This long overdue book on the Restoration actress both informs and disappoints. While a welcome anodyne to John Harold Wilson's outdated, patronizing All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration (1958), this study nonetheless disregards feminist and historicist theories to its detriment. A theoretical grounding would have transformed a competent book into a estimable one; it also would have explained the two strands of Howe's thesis that remain at odds.

It is as archivist that Howe succeeds. She deftly consolidates forty years of data, gleaned mainly from primary texts, on working conditions for the Restoration actress. She shows how traditional social roles—the woman as prostitute or suffering angel, for instance—were reproduced in the plays of this period. Howe also outlines the profound effect these first English actresses wrought upon the drama. She correlates the fortunes of different genre to the availability of popular actresses, demonstrating, for instance, how Nell Gwyn's absence from the stage after 1671 made difficult the subsequent production of comedies featuring "mad couples." Because playwrights tailored parts for the best players, they might simply abandon a genre if suitable actresses were not available. This "internalist" reading of the Restoration stage, whereby dramatists responded to fluctuations in theatre personnel and stage technology, rather than global forces outside the theatre, follows the lead of scholars like Robert D. Hume, Judith Milhous, Frances Kavenik, Eric Rothstein, and J. L. Styan. By demonstrating how actresses were instrumental...