



Rachel Willie. *Staging the Revolution: Drama, Reinvention and History, 1647-72*

Rachel Willie. *Staging the Revolution: Drama, Reinvention and History, 1647-72*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. xi, 242 p., 4 b/w ill. ISBN 9780719087639. UK £70.00 (hardcover).

Rachel Willie's splendid study of theater in England from 1647 to 1672 opens with a tantalizing anecdote: in May 1645, Colonel Blunt of the parliamentary army mounted a performance of the civil wars in order to redirect his troops' energies from drink and disorder to acting the parts of Roundheads and Cavaliers. By all counts the men played their roles with gusto. The episode serves to introduce Willie's central concern in *Staging the Revolution* – the way in which topical plays on both stage and page “recast the current moment, partly as a way to comment upon contemporary events and partly to rewrite [them]” (17). Aligning herself with the New British Historians, Willie engages recent work on the production of plays during the Commonwealth period, as well as the history of the book and print culture, to reveal how drama was appropriated by royalists and parliamentarians alike as a means of intervening in the historical narrative of the immediate past. She debunks the conventional wisdom that Commonwealth England was theaterless (a notion “fostered in the Restoration” [17]) to argue instead that dramatic forms played a vital role in reinterpreting regicide, restoration, and government throughout the turbulent period.

Chapters One and Two explore the dynamic interplay between stage and page following the 1642 theater ban. Willie employs Thomas Nashe's term “paper stage”—first coined in his preface to Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591) for poetry that functions at the borders of dramatic and literary cultures—to argue that Commonwealth plays, though not performed, were nonetheless written with a theatre-literate public in mind and offered “an abstract public space where social and political concerns may be articulated and fictionalised” (28). While Chapter One lays the theoretical groundwork for this claim, drawing on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, Chapter Two turns to select play pamphlets that depict Oliver Cromwell and Charles I either at a fair or in the afterlife. For Willie, these real and imagined “public” spaces consigned discord to the fairground and historicized the civil wars from the purview of the afterlife. Although they produced reductive, oppositional images of Charles I and Cromwell – as saint and devil respectively – the play pamphlets also offered readers both “a way of processing collective grief and staging reconciliation” (66), and a liminal space in which to reconceive kingship.

Chapter Three turns to performance with William Davenant's refashioning of Stuart court



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masque for the protectorate stage, and James Shirley's *Cupid and Death* (1653), based on John Ogilby's translation of Aesop's *Fables* (1651). Willie underscores the diversity of responses to the political moment as masques promoted a nationalist agenda and a counter-narrative to the image of Cromwell seen in the play pamphlets. Focusing on the role of allegory and fable in the stories of monarchy performed in the Commonwealth "court," Willie deftly demonstrates the ambiguities among text, performance, and context to show how the period's practice of appropriation and innovation created a hodgepodge theater where notions of genre, kingship, and allegiance were under construction.

Chapters Four and Five bring us to the Restoration stage. The former focuses on heroic drama, arguing that Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656/1663) and Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* (1670-71) safely question notions of sovereignty by relocating war and usurpation in foreign lands. The chapter ends with discussion of Villiers' mock-heroic, *The Rehearsal* (1672), which brought the debate on sovereignty back to England, but contained unrest and plotting to the stage. Chapter Five examines panegyric in three Restoration comedies that recast the civil wars in comic mode: Tatham's *The Rump* (1660), Howard's *The Commitee* (1663), and Lacy's *The Old Troop* (1664). Willie reveals that Restoration comedy was more focused on reinventing the previous thirty-year civil war period than on marking a new period. A short epilogue examines several post-1688 plays that treat the death of Charles I in light of the deposition of James II.

Despite the book's title, the focus in *Staging the Revolution* is less on staging than it is on reinventing drama in mid-seventeenth-century England on both page and stage as playwrights reacted to changing political and theatrical circumstances. Willie's close textual analyses, although occasionally overwhelmed by a surfeit of details and comparisons, reveal complex and plausible interpretations that place the plays and performances in their rich historical context. The first two chapters on print culture will be of particular interest to SHARP members, while the book overall will be of interest to anyone working in drama, theater, pamphlet culture, and history of the seventeenth century.

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