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Watkins, Stephen. *Shakespeare and the Restoration Repertory*. Cambridge University Press, 2025. ISBN: 9781009324137. 104 pp.

Observing late early-modern English theatre culture through a twentieth or twenty-first century lens has resulted in a tradition of addressing post-1660 revivals and appropriations of Shakespeare's plays as a more or less isolated phenomenon, which existed in the background of Restoration theatre conventions rather than as an integral part of them. To offer a few examples, in her recent assessment of the late seventeenth-century reception of Shakespeare's works, *Shakespeare's Rise to Cultural Prominence: Politics, Print and Alteration, 1642–1700* (2018), Emma Depledge takes into consideration both the material conditions of Restoration theatre and the contemporaneous book market; however, rather than the immediate cultural context, she focuses on the political climate in England and how it influenced Shakespeare's status and reputation, especially in the wake of the Exclusion Crisis (1678–1682). In her volume *Restoration Shakespeare: Viewing the Voice* (2001), Barbara A. Murray examines Restoration adaptations of Shakespeare chiefly in the context of Restoration debates about dramatic poetry and how new theatre conditions shaped Shakespearean productions. Focusing on William Davenant's Shakespearean achievement, Mongi Raddadi maintains that "unless they are studied [...] as Restoration drama [...] Davenant's adaptations [of Shakespeare] will not receive the appreciation they really deserve" (1979: 11). Despite this assertion, Raddadi provides only isolated motivic readings of William Davenant's play-texts, spending little time explaining how they responded to the rest of contemporaneous repertory.

In *Shakespeare in the Theatre: Sir William Davenant and the Duke's Company* (2022), Amanda Eubanks Winkler and Richard Schoch mark a turn in assessing productions of Shakespeare in the late early-modern period, maintaining that "Davenant, instead of being guided by a particular vision for acting Shakespeare, was guided by a grand holistic vision for the theatre that could be realized in part by acting Shakespeare" (97). This observation opens the door for examining Restoration Shakespeare as a part of a rich mosaic of Restoration dramaturgy than rather than a special, or even privileged, oddity. Such a notion is taken up in Stephen Watkins's study of Restoration productions of Shakespeare's works. Here, Watkins discusses Shakespeare in the context of the broader repertory of Davenant's Duke's Company, one of the two patented Restoration theatres, in the course of the 1660s. Not only does Watkins's monograph explain the relationship between the production of Shakespeare's pieces and other dramatic works staged alongside them, something that previous scholars rarely address, but also shows how adaptations of Shakespeare helped

to establish the distinct “house style” of the Duke’s Company in the first years of its existence.

William Davenant has been traditionally considered the more astute and innovative of the two competing theatre managers who in 1660 received King Charles II’s warrant to establish a new theatre, despite the number of disadvantages compared to Thomas Killigrew’s King’s Company. Unlike Killigrew, Davenant could not rely on experienced actors from the pre-Interregnum era, who were all employed by the King’s Company. At first, he did not even manage to procure the back catalogue of Renaissance plays (including several of his own), which posed a serious problem at a time when there were no new dramatists or dramatic works. Ultimately, Davenant submitted to the lord Chamberlain’s office “a proposition of reformeing some of the most ancient Playes that were playd at Blackfriars and of makeinge them, fitt, for the Company” (Nicoll 1928: 314), thus obtaining rights to nine plays by Shakespeare (*The Tempest*, *Measure for Measure*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry VIII*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*). By 1668 when Davenant died, his company staged all of them – some in their original form, others “made fit” as radical adaptations for which the Duke’s Company became famous. Paradoxically, while the King’s Company owned rights to the remainder of the former King’s Men’s repertory, Killigrew staged Shakespeare’s plays only sporadically and, as Winkler and Schoch put it, it was chiefly thanks to Davenant’s systematic effort that “Shakespeare gained a new lease on life in the Restoration”, even maintaining that “[w]ere it not for Davenant, Shakespeare’s plays might not have become central to the English theatrical repertoire” (2022: 2).

Watkins’s volume is divided into four main chapters, each focusing on one or more Shakespearean productions by the Duke’s Company in the 1660s and explaining Davenant’s apparent motivations behind their stagings (including the form in which they were staged) and their ramifications for his theatre. In the first one, “Establishing Actors’ ‘Lines’”, Watkins addresses Davenant’s *The Law Against Lovers* (1662), a bizarre conflation of Shakespeare’s problem play *Measure for Measure* and one of the story-strands of his comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. While it has been argued that Davenant’s alteration of Shakespearean material “show[s] strong indebtedness to the patter commonly called Fletcherian tragic-comedy” (Raddadi 1979: 97) and that the Restoration play “obviously parallels the history of the Commonwealth” (Dobson 1992: 34), Watkins argues that *The Law Against Lovers* was primarily a training text which allowed his young and inexperienced actors to build upon their success with *The Siege of Rhodes* (produced by Davenant’s company in the previous season) and to establish their characteristic “lines” (stereotyped characters) which they “tended to play across the repertory” (2025: 17–18). Watkins persuasively compares the stereotyped characters of *The Siege of Rhodes* and *The Law Against Lovers*, to which he assigns the possible actors and actresses of the Duke’s Company at the latter play’s opening (Watkins’s tentative findings are neatly summarised in Table 1 on pp. 20–28). According to him, for instance, the then-future star of Restoration stages Thomas Betterton began his career acting “Lead Heroes, Redeemable Usurpers, Misanthropes” such as Lord Angelo in *The Law Against Lovers* and Solymán the Magnificent in *The Siege of Rhodes* (2025: 20). His future wife, Mary, was cast into “Lead Female Roles, esp.

Virtuous Heroines, Witty Lovers, Queens and Rulers”, namely Beatrice in *The Law Against Lovers* and Iantha in *The Siege of Rhodes* (2025: 25). Furthermore, Watkins lists a number of common dramatic patterns and situations of the two plays, suggesting that the plot and trajectory of *The Law Against Lovers* were clearly modelled on the Duke’s Company’s previous hit.

The notion that Davenant used Shakespeare to establish the distinct dramaturgical style of his company that could compete with Killigrew’s is further developed in the following chapter, “LIF House Style”. Especially after 1663, when Killigrew moved his King’s Company to the new playhouse in Bridges Street, which outclassed Davenant’s theatre in Lincoln’s Inn Fields (LIF) in several ways, including stage machinery for the flying of actors. Davenant, therefore, had to showcase the abilities of the Duke’s Company to keep up with his competitor. In 1663, one of his prominent actors, Henry Harris, threatened to leave the company if he did not get more money and better parts. Watkins argues that Davenant’s opulent production of William Shakespeare and John Fletcher’s unaltered *Henry VIII* in December 1663 was influenced by both of these factors and established the shape of the company’s future productions: “beautifully designed, with an emphasis on sartorial and scenic verisimilitude, often with a historical setting, all meticulously rehearsed and performed by consummate professionals” (2025: 42). In this context, the casting of Betterton as King Henry, Harris (who was promoted to one of two leading actors of the company) as Cardinal Wolsey and Mary Betterton as Queen Katherine, established a convention of plays revolving around these three actors, which he repeated in both non-Shakespearean (such as Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery’s *Henry the Fifth*) and Shakespearean (such as *The Rivals*, Davenant’s radical adaptation of Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *The Two Noble Kinsmen*)¹ productions. It was in the 1663/64 season that Shakespeare became central to Davenant’s repertory – unlike the repertory of Killigrew’s company. However, as Watkins’s volume stresses, Davenant employed Shakespeare’s plays with the needs of his theatre in mind and treated them in the same manner as other dramatic material available to him.

In the chapter “Supernatural Rivals”, Watkins demonstrates how Davenant, who has been framed as setting the trends of early Restoration dramaturgy with Killigrew merely following, was in fact on the defensive on a number of occasions in the 1660s and was forced to respond to the success of Killigrew’s theatre. One such instance was the King’s Company’s production of John Dryden and Sir Robert Howard’s spectacular heroic play *The Indian Queen*, which opened in January 1664 and largely overshadowed Davenant’s repertory (including his revival of Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII*, see Watkins 2025: 55). Davenant’s response ten months later was an adaptation of *Macbeth*, which gave prominence to the witches and thus built upon the popularity of Killigrew’s production which foregrounded supernatural elements. Doing this, Davenant, who (unlike Killigrew) was hesitant to introduce supernatural happenings on his stage and based his repertory on plots about human actions and passions, “was altering radically his dramaturgical praxis in order to mount a commercial challenge to Killigrew” (Watkins 2025: 62).

In his final chapter, “Continuity and Innovation”, Watkins argues that despite a departure from the Duke’s Company’s house style, in terms of the inclusion of

the supernatural, Davenant continued to offer his actors parts within their established lines and, with the help of what is known about the company's other repertory of the mid-1660s, he attempts to reconstruct the original cast-list of *Macbeth* at its premiere 1664. Contrary to the established belief that Lady Macduff, whom Davenant elevated to a key moral character in the play to create a contrast with the vicious and scheming Lady Macbeth, was originally played by the actress Jane Long, Watkins suggests that the character was played by "someone like Anne Gibbs Shadwell, who, as we have seen, was developing a strong line in morally impeccable women" (2005: 65). Watkins's argument is that, just like in a number of previous productions, Davenant knew how to balance theatrical innovation with established formulae, including his cast of players – an ability that was pivotal to his theatre's success.

The final adaptation Watkins addresses is Davenant's version of *The Tempest*, which the theatre manager (quite untypically) made in collaboration with Dryden and which opened in November 1667 (about five months before Davenant's death). As Watkins explains, the adaptation and revival of *The Tempest* was influenced by a number of external factors, among which was the recent production of John Fletcher's *The Sea Voyage* and Sir John Suckling's comedy *The Goblins* (both inspired by Shakespeare's play) by Killigrew's company and the popularity of female cross-dressing roles at the time. This led, for example, to the introduction of the non-Shakespearean character of Hippolito, played by Jane Long, for whom it "must have been a breakthrough role – one of the first major speaking parts of her career" (2025: 73). Watkins continues to assert that *The Tempest* builds on the previously established lines of the company's actors and demonstrates how "necessity was the mother of invention" (2025: 74). The reduction of the character of Prospero in Davenant and Dryden's version of the play is, according to Watkins, the result of Thomas Betterton's ill-health between October 1667 and June 1668, who would otherwise have certainly played the role (Watkins speculates that the role was ultimately played by John Young, who had taken over Betterton's *Macbeth* just before). Betterton's absence, according to Watkins, on the one hand "might have freed up the ways in which Davenant envisaged his Shakespeare adaptation" (2025: 76), and on the other, gave him an opportunity to promote younger talents in his company.

Watkins's volume is an extremely valuable contribution to the studies of Restoration theatre culture, adaptation studies and, of course, Shakespeare studies, which sheds new light not only on the ways in which Shakespeare was staged and adapted, but also broadens our understanding of the operations of the theatre business in Davenant's era. Seeing early Restoration Shakespeare from the perspective of repertory studies means to liberate contemporaneous productions of Shakespeare plays from literary approaches, which have always tended to be largely unappreciative to them. It also helps to explain their forms and shapes within the context of contemporaneous theatre business, competition, the theatres' material conditions and limitations, as well as tastes and demands of theatregoing audiences of the time. *Shakespeare and the Restoration Repertory* shows how Shakespeare contributed to one of the most vibrant and innovative chapters of English theatre culture not as an isolated entity, but as a productive part of a much more diverse repertory.

Perhaps the only (and arguably very subjective) limitation of the volume is the format of the Cambridge Elements, which offers its authors only limited space for the presentation of their argument. The volume's sharp focus makes for excellent reading, but one cannot help but wish that Watkins had had an opportunity to provide his readers with more examples and details on this fascinating subject.

Note

- ¹ In this context, one could speculate whether Shakespeare and Fletcher's lost tragedy *Cardenio*, which contained a love-and-honour plot revolving around Cardenio, Fernando and Lucinda, and whose manuscript was, according to Lewis Theobald, in the possession of Davenant's company in the 1660s (Theobald 2010: 167–168), would not have provided ideal material for the company's repertory. (Provided that Theobald did not fabricate the story, of course.)

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