

## The Eighteenth Century

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This chapter has four sections: 1. General and Prose; 2. The Novel; 3. Poetry; 4. Drama. Section 1 is by Joseph Turner; section 2 is by Fiona Milne; section 3 is by Dylan Carver; section 4 is by Ashley Bender.

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### 4. Drama

Particularly valuable among the critical pieces I have thus far discussed are those that contribute to the continued recovery and recentering of women's writing and women's representation in long eighteenth-century drama. A number of 2021 publications fall into this category. Prime among these is Paula R. Backscheider's *Women in Wartime: Theatrical Representations in the Long Eighteenth Century*, a tremendous undertaking that explores, as the title suggests, how the backdrop of 'intense periods of British wars' (p. 6) across the long eighteenth century affected playwrights' portrayals of female characters of all classes. Backscheider reveals playwrights' combined use of convention and invention to imbue female characters' roles—and their bodies—with symbolic purpose: 'The representations of wartime women's bodies are both historical constructions [...] and theatrical constructions' (p. 6). The representations of wartime women not only reveal the ways that women supported war efforts at home and in military camps, but also the ways that women characters addressed national needs, such as reinforcing ideal standards of masculinity and supporting recruitment efforts.

Organized chronologically, the book begins with an analysis of Nathaniel Lee's *Rival Queens*, John Banks's *Rival Kings*, and Samuel Pordage's *Siege of Babylon* [all 1677]. She suggests these 'intertheatrical' plays lay a foundational link among 'women, civic spirit, and a nascent British identity in impactful ways that the stage will sustain into the nineteenth century' (p. 57). As 'transitional texts', plays like William Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* [1676], Thomas Shadwell's *The Woman Captain* [1679] and Susanna Centlivre's *The Beau's Duel* [1702] expose the link between British wars and trade and 'hold some of the most important themes, incidents and ideological formulae of later plays that incorporate wartime women' (p. 61), among them, for example, Manley's contribution to the sailor 'type'; Fidelia's breeches role, and the woman disguised as a military man; Mrs. Gripe's role in 'exposing, judging and regulating men's behavior' (p. 78); and Centlivre's use of a soon-to-be-formulaic plotline of a virtuous woman courted by three suitors (p. 89). Backscheider argues that Centlivre's play foregrounds themes that crystallized over the century: a woman who chooses a military man as the most worthy suitor (p. 89); the establishment of inappropriate and appropriate male violence (p. 90) and its larger implications for ideal British masculinities; the trope of woman-as-reward, which contributes to ideals of women's patriotism; and drawing parallels between warfare and courtship (p. 94).

Historical moments the book attends to include the years following the Third Anglo Dutch War (1672–4), the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), ‘crisis years’ from 1739 to 1783, during which ‘wars blended into each other’ (p. 153), the American Revolution (1775–84) and the Napoleonic Wars (1793–1801, 1803–15). As the chapters progress, Backscheider demonstrates the evolution of wartime women characters over time and the mechanisms by which they became entrenched types on the stage that playwrights used to reinforce British nationalist ideologies tied to performances of gender and class. The book is so expansive, a short review feels insufficient. Highlights include Backscheider’s demonstration that scenes of war were brought to the public through staged reenactments of battles, military camps, and press gangs, as well as other cultural artefacts like images. She also emphasizes women’s extensive contributions to wartime efforts both at home and abroad, for example, encouraging men to volunteer, or laundering, cooking, or carrying supplies for military camps (efforts often overshadowed by the emphasis on women sex workers as camp followers). In doing so, Backscheider suggests, the plays portray often ignored realities of women’s lives from all classes, including and especially lower-class women, during wartime in the long eighteenth century. As an act of recovery, this book uncovers how essential women’s stage representations were to the development of an ideal British masculinity and women’s participation as ‘patriots’ in a society that still excluded them from political and civic participation.

The book equally expands the archive of stage performances with her work in chapters 4 and 5, which analyse clusters of periods of creative production in the decades following the Licensing Act of 1737. She argues that a number of short pieces, like pantomimes and farces, ‘render [...] immediate events and the structures of feeling around them’ (p. 154), making such entertainments useful propaganda to develop a shared sense of unity for the nation and to reinforce the need for peace at home. These plays depict a range of women’s roles—from those who refuse to be left behind to those who sneak into camps, from those who participate in recruiting to those who are sex objects—each of which, Backscheider argues, ultimately contributes to ‘the employment of wartime women characters and their hegemonic participation in social change’ (p. 197). In her concluding chapter, Backscheider argues that female characters’ domestic roles reinforced the idealization of a class of military men within the national imagination. This chapter simultaneously positions British military endeavours within a global context, revealing the theatre’s participation in the construction of racial difference (p. 319).

Backscheider traces the evolution of breeches roles across the eighteenth century, showing their diminishing sexualization over time. Kitty Clive and Peg Woffington are two actresses regularly mentioned. Woffington is the focus of Annette Rubery’s “‘Thus let me wipe dishonour from my name’: Peg Woffington as Lothario in *The Fair Penitent*’ (TN 75[2021] 76–93). The actress performed Lothario in travesty for a revival of Nicholas Rowe’s play in 1753. Rubery calls her choice to do so ‘one of the oddest experiments on the Georgian stage’ (p. 77). By midcentury, women’s travesty performances were more anxiety-provoking than previously, not least because of their recognized homo-erotic potential (p. 88). Rubery argues that Thomas Sheridan’s managerial intervention may have influenced this choice through a compelling comparison of Woffington’s on- and off-stage personae with those of Sheridan’s later protegee, Sarah Siddons.