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978-0-521-42210-9 - The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660-1700

Elizabeth Howe

Frontmatter

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Before the Restoration of Charles II there were no professional actresses on the English stage, and female roles had almost always been played by men. This book describes how and why women were permitted to act on the public stage after 1660, and the consequences of their arrival for the drama of the period.

There is a surprising lack of published research into Restoration actresses. Elizabeth Howe not only supplies important new facts about the women and their drama, but also opens up a fascinating subject to non-specialists. Beginning with a general account of the workings of Restoration theatre, she goes on to explain the advent of the actresses and how they were treated by theatre companies, theatre audiences and society in general. Perceived predominantly as sex objects, the actresses' sexuality was variously exploited in ways that had important consequences for drama. The remainder of the book concerns the lives and talents of the major figures, in particular Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle, showing how their popularity, dramatic skill and public image frequently dictated the kinds of plays written for them.

The book addresses questions that are relevant to women's issues in every period: how far did the advent of real women players alter dramatic portrayals of women? Did this encourage more or less equality between the sexes? Although in one sense merely playthings for a small male élite, the pioneering actresses also represent a new female voice in society and a new place in discourse.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Note on styling, dates and editions used</i>	xiv
Introduction: the Restoration theatre	i
1 The arrival of the actress	19
2 Sex and violence	37
3 The actress, the dramatist and comedy	66
4 Life overwhelming fiction	91
5 Elizabeth Barry and the development of Restoration tragedy	108
6 The actress as dramatic prostitute	129
7 The angel and the she-devil	147
8 Conclusion: the achievement of the first English actresses	171
<i>Appendix 1</i> Major actresses and their roles in new plays	178
<i>Appendix 2</i> Plays in which Barry and Bracegirdle appeared together	190
<i>Notes</i>	192
<i>Bibliography</i>	208
<i>Index</i>	221

Illustrations

- | | | |
|----|--|---------------|
| 1 | Engraving of a 'scene' of prisoners on spikes in the 1673 edition of Settle's <i>Empress of Morocco</i> (permission of Bodleian Library) | <i>page</i> 5 |
| 2 | Frontispiece engraving to <i>Othello</i> , possibly from a Restoration production, in vol. v, Rowe's <i>Works of Shakespeare</i> (1709) (permission of Bodleian Library) | 38 |
| 3 | Frontispiece engraving to <i>Cymbeline</i> in vol. vi, Rowe's <i>Works of Shakespeare</i> (permission of Bodleian Library) | 40 |
| 4 | Frontispiece engraving to <i>Amboyna</i> from John Dryden's <i>Dramatick Works of... 1735</i> (permission of Bodleian Library) | 44 |
| 5 | Nell Gwyn – studio of Sir Peter Lely (permission of National Portrait Gallery) | 68 |
| 6 | Nell Gwyn as Venus, with Cupid, by Sir Peter Lely (permission of the Trustees of the Denys Eyre Bower Bequest, Chiddingstone Castle) | 69 |
| 7 | Anne Bracegirdle, probably by Thomas Bradwell (permission of Garrick Club, E. T. Archive) | 86 |
| 8 | Anne Bracegirdle as Semernia, the Indian Queen, unsigned (permission of Victoria & Albert Museum) | 87 |
| 9 | Nell Gwyn rising from the dead to speak the epilogue to <i>Tyrannick Love</i> , from <i>The Key to the Rehearsal</i> , in Buckingham's <i>Works</i> (1715), vol. II (permission of Bodleian Library) | 96 |
| 10 | Frontispiece engraving to <i>Antony & Cleopatra</i> , in vol. vi of Rowe's <i>Works of Shakespeare</i> , probably taken, however, from a production of Dryden's <i>All for Love</i> (permission of Bodleian Library) | 112 |
| 11 | Elizabeth Barry, after Godfrey Kneller (permission of Garrick Club, E. T. Archive) | 115 |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42210-9 - The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660-1700

Elizabeth Howe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Illustrations

ix

- 12 *William III on Horseback* by Godfrey Kneller, with
Mrs Barry as Ceres and Mrs Bracegirdle as Flora (by
gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen) 158

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42210-9 - The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660-1700

Elizabeth Howe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

In the autumn of 1660, the first professional English actress performed on the London public stage and two years later a royal warrant was issued decreeing that ever after women rather than boy actors were to play all female roles. This book is about the first English actresses and how their arrival affected both the writing of drama and theatre production in England between 1660 and the end of the century.

My study follows two major lines of inquiry:

- (a) the general dramatic consequences of changing the sex of a performer of female parts from male to female;
- (b) the individual influences of the various major actresses who emerged on the plays that were written for them.

In assessing the actresses' impact on Restoration drama, I have naturally also considered other influences on the playwrights, most notably the social and political background in relation to changing attitudes towards women. However, this work is primarily intended to be a study of the actresses and how their presence on the London stage affected the drama written and performed there between 1660 and 1700. Surprisingly, although the influence of the Restoration player on the drama of his time is now well recognised, there has been no separate critical evaluation of the actresses' special contribution, apart from John Harold Wilson's pioneering study *All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration* (Chicago, 1958), a useful and informative book which nevertheless seems out of date in the light of more recent research of the period and its theatre.

While this book aims to furnish the specialist with important facts about the women players and their drama, it is also intended to open up a fascinating subject to non-specialists. For this reason I have begun with a general introduction briefly outlining the history of Restoration theatre, its organisation, its audience and the production process for a play. The first chapter examines why and how the

Preface

xi

actresses came to be introduced to the English stage in 1660 – a matter on which critical agreement has not yet been reached. While the particular influence of individuals – the theatre managers, King Charles II – was crucial, the replacement of boy-actresses by women is above all a product of the changed circumstances of theatre itself after 1660. The Caroline court had supported the idea of female performers, indeed, Queen Henrietta Maria and her ladies themselves acted in private, but it was only after the Restoration that London theatre became sufficiently court-based as to allow an acceptance of actresses on the public stage. Like many of the consequences of the arrival of actresses, their introduction was simultaneously radical – in allowing women a voice on the public stage for the first time – and conservative: within a predominantly courtly, coterie theatre the women were almost entirely controlled by male managers and playwrights and were exploited sexually on stage and off. Similarly, although the profession of actress offered women a rare opportunity to earn fame as well as money in a public arena, the pay and status of the female players within the companies reflects their inferiority in relation to their masculine counterparts.

The second chapter deals with changes to tragedy and comedy created by the presence of female, as opposed to young male, bodies on the stage. The actresses were perceived predominantly as sex objects and were required, with significant frequency, to represent rape victims and to enact explicit love scenes. Again, however, the consequences of such developments can be seen as both reactionary and subversive, questioning as well as reinforcing traditional dramatic female stereotypes. While many dramatists used the body of the actress purely to titillate, the best ones – Thomas Otway, William Wycherley, Aphra Behn, Thomas Southerne, William Congreve – used the new female resource to present and explore women's sexual feelings in important new ways.

The remainder of the book concerns the contribution of individual actresses to the drama they performed. It has been shown that the talent and popularity of a player could affect radically the kind of plays that were produced: if a player proved very successful in one type of role, this would influence the playwright who then tended to write plays around him (or her) and his speciality. In fact, patterns more complex than simple typecasting took place and it is possible to trace the development of dramatic genres and conventions, as well as female character types, in relation to the actresses who made them

popular. Chapter 3 deals with the development of Restoration comedy in this way, chapter 5 is similarly concerned with the actresses' impact on tragedy. Chapters 6 and 7 trace the way in which particularly successful female specialities left a strong mark on the repertory. Inevitably, the best and most influential actresses appear again and again in different chapters, while the greatest of them all, Elizabeth Barry, had an outstanding effect on almost every type of play. Any book on Restoration drama and the actress must often become simply a study of the versatile and irresistible Mrs Barry and the numerous vehicles that were written for her.

I have devoted chapter 4 to the relation between the actresses' own actual or reputed characters and the roles that were written for them. From the beginning, the public took a particular interest in the private lives of the female players, gossiped about them, even had affairs with them. The most popular actresses delivered especially written prologues and epilogues which played on this intimacy and allowed them to communicate with audiences as themselves, rather than solely in the guise of fictional characters within a play. As a result, dramatists had to take care to base the roles they wrote for a popular actress around her public image and the relationship she had with her audience.

Finally, any study of the actresses' influence on drama cannot avoid addressing certain feminist questions. Did the use of real women as players significantly alter the portrayal and treatment of women in plays? Did the presence of the actress encourage, on the stage at least, more equality between the sexes? How far can female performers be said to represent a challenge to traditional, patriarchal attitudes? While touching on these issues throughout, they are the focus of the conclusion in which the actresses' contribution to changes in the dramatic treatment of women (and, especially, of wives) is seen as part of a pattern of wider social, political and cultural change. Alongside the establishment of actresses, the late seventeenth century also saw a series of striking attacks on all traditional forms of authority (monarchist, religious and familial), a new degree of support for divorce, new laws in women's favour and a remarkable growth in publications by and for women. As has been pointed out, the struggles that characterise every aspect of English culture during the seventeenth century may not have brought women significantly nearer to sexual equality, but the end of the century left them more articulate in their own defence than ever before. Although in one

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42210-9 - The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660-1700

Elizabeth Howe

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

xiii

sense merely playthings for a small, male, mostly royalist élite, the actresses were also part of the new female voice in society. Their talent and popular success fostered a shift from male-based drama to female and led more radical comic dramatists to write sympathetically about female problems and female rights, particularly in marriage. In this way the actresses form part of the new place in discourse, the new ability to speak, which by 1700 women had begun to achieve.

I should like to offer sincere thanks to all who have helped me with this work. I am most grateful to the University of London for giving me a research grant to enable me to study for three weeks at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington and to examine the Restoration prompt-books there. For help at important moments I should like to thank Professor Anne Barton, Professor Robert D. Hume, Dr Derek Hughes, Dr John and Dr Gillian Manning, Eva Simmons, Sandra Richards, Sophie Tomlinson and Dr Jackie Bratton. For their generous assistance I wish to thank many librarians, especially those of the University of London Library, the British Library, the London Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Bodleian Library and the Library of Queen's University, Belfast.

My thanks are due especially to my supportive husband, whose practical experience as a theatre director and as a script editor have proved invaluable, to my parents, for minding the children at crucial moments, to my patient and efficient typist, Sue Wasley, to my editor Sarah Stanton for her unfailing advice and encouragement and above all to my Ph.D. supervisor, Professor Inga-Stina Ewbank, without whom this work would certainly never have been written. To Inga-Stina this book is affectionately dedicated.

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[More information](#)

A note on styling, dates and editions used

In the text the date given in brackets after a play is the date of its first performance as given in *The London Stage* unless otherwise indicated. I cite publication date only in notes and bibliography. If a play has two titles (for example *The Man of Mode: or, Sir Fopling Flutter*), both will be given at its first mention in the notes and in the bibliography, but in the text only first titles will be used. Prologues, epilogues and prefaces are quoted from the edition of the play (normally the first) cited in the text, notes and bibliography.

Unless otherwise stated the place of publication of all texts is London. When quoting from seventeenth-century editions the long s has been printed as s.

First editions of plays have been used where possible, unless a good modern edition is available.

I have ignored the fact that the calender year was held to start on 25 March during this period and have used the modern style of dates starting on 1 January throughout.