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978-1-107-02783-1 - Restoration Plays and Players: An Introduction

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Restoration Plays and Players

Introducing readers to the key texts, theatrical practice and context of late seventeenth-century drama, David Roberts combines literary and theatrical approaches to show how Restoration plays were written, performed, received and printed. Structured according to the 'life cycle' of the dramatic text, this book reproduces extracts from twenty-four of the most influential Restoration plays to provide readers with a comprehensive and colourful introduction to the period's drama. Roberts encourages readers to look beyond a limited canon of established plays and practice, and to see how Restoration Drama has been revived and adapted on the modern stage. *Restoration Plays and Players* is of great interest to undergraduate and non-specialist readers of seventeenth-century drama, Restoration literature and theatre studies.

DAVID ROBERTS is Professor of English and Dean of the Arts at Birmingham City University. He is the author of *Pinacotheca Betterton-aeana: The Library of a Seventeenth-Century Actor* (2013) and *Thomas Betterton: The Greatest Actor of the Restoration Stage* (Cambridge, 2010), which was shortlisted for the Theatre Library Association's George Freedley Memorial Award in 2011. He has also written many journal articles, including in *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

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[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
1 Regime change theatre	1
2 The life cycle of the Restoration play	29
3 Playwrights	67
4 Companies	91
5 Actors	117
6 Playhouses	144
7 Audiences and critics	164
8 Texts and publishers	189
9 Revivals and adaptations	217
<i>Further reading</i>	234
<i>Timeline</i>	240
<i>Index</i>	245

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02783-1 - Restoration Plays and Players: An Introduction

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Figures

1.1 Charles II, by John Michael Wright (reproduced by permission of the National Portrait Gallery)	page 9
2.1 Actress thought to be Anne Bracegirdle as Semernia in <i>The Widow Ranter</i> (reproduced by permission of the British Museum)	58
4.1 Sketch for a scene from <i>The Siege of Rhodes</i> (reproduced by permission of the Chatsworth Trust)	94
5.1 Thomas Betterton, painted by Godfrey Kneller (reproduced by permission of the Garrick Club)	124
5.2 David Garrick and Susannah Cibber in <i>Venice Preserv'd</i> , painted by Johann Zoffany (reproduced by permission of the Garrick Club)	130
5.3 Elizabeth Barry; anonymous (reproduced by permission of the Garrick Club)	133
6.1 Richard Leacroft, reconstruction of the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (reproduced by permission of Methuen and Company)	146
6.2 Imagined scene for Settle's <i>The Empress of Morocco</i> (reproduced by permission of Yale University)	148
6.3 A Chinese Garden, from Arnoldus Montanus's <i>Atlas Chinensis</i> (reproduced by permission of Harvard University)	155
8.1 1694 Quarto text of Congreve's <i>The Double Dealer</i> (reproduced by permission of the British Library)	192
8.2 1710 Folio text of Congreve's <i>The Double Dealer</i> (reproduced by permission of the British Library)	194
9.1 Gary Oldman as Horner in Wycherley's <i>The Country Wife</i> , directed by Nicholas Hytner at the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre (reproduced by permission of Kevin Cummins)	219

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02783-1 - Restoration Plays and Players: An Introduction

David Roberts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Why *Restoration Plays and Players*? This book might have been called *Restoration Drama*, in reference to the body of plays written between 1660 and 1714; or *Restoration Theatre*, the performance practices that animated them, or occasionally failed to. Instead, *Restoration Plays and Players* treats reading and performance (institutionally, ‘literature’ and ‘theatre’) as mutually fruitful means of approaching late seventeenth-century drama, recognizing that Restoration people themselves experienced drama in print as well as in the theatre. The title harbours a further distinction. *Restoration* is nothing if not political. For the past twenty years studies of the period’s plays have devoted a lot of space to the collective experience of shifting ideologies or factional politics. *Players* signals a counterbalancing curiosity about the theatre people who were agents or victims of that experience. Actors, writers, managers and even critics variously innovated, succumbed, resisted or simply carried on as the world changed around them.

So to the subtitle: *An Introduction*. The contexts for Restoration plays are manifold and complex, whether in original performance, reading or recent revival, and it is the job of an introduction to unpick them. Context means little without text, however, and many readers will be unfamiliar with more than a small proportion of the works discussed here. In addition to thumbnail narratives of political and dramatic history, this book therefore reproduces and briefly examines key passages from two dozen or so of the most distinctive Restoration plays, in the hope of conveying something of their individual colour and impact, as well as their relationship to contextual themes and critical controversies: a primer in the primary material, so to speak. There is no attempt at – and no room for – a comprehensive review of recent criticism, but there is a discursive guide to further reading for those who wish to take the subject further.

While *Restoration Plays and Players* seeks to harmonize literary and theatrical approaches, its structure highlights plays’ ‘life cycle’, from

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

writing to performance to print to revival. The chronology of literary history is served by two complementary chapters that describe parallel trajectories for Restoration plays. First there is a survey of the various kinds of political, cultural and dramaturgic change that characterize the period, starting with an account of one its best-known plays; this forms a sketch of what is described as ‘regime change theatre’. Then there is a chapter outlining key theatrical innovations, followed by an account of the life cycle of the Restoration play, which serves as a rehearsal for seven subsequent chapters on key components of the process: writers, companies, actors, playhouses, audiences, booksellers and revivals. Each of the total of nine chapters contains case studies of plays and/or people. Discussion of each play is informed, rather than limited (or such is the intention), by the theme of the chapter in which it appears, one of the premises of the book being that Restoration plays tend to refer to the circumstances of their appearance in the world as much as to surrounding events and ideas. The index indicates where in the book discussions of individual plays are to be found, while a timeline at the end of the book supplements the chronology provided in the opening chapter.

References to plays are to the first editions, as available in Early English Books Online (EEBO) and Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO). The notes also give act/scene/line references as presented, where possible, in David Womersley’s *Restoration Drama. An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). For texts not in Womersley’s anthology, an alternative modern edition is cited. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized for the sake of accessibility, except where the verse demands an abbreviated form; where it occurs in titles of plays (*The Luckey Chance*, *Venice Preserv’d*), old spelling is retained for the sake of recognition.

Thanks are due to Sarah Stanton at Cambridge University Press for proposing the idea of a new introduction to Restoration plays, to Rosemary Crawley for her diligent support during the production process and to Mike Richardson for the copy-editing. Izabela Hopkins chased picture permissions with extraordinary tenacity. I am grateful to the anonymous readers whose wise counsel has improved the book. My thanks also go for Bloomsbury and to Houghton Mifflin, for permission to reproduce the extract in Chapter 3 from Richard Wilbur’s translation of *L’Ecole des Femmes*, and to Methuen and Edward Bond, for allowing me to quote from his *Restoration* in Chapter 9.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02783-1 - Restoration Plays and Players: An Introduction

David Roberts

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

ix

Somewhat to my surprise, it has been possible to complete this work on schedule in the face of growing administrative duties, and I owe a debt to colleagues at Birmingham City University for allowing me the time I have needed. Maddy Shaw Roberts read an early draft and hunted down citations. Fiona Shaw Roberts has, as ever, been the most patient, kind and loving interlocutor during every problem or breakthrough. Because this book reflects decades of teaching seventeenth-century drama, this preface is a good place to acknowledge the generations of students at Bristol, Oxford, Kyoto, Osaka, Worcester, Warwick and Birmingham who have helped me hone my thoughts.

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