up with that Old Toad.

BARRY

(laughing)

He was terrified of her. That's why he's so uneasy around "She-Wits."

MARY

My husband has had a bit of a windfall of late, so it would be my pleasure to buy each of you a dish of chocolate and toast She-Wits.

BRACEGIRDLE

Oh, so kind of you, Mrs. --?

MARY

Pix. Mary Pix. It is an honor to make your acquaintances, Mrs. Bracegirdle, Mrs. Barry, and Mr. Betterton. If you please, may I introduce Mrs. Delarivier Manley, call her "Della," and Miss Catherine Trotter.

CATHY

We've loved all of your performances! We are at Drury Lane every week.

BETTERTON

(makes a small bow)

'Tis a pleasure to meet you radiant ladies. We thank you for your attendance.

BARRY

Mrs. Pix, did The Old Toad speak true when he said that you have been sending him plays? Forget the beastly things he said. Are you ALL She-Wits?

DELLA

We do scribble.

CATHY

For the stage. We all write plays.

BETTERTON

(to DELLA)

And are you THE Mrs. Manley, whose scandalous accounts of life at Court are secretly passed from hand to hand across the Town?

DELLA smiles, and is about to answer.

MARY

Now let's leave something to talk about at the Chocolate-House. And I believe a certain young miss had better be getting herself home before her guardian notices that she snuck out of the house when he thought she was at her Greek studies.

CATHY

Don't you think I could stay out just a bit longer for one dish of chocolate?

DELLA

Trotters! Home you go! T'wouldn't do at all to have you on housebound right when we are poised to take London by storm.

MARY

(hugs Cathy)

Run along my little classical scholar.

BRACEGIRDLE

Good evening, Miss Trotter.

BRACEGIRDLE clasps CATHY's hand, then BARRY does the same, and BETTERTON kisses it. CATHY runs off waving with delight to her new friends.

DELLA

I declare, 'tis time for fewer graves, and more chocolate. Let us go.

MARY and DELLA lead the Actors offstage. Lights shift.

SCENE TWO.

Lights up on RICH and HAMMINGTON in the coach.

HAMMINGTON

The Players had a few things to say to you, Mr. Rich. I trust there is not always such an acrimonious tone to the discussions amongst you? Perhaps the piercing grief at the loss of Mrs. Behn has driven tempers to flare?

RICH

You must be correct, Your Lordship. I was wondering myself what had gotten into their heads. I do labor to keep the discourse civil within the walls of Drury. I cannot be expected to answer for their behavior in a churchyard.

HAMMINGTON

Pray help me to recall, Mr. Rich, how came you to lead the United Company?

RICH

'Twould be my pleasure to relate the events that led to that excellent arrangement.

(Aside to audience)

I am very pleased that he has asked me this; I was not allowed to make my case in the Prologue. Those She-Wits saw to that.

(to HAMMINGTON and playing to the audience.)

When randy Charles the Second did return
To London and the throne that he did earn
By spill'ng his seed in every French boudoir
Until King Louis said, "Monsieur, au revoir!"
And kicked his Majesty across the sea.
Back to this piss-soaked Isle came Charlie
Where he could force his favorite frog delight
Of ladies on the stage in breeches tight
Upon his helpless subjects, feel our plight!

HAMMINGTON

(interrupting)

I am sorry to say that I must disagree with you on that point, Mr. Rich. I find ladies in breeches to be a most pleasant site. Why, simply think upon your Anne Bracegirdle. In a gown, she is lovely; in breeches transcendent. Forgive the interruption. Pray continue, I'll hold my tongue.

RICH

Far be it from me to disparage Miss Bracegirdle in a pair of breeches. My receipts reflect her appeal. But why speak we of her? 'Twas my story that you requested.

HAMMINGTON

Precisely, Mr. Rich. Please do continue.

RICH

Two patents did young Charles see fit to grant
To two old farts, Killigrew and Davenant,
They built new theatres in the heart of town,
But just as one did ope, the other burnt down,
For these men fancièd themselves artistes,
And had not heads for business, pompous beasts.
The fate of English drama on their heads
The Players agreed together to make their beds,
A United Company was formed by royal decree
And at last its governance belonged to me.

HAMMINGTON

Well said, Mr. Rich. Your entertainments at Drury Lane have delighted the Town for many years now. I do predict that you shall continue in this vein for many years to come.

RICH

'Tis your gracious patronage that makes it so. I did not jest when I suggested a venture onto the stage for Your Lordship. If the will is there I should be delighted to orchestrate your debut. Perhaps one of Mr. Congreve or Mr. Wycherley's gentlemen-wits would please?

HAMMINGTON

Nothing would give me more pleasure, Mr. Rich, though Lady Hammington will object. She disapproves of the Theatre, as is the fashion now at Court. In truth, she disapproves of most things.

If you would like to read the complete script please e-mail me at michaelagoldhaber@gmail.com.