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Bood on Keenan, 'Restoration Staging, 1660-74'

Author: Tim Keenan
Reviewer: Rena Bood

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Restoring the Nation's Stage

Following King Charles I's execution in 1642 and the subsequent Interregnum (1642-60), the monarchy was restored in 1660 with the return of Charles's son, King Charles II. During the years of the Interregnum, playhouses were banned by Oliver Cromwell and his stricter, Puritan government. Though underground performances continued, and the print market's demand for plays increased, for eighteen years the long-standing tradition of visiting the theater for entertainment was halted. However, the returning king, and especially his wife, Catherine, had great love for the theater, and as soon as they were settled in London, the theatrical scene

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came back to life. Two companies were granted licenses: the King's Company under the direction of Thomas Killigrew, performing at the Bridges Street theater, and the Duke's Company under the direction of William Davenant, performing at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Though neither the actors nor the directors were novices in the art of performance, it soon became clear that the years of the Interregnum had had a rather important side effect: new material to perform was difficult to come by, and since Killigrew's company had been granted the rights to most of the pre-Civil War plays, Davenant faced a shortage of plays to stage. This is why, according to some, *faute de mieux*, Davenant (and later Killigrew) turned to amateur playwrights. During the Interregnum, playwriting had become an admirable pursuit, practiced by aristocrats as well as inexperienced writers. Under time pressure (a successful play might run for a week), Davenant and Killigrew made active use of such plays until the 1670s, when playwriting could again establish itself as a profession.

It is not difficult to understand why there has been an overwhelming tendency in previous scholarship to regard early Restoration theater as nothing more than a transitional phase leading up to the "real" and "characteristic" Restoration pieces of the mid-1670s and later. The surviving plays of the 1660s were believed to be inferior, not just in a literary sense, but also in their staging possibilities. The negative image associated with this period passed down through centuries of criticism. Eighteenth-century critics disliked the plays of the Restoration period, especially the adaptations of Shakespeare, and considered the earliest years as unworthy of their attention; the nineteenth century agreed, and by the twentieth century the image was firmly established. Though not entirely ignored, the field of early Restoration theater has been largely stagnant, and previously proposed models and analyses are hardly ever contested. This neglect of the early years was also sanctioned by the generalization of the concept of "Restoration theater," even though a great many changes took place from its start in 1660 both in terms of the conditions of performances (changing theaters, changing companies, mergers of companies, etc.) and in the professionalism of the plays that were produced.

Tim Keenan's study, *Restoration Staging 1660-74*, is a welcome breath of fresh air in the field of early Restoration theater studies. Though geared towards performance studies, with the construction of a model that shows the minimal requirements and maximum capacities of a Restoration stage, it is equally useful for literary scholars, for "by 1660 a tradition of play writing by non-professional authors writing with the reader in mind had been established" which "emphasises theatricality, while simultaneously enhancing the reader's experience by making that theatricality easier to

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visualise" (p. 51). The difference between the play text as it was performed, subject to the "whims of actors and managers" (p. 45), and how it was published, "a true record of an author's design, 'correcting' false impressions" (p. 45) highlights the need for both a theatrical and a literary approach. To reconstruct the staging of plays in the early Restoration period, Keenan makes use of the clues and directions embedded in the texts of the plays as well as in the authors' stage directions and prompts.

The book is clear, concise, well structured, and informative. Chapters 1 and 2 offer an introduction to the rest of the study which is valuable even if the reconstructed model is too specific to be used for one's own study. In chapter 1 Keenan exposes some of the problems within the field of Restoration drama, showing the origins of the issues, some common misconceptions, and separating facts from fictions, while clearly declaring his own aims and the means he proposes to employ to achieve them. Chapter 2 revolves around visualizing the Restoration stage according to current (and, as Keenan argues, faulty) models. There is also an emphasis on the difference between "reading and seeing" and on the need to revisualize Restoration staging. In chapter 3, Keenan describes his new conceptual model: the LIF model, standing for Lincoln's Inn Fields, upon which it is based. His argument is that this model can be applied to Bridges Street as well, since the two theaters would have had the same dimensions. He chose to base his model on the LIF theater largely because more evidence from this theater has survived through the years. Chapters 4 and 5 serve to test the model on the known plays produced between 1660 and 1674. Chapter 6 applies the LIF model to the most demanding plays that were previously considered too extravagant to have been staged without simplifying the decor. Finally, chapter 7 aims to establish an early Restoration dramaturgy focusing on the authors' experimentation with new technical features and more innovative scenic spectacles.

Though not a large volume, Keenan's study contains an incredible amount of information, which, particularly after chapters 1 and 2, can be quite dense to read. The sometimes lengthy summations of the available data in the plays, which ultimately results in a table that is easy to read, is at times difficult to get through, especially because it requires the reader to be familiar with all the theatrical terms then in use. To be sure, a glossary of the terms is provided at the beginning of the volume; yet for a scholar new to the field, this terminology will remain a challenge. Nevertheless, for those comfortable with the terms and able to visualize the construction of the stage, a great deal can be gained from following the deductive process in such detail in order to understand fully how Keenan arrived at his conclusions.

The LIF model is distilled from the roughly seventy plays produced for the first time between 1660 and 1674 in both Lincoln's Inn Fields and Bridges Street. From this information Keenan gathers that there are two key tests on which his model stands or falls: (1) the model has only one set of backshutters; consequently, there must be no indication in the plays of successive backshutter discovery or relief scenes; and (2) the model has only two practical forestage doors, so there cannot be a play that requires more than two. To demonstrate the use of the model, Keenan first applies it to the corpus as a whole, which mostly means the plays that fit more easily within the model. Then he moves on to test the model on four plays that are known for their exceptional staging demands: Robert Howard and John Dryden's *The Indian Queen*, Dryden's *The Indian Emperour*, George Digby's *Elvira, or, The worst not always true*, and Thomas Shadwell's *The Sullen Lovers*. A thorough examination of the available material (i.e., prompts, textual references, and director's notes) reveals that these plays are demanding but not impossible to stage. None requires more than what the model proposes.

The greatest challenge seems to be saved until chapter 5, where Keenan applies his model to two plays that have always stumped critics and historians alike: Samuel Tuke's *The Adventures of Five Hours* and Roger Boyle's *Guzman*. Each requires rapid scenic changes, and at first glance Tuke's play especially seems to demand more than two functional doors. This analysis requires a more carefully considered approach, and it all comes down to timing. Previous critics considered the early Restoration playwrights inferior and hence incapable of working as precisely as both Tuke and Boyle did. Their plays were written with a full awareness of what the theater was capable of, including the capabilities of the theater hands, the dimensions of the stage, and the number of scenic displays available. The result had to be economical but also spectacular, and pushed the theater's capabilities to their limits.

Keenan characterizes a number of plays as belonging to the category of "Spanish plot" plays, but more are present than his list identifies. Besides *The Adventures of Five Hours*, *Elvira*, *The Indian Queen*, and its sequel, *The Indian Emperour*, there are also *Tarugo's Wiles* by Thomas St. Serfe, *The Spanish Rogue* by Thomas Duffet, and *The Assination or Love in a Nunnery* and *An Evening's Love* by Dryden. Additionally, there are plays that are neither traditional Spanish plot plays nor translations, yet they revolve around Spain--for example, *The Great Favourite, or, The Duke of Lerma* by Robert Howard. Most of the plays considered a challenge to fit into any model, whether Keenan's LIF or the older models by Visser and

Langhan, are derived from or translations of Spanish material. Yet the demands in terms of staging are exclusively attributed to the playwright, even though playwrights would often try to emulate the Spanish theater. [1] Are these extraordinary demands then designed by the playwright, or are they part and parcel of the demands of the Spanish theatrical tradition? Was it, therefore, the playwright's innovative spirit that devised the exactly timed staging, or had the playwright already simplified it as much as possible to fit it within the confines of the early Restoration stage? In other words, did the playwright raise the play's staging demands or did he reduce them? These are all questions that could be taken up from a more culturally historical perspective in the future, and Keenan's study will be a great help in this endeavor.

In sum, this volume is an important contribution to the study of early Restoration theater. It opens up a relatively stagnant area of research and inspires its readers by raising as yet unanswered questions. The LIF model is well crafted, easy to follow, and it makes sense. Understanding the necessities and limitations for staging a play in this period makes it easier to visualize the play's performance based on the play text itself. For both literary and performance scholars, Keenan's volume will be an invaluable tool.

Note

[1]. See Barbara Fuchs, *The Poetics of Piracy: Emulating Spain in English Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

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