



A Review of English Restoration Drama and Politics on Stage

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This review briefly overviews the relationship between restoration stage representations of Islam and England's contemporary foreign political concerns. This review illustrates the belief that English playwrights' political allegiances determined, to a great extent, what kind of representations and personifications that would be presented on the stage. The scholarship that analyses the political side of Restoration drama looks at the plays of this time period from a broader perspective that considers the impact of the political debates on the topics, tropes, and characterizations on stage.

Prominent among the works that tackle the politics of Restoration drama is Susan Owen's *Restoration Theatre and Crisis* (1996). In her book, Owen explores the hidden agendas behind the theatre in the Restoration period, particularly the staging of the Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis. Owen presents great illuminations about the political partisanship in the theatre of that troubled era. The book considers both Whig and Tory theatrical writings and examines the ways in which drama participated actively in the political process. Owen points out that "[f]rom the outbreak of the Popish Plot scare in the autumn of 1678 onwards, the dramatists denounced the plot as a piece of theatre and suggested that there was more truth and less artifice in the theatre than outside it in the 'theatre of news'" (3). This discussion supports the claim that the playwright's political attitude towards such events as the Popish plot is a rich and important source that enables us understand Restoration drama in a new way.

Owen's insights into the topic are not limited to the views embedded in her book. Her essay "Interpreting the Politics of Restoration Drama" (1993) highlights the need to ground our political history of the theatre in the specificity of the historical moment. Owen stresses the need to "read the drama politically in terms of themes and tropes.

The advantages of this approach lie in relating drama to social process, and in avoiding the twin dangers of over- and under-reading" (68). In addition, the article discusses and corrects many mistaken assumptions. For example, Owen reveals that earlier studies of the politics of Restoration drama used to underestimate Whigs and their dramatic imprint on Restoration theatre.

Another key study in this field is Jessica Munns' *Restoration Politics and Drama: The Plays of Thomas Otway* (1995). In her book, Munns presents valuable insights into the drama of Thomas Otway, which was written during a period of political crisis and tension. According to Munns, Otway's writings addressed major political issues of the time, such as the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis. Munns explains how many of Otway's plays depicted monarchs' power as "flawed" by their tyranny in a court of ambitious and treacherous politicians (106). Although the book is limited to one major playwright, it is important to our topic because it refers to a wide range of contemporary political texts. A careful consideration of such texts suggests that it would be useful to understand the intersection between Restoration drama and its politics comprehensively. Therefore, including contemporary texts such as Elkanah Settle's pamphlet "The Character of a Popish Successor," the anonymous pamphlet "The Earl of Rochester's Verses For Which He Was Banished," the diaries of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, and excerpts of some Parliamentary petitions to Charles II are vital for a deeper understanding of the Restoration theatrical production and culture. These texts show that Restoration drama was deeply interested in the political debates and controversies of the time.

Like Owen and Munns' endeavours, Matthew Birchwood's *Staging Islam in England: Drama and Culture 1640-1685* (2007) adds more insights into the importance of considering domestic political and religious aspects in reading drama. Birchwood is concerned with analyzing the representations of Islam in English politics, culture, and drama from the Civil War to the end of Charles II reign. Birchwood explores the reception and representation of Islam in a wide range of English writings of the period. The novelty of Birchwood's work is that he examines the portrayal of Islamic culture regarding both the foreign and domestic

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political concerns of English playwrights. In the chapter entitled "Plotting the Succession: Exclusion, Oates and the News from Vienna," Birchwood analyses the political implications in portraying Muslim characters in the plays of Elkanah Settle and Henry Neville Payne. He also traces the sources that Restoration playwrights relied on when they discussed Islam and its culture, highlighting their indebtedness to Richard Knolles' *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603). In this regard, I stress the importance of inviting more examples from that period to construct a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that shaped the image of the Other on the Restoration stage.

Unlike the broad perspectives provided in the studies mentioned above, some articles provided more specific discussions about the political implications of Restoration drama. A note-worthy article that helps define the pre-Restoration tendency to involve politics in dramatic performances is Claire Jowitt's "Political Allegory in Late Elizabethan and Early Jacobean 'Turk' Plays: *Lust's Dominion* and *The Turke*" (2002). The article assumes that the traditional understanding of the image of the Turk in early modern English drama falls short of giving us a comprehensive and persuasive rationalization of the issue. Jowitt insists that the dominant view of early modern Turk plays – presented by Matar, Barthelemy, and others – only provides a partial understanding of the significance of these cultural documents.

Jowitt provides a very convincing discussion that connects the plot of Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion* and John Mason's *The Turke* with contemporary English political issues and debates. For instance, Jowitt draws many parallels between the Spanish story of *Lust's Dominion* and actual events in the English Court. Jowitt associates the representation of Philip II in the play with England's own monarch, Queen Elizabeth (419). During the latter years of Elizabeth's role, succession was a highly controversial topic in England. This is what Dekker alludes to by writing his play. Jowitt's reading of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama provides validity for the view that promotes the value of reading plays according to their domestic political dimension.

Similarly, Jeannie Dalporto's "The Succession Crisis and Elkanah Settle's *The Conquest of China by the Tartars*" (2004) concerns the contemporary political implications in Elkanah Settle's play. Dalporto argues that in the play, Settle summons the history of the Ming dynasty's downfall and the Qing's rise to reassure his audience about the stability of the Restoration political system. Dalporto concludes that, unlike Settle's earlier plays, *The Conquest of China* does not criticize the institution of the monarchy (143). Dalporto's article emphasizes the strong relationship between the domestic political scene and the different possibilities of representing the *Other* on the Restoration stage.

One of the classical studies on the relationship between politics and the Restoration stage is Allardyce Nicoll's "Political Plays of the Restoration" (1921). Nicoll

skilfully chooses plays that show the strong relationship between Restoration theatre and the period's heated political concerns and discussions. The in-depth discussion employed in the article shows that Restoration theatre is the reflection of an age of fierce struggle between Catholics and Protestants, between Whigs and Tories, for religious and political supremacy (242). Perhaps it is not an exaggeration when Nicoll argues that almost all literary productions published during the Restoration period there were strongly connected to contemporary political events.

Recent studies by Alnwairan (2018, 2020, 2021) build on the accumulated body of research that traces the connections between the Restoration political scene and the representations of Muslims on stage. Alnwairan argues that Restoration playwrights' strong engagement in the political debates of their time resulted in a tendency to employ more allegories in their works. Restoration playwrights' use of Muslim settings and characters operated in the contemporary political scene to convey and code certain political sympathies.

As many of these plays were published during a time of extreme political tension and controversy, the political discourse the playwrights present reflects the increasing partisanship in the English political nation. A recommendation for future studies would be to have a broader perspective of analysis that takes more than one historical period into account when tackling the political preferences of Restoration playwrights. As Restoration drama presented a wider range of Muslim characters who were sometimes depicted as courageous, noble, and virtuous, it is important to gauge this evolution of the depiction of the Muslim, as well as the reasons that might produce that remarkable change in dramatizing Islam.

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