

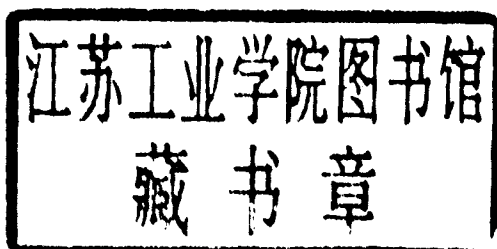


A COMPANION TO
RESTORATION
DRAMA

EDITED BY SUSAN J. OWEN

A COMPANION TO
*R*ESTORATION
*D*RAMA

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Long after the term 'Renaissance' in literary studies began to be interrogated, the term 'Restoration' was regarded as comparatively unproblematic. At the height of the revolution in Renaissance studies, the Restoration was regarded as a comparatively stable and conservative cultural yardstick against which to measure the cultural plurality of 'Renaissance' (or 'Early Modern' or 'Reformation') England.¹ The Restoration marked the end of Christopher Hill's 'Century of Revolution' and Restoration theatre was seen as culturally 'narrower' and more courtly than pre-Civil War theatre, reflecting the perceived re-establishment of order after the monarchy was brought back in 1660.

In recent years these views have been widely questioned and qualified, which is not to say that they are completely untrue. The fact there were only two licensed theatres in London meant that the Restoration audience *was* more dominated by royal and aristocratic tastes than the theatre of Shakespeare's time. This is reflected in the social composition of those immediately in front of the players: Shakespeare's 'groundlings' were replaced by an audience which contained many gentlemen and noblemen, seated on benches in the 'pit'. Yet the audience was by no means homogeneous. Humbler people sat in the galleries above the front tier of boxes, and people of 'middle rank' sat in the pit or the galleries or even took boxes themselves. Nevertheless, various factors might be supposed to have created a more culturally dominating experience for the audience than in earlier times. Restoration theatres were grander than theatres earlier in the century. Stage design was more elaborate, with a proscenium arch, and realistic sets made of painted wings, borders and shutters. Scenes could be changed by sliding moveable backdrops along grooves in the stage, shutters opened to stunning tableaux. Machines for enabling people to fly created exciting new possibilities, and there was increased use of music and spectacle. All this might have been supposed to contribute to a shift from critical engagement to passive consumption of the drama.

Yet there are contradictory aspects. In front of the proscenium arch, a forestage extended right into the pit. Most acting took place here. The forestage also allowed

intimate exchanges with the audience in prologues and epilogues, the latter often spoken by actresses. The prologues and epilogues were spoken with an air of familiarity and were full of in-jokes. We know from Pepys's diary that he and others went to the theatre regularly, sometimes several times a week. They knew the actors and understood the theatre's conventions. Going to the theatre was a much more ordinary and everyday experience, and therefore less intimidating, than it can be in our own time. Nor was the audience respectfully silent. The candles remained lit throughout the performance, permitting flirting, the sale of everything from oranges to sexual favours, a ribald exchange of witticisms (by no means always connected to the play), and sometimes fights. The audience, in other words, were a theatre in themselves. Theatres did not really rank as 'high culture' in the Restoration. Plays rarely ran for more than six days, and were seldom extremely profitable. Actors were so poorly paid that many had second jobs. Authors got box office receipts on the third night, since published texts were usually cheap and shoddy and yielded little profit. Issues of cultural authority in the theatres were complex. This reflects a complexity in authority relations within Restoration society.

Restoration drama, like any cultural production following major social upheaval, has an immediacy and topicality which were to be gradually lost in the two centuries that followed. The theatre after 1660 was affected by big social contradictions, involving sex and gender, and political power. Everyone has heard of the so-called merry monarch and his mistresses, of whom Nell Gwyn is the best known. Under Charles II there was a burgeoning of libertinism. If John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, was the most illustrious exponent, the chief practitioners were the Stuarts, Charles II and his brother and heir, James. The period after 1660 also saw the development of the sexual 'marketplace', ranging from prostitutes who catered for all tastes, to homosexual 'molly' houses, to a generalized fetishization of sexual characteristics. There are numerous references in the drama to homosexuality, sado-masochism and voyeurism, as well as libertinism and prostitution. However, there was also widespread moral disapproval of these developments. Even a royal supporter like Pepys notes the king's 'horrid effeminacy' (enslavement to women) and 'the viciousness of the Court' and 'contempt the King brings himself into thereby'. The king's promiscuity was often seen as a sign of political irresponsibility, as the arch-libertine Rochester himself noted: 'His sceptre and his prick are of a length, / And she may sway the one who plays with t'other / And make him little wiser than his brother'. When Rochester coined the designation 'merry Monarch' he was being sarcastic: Charles is 'A merry Monarch, scandalous and poor'. In Andrew Marvell's poem *Last Instructions to a Painter* the Kingdom appears to the recumbent Charles in allegorical female form and the king's response is to exploit it.

It is not surprising, therefore, that we encounter a contradictory attitude to sex in the drama. Constructions of gender were also thrown into crisis. As we shall see, this affected masculinity as well as female roles. It is enough here to mention the contradictory response of Dryden, who elevates the hero who 'weeps much, fights little, but is wondrous kind' in *All For Love*; but denigrates male 'effeminacy' in

Troilus and Cressida. For women, also, there were massive contradictions. Libertinism opened up a new freedom to assert sexual desire, but libertinism was itself a misogynistic philosophy, sanctioning desire for the male but not the female, and seeing women as prey. Women could for the first time become actresses and playwrights, a development of profound significance in the theatre, but they were often thought of as sexually available and morally compromised simply by their association with theatre and public exhibition. The actresses' changing room was open to the public. They were regarded as easy prey and it was hard for them to resist unwanted male attention. The first professional woman playwright, Aphra Behn, was always financially insecure and never really respectable. Behn's attitude to libertinism varies between indulgence, caution and criticism, and her plays are permeated by an awareness of the cost for women of sexual double standards. 'Breeches' parts for actresses embodied the contradiction for women: on the one hand, women could dress and fight as men; on the other, we know from contemporary accounts that the audience saw such parts as a chance to revel in the titillating sight of the actresses' legs.

These contradictions of sex and gender arise within a context of political contradiction. Despite the triumphant rhetoric and ostentatious rejoicing which accompanied the reassertion of royal control in 1660, the king soon came up against a crisis of authority. It was impossible to establish the ideological consensus, to obliterate the memory of the Interregnum, or to gloss over profound religious and political divisions in the nation. Charles faced criticism from the old Cavaliers for being too lenient towards former supporters of Cromwell; but he also faced growing mistrust from parliamentarians like Andrew Marvell for being soft on 'popery' and disposed towards 'arbitrary government' on the French model. Europe was in political and religious turmoil, and the depth of English anxieties about the Protestant succession and the parliamentary freedoms thought to be associated with it was reflected in the overwhelming electoral victories and mass support of the opposition to the government in the late 1670s and early 1680s. The Exclusion Crisis of 1678–83 almost erupted into another civil war. At this time party political division emerged for the first time in England, as royalist and parliamentarian factions hardened into Tories and Whigs. Ultimately these tensions were to explode in the revolution of 1688. The ejection of James II in 1688 was followed by significant reversals at the level of political ideology, law, constitution and foreign policy, and led to a changed culture.

Charles II took a keen personal interest in the theatre, and personally inaugurated the new genre of the heroic play. The assertion of royal control in the theatres also took the form of censorship and strict limits on theatrical outlets, since only two theatres were licensed (though plays could also be performed at court). Yet contradictions emerged in the drama's attitude towards royal authority, even during the early Restoration period of the ascendancy of the royalist heroic play. In the Exclusion Crisis, 'oppositional' tragedy develops and contradictions are evident even in plays in which dramatists were apparently straining every nerve to offer a royalist and Tory message. Censorship, while it may have worked to some extent to limit criticisms of

the authorities in performance, did not stop publication. Even during the Exclusion Crisis play texts appeared in print uncensored, even when the play was banned from performance. In the 'bigger picture', all drama is permeated by anxieties about hierarchies of class and race. As J. Douglas Canfield has pointed out, 'the romance of empire' is 'a major subtext of Restoration tragedy... a subtext that moves into maintext after the Revolution [of 1688]' (Canfield 2000: 5).

This is not to say that dramatic shifts are entirely 'determined' by socio-political ones. The prevalence of tragicomedy after 1660, and the rise of tragedy in the 1670s, almost certainly had something to do with the changing political 'mood', but other questions need to be asked, and are addressed in this volume. Some of the chapters which follow explore directly the links between drama and politics, or issues of gender, race and class; others address questions about generic shifts, such as the movement from the satirical to the sentimental, and the important development of musical drama. The first section of this volume offers wide-ranging perspectives on Restoration theatre and society, locating the Restoration theatre as a performance space, and situating the drama in relation both to Restoration and more recent shifts in perspective. We examine the theatres themselves and survey the critical debates about what Restoration drama is and should be. We explore the new sexual climate and gender relations in the drama. We probe the drama's relationship with political issues and questions of race and social class. Contrary to widely held belief, the Restoration period was a time of dramatic variety, innovation and vitality. The second section of this volume introduces readers to that variety through explorations of different dramatic genres. The third section sheds new light on the work of the most significant dramatists, and on relationships between them. Criticism of Restoration drama has been uneven, and in this volume each contributor offers a unique perspective: there has been no attempt to homogenize or smooth out critical differences. On the contrary, our aim is to introduce the reader to the full range and diversity of criticism in this field as well as to the variety of the drama. For example, different perspectives on the Collier controversy are offered in different chapters. Dryden is looked at differently in chapter 12 on heroic drama, and in chapter 18 on Davenant and Dryden. Our aim is to provide an authoritative and stimulating guide to the diversity of drama at the end of the seventeenth century. Each contributor offers suggestions for further reading.

I would like to thank the University of Sheffield for granting me study leave in the autumn of 2000 during which I completed work on this volume, and the efficient editorial staff at Blackwell. As always, thank you to my daughters Alice and Jenny for their love and support.

NOTE

- 1 See, for example, Martin Butler's otherwise excellent *Theatre and Crisis* (1984); and Richard Kroll's critique in this volume (chapter 18).

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Contents

About the Contributors	viii
Preface and Acknowledgements	xii
PART I The Drama in Context	1
1 The Post-1660 Theatres as Performance Spaces <i>Edward A. Langhans</i>	3
2 Restoration Dramatic Theory and Criticism <i>Paul D. Cannan</i>	19
3 Theatrical Regulation during the Restoration Period <i>Matthew J. Kinservik</i>	36
4 Libertinism and Sexuality <i>Maximillian E. Novak</i>	53
5 The Restoration Actress <i>Deborah Payne Fisk</i>	69
6 Masculinity in Restoration Drama <i>Laura J. Rosenthal</i>	92
7 Images of Monarchy on the Restoration Stage <i>Jessica Munns</i>	109
8 Restoration Drama and Politics: An Overview <i>Susan J. Owen</i>	126
9 Restoration Drama and Social Class <i>Aparna Dharwadker</i>	140

10	Race, Performance and the Silenced <i>Prince of Angola</i> <i>Mita Choudbury</i>	161
11	Restoration Drama after the Restoration: The Critics, the Repertory and the Canon <i>Brian Corman</i>	177
	PART II Kinds of Drama	193
12	Heroic Drama and Tragicomedy <i>Derek Hughes</i>	195
13	Restoration Comedy <i>J. Douglas Canfield</i>	211
14	Tragedy and Varieties of Serious Drama <i>Jean I. Marsden</i>	228
15	London Theatre Music, 1660–1719 <i>Todd S. Gilman</i>	243
16	Shakespeare and Other Adaptations <i>Sandra Clark</i>	274
17	Rakes, Wives and Merchants: Shifts from the Satirical to the Sentimental <i>Kirk Combe</i>	291
	PART III Dramatists	309
18	William Davenant and John Dryden <i>Richard Kroll</i>	311
19	‘Still on the Criminal’s Side, against the Innocent’: Etherege, Wycherley and the Ironies of Wit <i>Robert Markley</i>	326
20	‘Who Vices Dare Explode’: Thomas Shadwell, Thomas Duffey and Didactic Drama of the Restoration <i>Christopher J. Wheatley</i>	340
21	Otway, Lee and the Restoration History Play <i>Paulina Kewes</i>	355
22	Elkanah Settle, John Crowne and Nahum Tate <i>Don-John Dugas</i>	378

23	Two Female Playwrights of the Restoration: Aphra Behn and Susanna Centlivre <i>Cynthia Lowenthal</i>	396
24	William Congreve and Thomas Southerne <i>Miriam Handley</i>	412
25	Sir John Vanbrugh and George Farquhar in the Post-Restoration Age <i>John Bull</i>	429
	Index	446

Part I

The Drama in Context

