

6. RESTORATION TRAGEDY or THE HEROIC TRAGEDY

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Heroic drama is a type of play popular during the Restoration era in England. It is a kind of tragedy written during the first twenty years after the Restoration of Charles II. It is distinguished by both its verse structure and its subject matter. It deals in a high rhetorical manner with the conflict between love and honour or love and duty. The influence of French romances and drama produced its first important result in the form of heroic play. The influence of the Royal Court of Charles II was paramount on dramatists and actors alike. It reflects the changing moral, spiritual and social conditions of the time. The heroic tragedy creates an escape world for a degenerated aristocracy. Love, beauty and valour are the main themes of heroic plays. The heroes in these plays are wonderfully brave and heroines extremely fair. Sensationalism, violence and bloodshed are important features of the heroic plays. The heroic tragedy was written both in blank verse and heroic couplet.

The heroic tragedy follows the Epic tradition. Like the Epic it develops the actions of the hero by means of the principle of unity. Everything in a heroic tragedy is governed by an air of exaggeration. Dryden himself states "Heroic play is indeed the representation of nature, but it is nature wrought up to a higher pitch." The purpose of the heroic tragedy is didactic. The dramatists of the heroic plays seek to advance the characters of virtue in the shape of valor and conjugal love. "The business of the plays is to recommend virtue and discountenance vice." Virtue should be rewarded and in order to reward virtue, unhappy endings are avoided as far as possible. Furthermore, an unhappy ending is not considered appropriate because the heroic tragedy deals only in 'admiration' and 'concernment'.

The major dramatists of the age who contributed their best for the stage are as follows:

i) **John Dryden (1636-1700):** Dryden is the greatest literary figure of the Restoration age. Charles II may have been King of England, but John Dryden was King of Restoration literature. He is, by far, the most important literary figure of the period. Not only was he a prolific writer who worked in a bunch of different genres including poetry, drama, and prose, but also he set the bar in terms of literary standards for the period. In his works we have an excellent reflection of both the good and the evil tendencies of the age in which he lived. His major work *All for Love* is another version of *Antony and Cleopatra* of William Shakespeare. *Annus Mirabilis* is a lengthy historical poem which describes the English defeat of the Dutch naval fleet and the Great Fire of London in 1666.

ii) **William Davenant (1606-6968):** Davenant was one of the rare figures in English Restoration theatre whose career spanned both the Caroline and restoration eras and who was active both before and after the English Civil War. His famous tragedies are - *Albovine*, *King Of The Lombard* (1629), *The Cruel Brother* (1630) and *The Unfortunate Lovers* (1643). Shakespeare was apparently Davenant's godfather, and gossip held that the famous playwright may even have been his father. Davenant became a page in London in 1622 and later served a famous literary courtier, Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke. Meanwhile he was writing his early revenge tragedies, such as *Albovine* (produced c. 1629), and tragicomedies, such as *The Colonel*. After he had served in continental wars, his engaging, reckless personality and his plays and occasional verses attracted the patronage of Queen Henrietta Maria. Davenant was appointed to the poet laureateship in 1638, after the death of Ben Jonson the previous year, and composed several court masques. In 1656

Davenant made the first attempt to revive English drama, which had been banned under Cromwell, with *The first day's Entertainment* (produced 1656), a work disguised under the title *Declamations and Musick*. This work led to his creating the first public opera in England, *The Siege of Rhodes Made a Representation by the Art of Prospective in Scenes, And the Story sung in Recitative Musick* (produced 1656). In *The Siege* he introduced three innovations to the English public stage: an opera, painted stage sets, and a female actress-singer. In 1660, after the Restoration, he was granted one of two new royal patents to establish new acting companies and founded the new Duke of York's Playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields. As manager, director, and playwright, he continued to produce, write, and adapt plays. The charter was later transferred to Covent Garden. Together with the poet John Dryden, he adapted Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in 1667.

iii) **Nathaniel Lee (1653- 1692)**: Lee as an English dramatist after the Restoration conformed to the church of England and withdrew his approval for Charles I's execution. His reputation was made in 1677 with a blank verse tragedy *The Rival Queens* or *The Death of Alexander the Great*. The play deals with the jealousy of Alexander's first wife Roxana, for his second wife Statira. His other important works are- *Tragedy of Nero, Emperor of Rome* (1674), *Sophonisba* or *Hannibal's Overthrow* (1675), *Mithridates, King Of Pontus* (1677), *The Duke Of Guise* (1682) and *Constantine The Great* (1683).

iv) **Thomas Otway (1652- 1685)** was another Restoration dramatist. His first tragedy was *Alcibiades*. It was written in heroic verse. Otway's most memorable dramatic work was done in the last years of his short life. His masterpiece *The Orphan or the Unhappy Marriage* was written in blank verse. *The Orphan* had great success on the stage. The history and fall of *Caius Marius* is a curious grafting of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on the story of Marius. Otway's tragedies, particularly *Venice Preserved*, are notable for their psychological credibility and their clear and powerful presentation of human passions.

v) **John Crowne (1641- 1712)** was a British dramatist of the restoration age. His major works of tragedy are *Thyestes* (1681) and *Darius, king of Persia* (1688). Crowne's plays are interesting and important mainly because they offer a glimpse into the political vogue of the Restoration period. His comedies, particularly *Sir Courtly Nice* (1685), were often superlatively praised by contemporaries for their pleasing and skillful structure, and his 1675 masque *Calisto* was a courtly event of enormous grandeur. However, although many plays employ a subtle wit and capable dramatic organization notable in any period, critical attention in recent times focuses on Crowne's political themes and his significance as a representation of Restoration dramatic taste. Perhaps best understood as the efforts of a playwright seeking to please his court, Crowne's works also present some incisive satirical portraits of the major political figures of the English Restoration.

vi) **Nicholas Rowe (1674 - 1718)** was a versatile genius. He was appointed the Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom in 1715. *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* is an imitation of Shakespeare's style. It consists mainly of dramatic scenes and private distresses. The wife is forgiven because she repents and the husband is honoured because he forgives. *The Tragedy of Lady Jane Grey* was not much successful and was his last foray into the medium.

The heroic playwrights enjoyed a greater Liberty of fancy. Their imagination can conceive the extremist bounds of what is credible. There is a craving for romance and Supernatural. Since sensationalism is the essence of the heroic tragedy, the dramatist introduces Ghosts, spirits, goblins, operative elements, scenic effects, stirring actions, bustle and turmoil to dazzle and stupefy. The aim is not to depict human passion but to exhibit sudden and surprising turns of Fortune. These turns of Fortune do not depend on the actions of the hero, but are brought about by

a change in Fortune's wheel. Scenes of horror and bloodshed are frequent in the Heroic tragedy. The heroic play is a further elaboration of the romantic play which was first made by the Jacobean dramatists such as Beaumont and Fletcher.

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