Nell Gwyn's playgoing at the King's expense

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Nell Gwyn's Playgoing at the King's Expense

By 1675 Nell Gwyn had been Charles II's mistress for seven years; yet her attraction for the king was as great as the day she had appeared before him as Almahide in Dryden's The Conquest of Granada and charmed him by her deliverance of the prologue in a huge carriage hat. Louise de Keroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, had succeeded Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, as first mistress of the king, but to her annoyance she had had to share him with Nell. 'He divides his money, his time, and his health between the pair,' wrote Madame de Sévigné in September 1675. 'The low actress is as proud as the Duchess of Portsmouth, whom she jeers at, mimics, and makes game of. She braves her to her face, and often takes the king away from her, and boasts that she is the best loved of the two. She is young, of madcap gaiety, bold, brazen, debauched, and ready witted. She sings, dances, and finally makes love her business.'

Although Nell had long since retired from the stage, she still attended the theatre regularly. Very likely she had the freedom of the house when she went to the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, where she had acted, but when she saw a play at Dorset Garden, the Duke of York's playhouse, she was expected to pay for her seat in one of the boxes. Late in 1676 the Dorset Garden management sent her a bill, amounting to 35 pounds 19 shillings, for plays she and her companions had seen there during the seasons of 1674-75 and 1675-76 and part of the season of 1676-77. This and other bills she had run up—for a silver-ornamented bedstead, for cleaning of a warming pan, for a sedan chair, for strong ale, for a fan, for satin shoes, petticoats, and nightgowns, to name some of them—she turned over to the Exchequer for payment, in spite of the fact that the king had settled on her an annual pension of 5,000 pounds.

These bills remained in the Exchequer for more than a century and a half. In 1851, mutilated and damp-stained, they came into the possession of Robert Cole, a collector of Nell Gwyn documents, who made them available to Peter Cunningham. Cunningham published three that had escaped damage in his well-known biography of the actress, but he merely listed the bill for theatre seats. By 1872, when Alfred Horwood briefly calendared it, along with the other bills, in the Appendix to the Third Report of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, it had passed into the hands of the Rev. Francis Hopkinson, of Malvern Hills, Worcestershire. Recently acquired by the Theatre Collection, of the Harvard College Library, it is now printed for the first time. In addition to its biographical interest, it possesses considerable importance for the history of the Restoration theatre, as the appended annotations should make clear.

The bill is similar to one from the
Drury Lane Theatre at the close of the seventeenth century, discovered by Dr Leslie Hotson at the Public Record Office and published by him in 1918.2 The plays witnessed by the actress and her friends, together with the dates and charges, are listed on both sides of a single folio leaf. The leaf is badly damaged — stained, wrinkled, and torn in many places. Gone completely is the lower left corner, carrying with it the dates of five performances, and the upper left corner, containing the dates of eight performances and, on the verso, the names of four plays and part of the names of five others. In attempting a reconstruction of the document, I have been greatly helped by two of the warrants in the Lord Chamberlain's accounts, published by Professor Alardice Nicoll, for plays acted at Dorset Garden before the king from 3 July 1675 to 2 March 1676, and from 28 May 1675 to 12 May 1677.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Performer</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 1675</td>
<td>Guinn</td>
<td>The Tempest</td>
<td>Dorset Garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 1675</td>
<td>Guinn</td>
<td>The Citizen</td>
<td>Dorset Garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1675</td>
<td>Guinn</td>
<td>Hamlet</td>
<td>Dorset Garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 1675</td>
<td>Guinn</td>
<td>The Unfortunate Lovers</td>
<td>Dorset Garden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 1676</td>
<td>Guinn</td>
<td>Love and Revenge</td>
<td>Dorset Garden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 It is probable that Nell saw Davenant's *Love and Honor* in September, rather than October, of 1674, since in the next two seasons she began her playing in September. The last previously known performance of this play was in 1684.
4 The last previously known performance of this play by Davenant was in 1668.
5 The only known Restoration performance of this play by Denham.
6 Date supplied by Nicoll, p. 310, the king being present at this performance of Neill Payney's *The Siege of Constantinople*.
7 It is said that the king should have seen this play by Settle on 9 November 1674, exactly one month earlier (Nicoll, p. 310).
8 This was the first performance of Shadwell's opera, *Psyche*, and the king was present (Nicoll, p. 310). Box seats, ordinarily five shillings for an opera, were doubled. The king was charged thirty pounds for the use of his box at this performance, and we now see that he also eventually paid an additional pound for the pleasure of Nell's company.
Notes

19 Madam Guinn & 1 att ye Country Knight 10 & one in ye Pitt 00-10-06
24 Madam Guinn & 1 att ye Woman turn'd bully 11 & 1 in ye Pitt 00-14-06
75: June 12 Madam Guinn and 3 att the Libertine 12 00-16-00
15 Madam Guinn and 1 att the Libertine 00-08-00
22 Madam Guinn and 1 att the Conquest of China 00-08-00
23 Madam Guinn and 1 att Herod and Mediamne 00-08-00
24 Madam Guinn and 1 att Psyche 00-16-00
20 Madam Guinn and 1 att King Lear 15 00-08-00
Spts: 24 Madam Guinn and 1 att Doctor Neustus 00-08-00
25 Madam Guinn and 2 att Psyche 00-10-00
Octo: 8 Madam Guinn and 2 att Psyche 00-10-00
11 Madam Guinn and 1 att the Madde Lover 00-08-00
[2] 7 Madam Guinn and 1 att the Wanton wiffe 14 00-08-00
[? Nov.] Madam Guinn and 1 att King Henry the 8th 00-06-00
[? Dec.] Madam Guinn and 1 att the Valiante Cid 16 00-08-00
[? Jan.] Madam Guinn and 1 att Psyche 00-16-00
[? Feb.] Madam Guinn and 4 att She would if She Conld 00-00-00

Sum 24-09-00

[verso of the leaf]

March ye 11 Madam Guinn [and one att St Fopling] 10 00-08-00
16 Madam Guinn 17
[74] Maye: 9 Madam Guinn 17
23 Madam Guinn [and one att the Virtuoso] 16 00-08-00
June: 8 Madam Guinn [and one att Don Carlos] 19 00-08-00
9 Madam Guinn and 3 att Don Carlos 00 00-16-00

10 No play with this title is known. In a recent letter to Professor Nicoll, I suggested that the play was Crowne's The Country Wife, which Nell saw on 22 September 1766. Sir Manery Shallow, the country wit of the comedy, is described as a country knight in the dramatic personage.

11 The only known performance of this anonymous comedy, hitherto thought to have been produced about July 1675. The advanced price indicates this was the first performance.

12 The earliest known performance of this comedy by Shadwell.

13 The only known Restoration performance of King Lear before Tate's shockingly successful adaptation of 1681, which held the stage for more than a century and a half.

14 That is, Betterton's The Amorous Widow, or The Wanton Wife. The missing digit of the date of this performance must have been 1, not 3, as 17 October 1675 was a Sunday.

15 The only other known Restoration performance of this play by Joseph Betterton was in 1663.

16 Name of the play supplied by Nicoll, p. 310, the King being present at this performance of Luther's The Man of Mode. The play is often referred to by its subtitle (see the entry of 16 October 1675).

17 Title of the play lost along with the rest of the entry.

18 Name of the play supplied by Nicoll, p. 310, the King being present at this performance of Shadwell's comedy.

19 Probably the first performance of this tragedy, as Nell was the patron of the author, Thomas Otway. The king was also present (see Nicoll, p. 310, where the month has been misread as 'Jan.')

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July: 3d Madam Guinn and 2 att Abdelazar [......................... 00-12-00]
15 Madam Guinn and one att the Wrag[ling Lovers]b .......................... 00-08-00
Spt: 11 Madam Guinn and one att the .......................... 00-08-00
12 Madam Guinn and one att the Guernian .......................... 00-08-00
21 Madam Guinn and one att the Country Witz .......................... 00-08-00
23 Madam Guinn and one att Eppson walls .......................... 00-08-00
25 Madam Guinn and one att the Tempest .......................... 00-16-00
Oct: 10 Madam Guinn and one att Mackbeth .......................... 00-08-00
5 Madam Guinn and one att the Libertine .......................... 00-08-00
11 Madam Guinn and 1 att Betrod & Meriana .......................... 00-08-00
12 Madam Guinn and one att Don Carlos .......................... 00-08-00
16 Madam Guinn and one att St Fopling .......................... 00-08-00
18 Madam Guinn and one att Mackbeth .......................... 00-08-00
26 Madam Guinn and 1 att the Adventurers of 5 crowns .......................... 00-08-00
27 Madam Guinn and one att the Villaine .......................... 00-08-00
Novr: 01 Madam Guinn and one att St Timothy Treadby .......................... 00-08-00
45 Madam Guinn and one att Madam Pickle .......................... 00-08-00

Total ...... 15:19:00

Paid March 14 1674

Thus, in a little over two seasons, Nell Gwyn saw at Dorset Garden fifty-five plays, at least forty-two of them, including the new operatic versions of Macbeth and The Tempest, belonging to the Restoration age. If she saw as many plays at Drury Lane, where she had risen from orange girl to favorite comedian of the king, she was as avid a playwright as Pepys. Although she was present ten times when Charles II attended the theatre, she sat with him only once in his box —at the opening of Shadwell’s opera, Psychoe, the most expensive and spectacular production of its day. From her side box she must often have watched with envy her royal lover conversing with her rival, the Duchess of Portsmouth, and the other ladies about him.

WILLIAM VAN LEENEN

a New date of production for this comedy by Rowleyscroft, Eltherto it was thought to have been first acted in September 1670.

b Remainder of the entry missing except for the first three or four letters of the name of the play, and these are so faint that I have been unable to make them out even with the aid of an ultra-violet light.

c That is, Cowley’s comedy, The Guardian, altered by him in 1661.

d The last recorded Restoration performance of this very popular play by Tuke.

e The last previously known performance of this play by Porter was in 1667.

f New date of production for Mrs Bell’s comedy, The Town-Fopp, or, Sir Timothy Treadby. Eltherto it was thought to have been first performed in December 1676.

g That is, 14 March 1677, New Style. Written in another hand.
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