

ENGLISH DRAMATISTS

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ENGLISH DRAMATISTS

**EARLY WOMEN
DRAMATISTS
1550-1800**

Margarete Rubik

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University of Vienna*





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Editor's Preface

Each generation needs to be introduced to the culture and great works of the past and to reinterpret them in its own ways. This series re-examines the important English dramatists of earlier centuries in the light of new information, new interests and new attitudes. The books are written for students, theatre-goers and general readers who want an up-to-date view of the plays and dramatists, with emphasis on drama as theatre and on stage, social and political history. Attention is given to what is known about performance, acting styles, changing interpretations, the stages and theatres of the time and theatre economics. The books will be relevant to those interested in or studying literature, theatre and cultural history.

BRUCE KING

Preface

This book grew out of a personal and professional interest in the theatre and enthusiasm for the Vienna productions of two plays by Aphra Behn and Susanna Centlivre, and then developed into a more comprehensive analysis of the works of the early women dramatists. It surveys more than 200 plays written by women from the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century. Not all these plays were actually performed on stage; some were written as closet dramas, others were rejected by the all-powerful theatre managers and then published as reading dramas by their authors. Yet among those that saw production on stage are some of the best and most successful plays written in the period, displaying a delightful vitality and theatricality largely neglected by theatre historians and scholars.

The study has been divided chronologically into three parts: the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Restoration period, and the eighteenth century. These major sections, in turn, have been subdivided into various phases of development, such as the early Restoration period and the transitional time at the turn of the century, or the early and the late eighteenth century. Each part of the book begins with a short description of the contemporary social and legal situation of women in general, and of women's involvement in the theatre and the prejudices and pressures female dramatists encountered. Separate chapters have been devoted to the major playwrights, such as Behn, Centlivre, Cowley and Inchbald, and their principal works, particularly those available in modern editions, have been given extensive analysis.

The final part of the book, 'Performance and Tradition', describes contemporary and modern stagings of some of the plays, and traces the seeds of a female dramatic tradition. Despite the great diversity

of the material surveyed, and the disparities between the various playwrights in plot, style and tone, a number of similarities emerge, which set women's plays off from the male canon and point to the existence of an – albeit muted – female tradition in English theatre.

Author's Note

Some editions contain scene divisions, or at least indicate the beginning of new scenes, while others do not. References to the texts list act, scene and page numbers whenever possible. Occasionally, it seemed reasonable to refer to lines instead, to make it easier for the reader to trace the quote.

All plays reprinted in the collections *The Female Wits* (edited by Fidelis Morgan and published by Virago, London, 1981) and *Female Playwrights of the Restoration* (edited by Paddy Lyons and Fidelis Morgan and published by Dent, London, 1991) have been quoted from these editions, since they are more readily available. Aphra Behn's *The Rover* has been quoted from the Methuen edition of the play (edited by Bill Naismith, 1993). All other works by Behn have been quoted from *The Works of Aphra Behn* (edited by Janet Todd, volumes 5–7, published by Pickering, London, 1996). The plays of Centlivre, Pix and Trotter, unless published in the two collections mentioned above, have been quoted from the Garland facsimile editions (those of the first author edited by Richard C. Frushell, 1982, those of the second and third by Edna Steeves, 1982).

Margarete Rubik
July 1997