



Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage

Cynthia Lowenthal

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In *Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage*, Cynthia Lowenthal explores identity—especially masculinity and femininity, English and “foreign,” middle-class and aristocratic—as it is enacted, idealized, deployed, and redefined on the late-seventeenth-century British stage. Particular emphasis is placed on the ways the theatre contributed to new and often shifting early modern definitions of the boundaries of nation, status, and gender.

The first portion of the book focuses on the playwrights’ presentations of idealized men and the comic ridicule of male bodies and behaviors that fall short of the ideal. Of special interest are those moments when playwrights use stereotypes of national character, particularly the Spaniards and Turks, as examples of the worst in male behavior, judgments that are always inflected with elements of class or status inconsistency.

The second portion of Lowenthal’s discussion focuses on playwrights’ attempts to redefine the idealized woman. Lowenthal investigates the ways that an extratheatrical discourse surrounding the actresses, one that essentialized them as sexual bodies demanding scrutiny and requiring containment, also serves to secure for them an equally essential aristocratic status. Anchored by Manley’s *Royal Mischief*, Lowenthal’s reading reveals that even a woman playwright’s attempts to represent female subjectivity or interiority at odds with the surfaces of the body are doomed to return to those same surfaces.

By focusing on a new, early modern lability of identity and by reading less canonical women playwrights, such as Manley and Pix, alongside established male playwrights such as Dryden and Wycherley, *Performing Identities on the Restoration Stage* yields both a more accurate and a more compelling picture of the cultural dynamics at work on the early modern stage.

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