

**“I WOULD HAVE KILL’D MYSELF WITH A KNIFE”:  
SEXUAL VIOLENCE, COURTROOM BROADSIDE, AND THE  
RESTORATION STAGE**

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**JENNIFER L. AIREY**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2008

Major Professor: James A. Winn, Professor of English

**ABSTRACT**

My dissertation proposes a new context for reading dramatic depictions of sexual violence on the Restoration stage by examining the intersection of scandal, drama, and the legal process. Representations of rape expose the symbiotic relationship between the playhouse and the scandal sheet; scandal sheets draw upon dramatic conventions to increase their popular appeal, creating a fusion of proto-journalism and playwriting. Restoration plays simultaneously responded to and co-opted the sexually violent language of the broadsides as part of a larger cultural debate about the nature of theater and politics. In both genres, rape functions as a rhetorical device that encodes pervasive fears about illicit circulation and cultural contamination.

By reconstructing the deposition process preserved in archival records of late seventeenth-century sexual assaults, I argue that the testimony of victims was shaped by the expectations of the individual clerk and by a series of required questions. Scandal sheets, by contrast, were shaped by dramatic conventions, and playwrights drew in turn

on the language of those broadsides. In *The Country Wife* and *The Plain Dealer*, discussed in Chapter One, William Wycherley utilizes the sexually violent language of popular pamphlets to discredit the most hysterical antitheatrical pronouncements of his puritanical critics. In the Earl of Rochester's *Tragedy of Valentinian* (Chapter Two), rape is a dramatic myth and rhetorical tool; by harnessing the political power of the myth of Lucrece, Lucina effects political change. Nathaniel Lee's *Lucius Junius Brutus* (Chapter Three) employs the political rhetoric of the scandal sheets to reveal a wider discomfort with the nature of sexual and political circulation. And in Edward Ravenscroft's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (Chapter Four), the act of rape blends with the images of cannibalism and miscegenation to construct a powerful critique of James II's Catholicism. My final chapter returns to the culture of legal voyeurism and examines the theatricalization of scandal narrative in late-century renderings of the trial of Lord Castlehaven in 1631. I conclude by looking forward to Frederick, Lord Baltimore's trial in 1768, popular depictions of which drew on the literary tropes of Richardson's *Pamela*.