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In Praise of Dryden's "All for Love or The World Well Lost", "A Tragedy"

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Abstract: Restoration theatre embraced the mores of the popular theatre of the earlier period as well as the new notes sounded by the French neo-classicists, Corneille and Racine. The monied and aristocratic gentry, living in exile in France with the monarch, had developed a taste for the French 'Ballet de Cours'. The two Theatres set up in London by Thomas Killigrew and D'Avenant, the godson of Shakespeare, reflected this fashionable and sophisticated taste. It catered to their preferences for heroic sentiment, witty brilliance, the novelties of French and Italian drama, music, masque, spectacle and bombast. Heroic Tragedy is a grandiloquent tribute to the ideal of heroism; the conflict of love and honour was a typical ingredient. It fulfilled a deep psychological need for the heroic. Dryden stated that he wrote *All for Love* in imitation of Shakespeare. Yet the play is no mere imitation but a remarkable transmutation by a master craftsman and an important signpost in the history of ideas and concepts.

Keywords: Heroic tragedy, love-pity, terror-admiration, apotheosis

INTRODUCTION

Heroic Drama was an endowment of the Restoration Court of Charles II after the restoration of kingship in England. The sophisticated brilliance of the plays of Corneille and Racine was much sought after by the Monarch and his coterie living in exile in France. However, it was a fusion of the mores of the Greek Epics, the romantic drama of Beaumont and Fletcher and the French model, and it rejected Puritan rigidity. It was grandiloquent, passionate and celebratory of grandness of love, virtue and valour. In *The Indian Emperor*, Dryden writes: "the Favour which Heroick Plays have lately found upon our Theatres, has been wholly derived to them from the countenance and approbation they have received at Court" (1;1-4,7-8). Restoration Tragedy catered to the noble, fashionable courtly audience and reflected the mores of this society. It evolved to cater to the needs of a society "hungry for heroism", writes Bonamy Dobree (RT,16). Charles II was famous for his dissolute ways, yet he could be projected as venerable 'Augustus'. The cataclysmic events of the Civil War and the Interregnum disrupted the concept of noble and heroic obligations to God-given authority. A cynical gaiety and mercenary values replaced magnanimity of spirit. Heroic Tragedy dramatizes this self-division and presents it through an artifice of valorous ideals, as the conflict of Love and Honour.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle had delineated that Tragedy was to evoke the two passions of Terror and Pity; Corneille proposed a new one, which is 'Admiration'. The new poetics of Heroic Tragedy are "terror – admiration" and "love-pity" (RT,21). Hobbes declared that "the work of an heroic poem is to raise admiration, principally for three virtues, valour, beauty, and love" (RT,13). Dryden in *An Essay on Heroic Plays* wrote: "an heroic play ought to be an imitation, in little, of an heroic poem; and consequently that love and valour ought to be the subject of it" (Works,19). Heroic Tragedy fulfilled special needs of the age: social, aesthetic and psychological needs and desire for heroism, virtue and constancy in love. The chief features of a heroic play were great personages, a series of stage incidents of an exalted nature, conflicts between love and honour, a hero of superhuman accomplishments with grand ambitions, a heroine of unparalleled beauty and constancy, the heroic couplet, the classical unities of time, place and action, loud declamatory speech, rant, bombast and elaborate spectacle.

DISCUSSION

In the Preface to *All for Love*, Dryden declared that it was written in imitation of Shakespeare style. The decision to use blank verse instead of the usual heroic couplet is significant of a fundamental change in Dryden's attitude towards his material, especially in his attitude towards the main dramatic characters. The Prologue of *Aureng-Zebe* forewarns the change:

“.....to confess a truth (though out of time)
Grows weary of his long-lov'd Mistris, Rhyme
Passion's too fierce to be in Fetters bound”. (I;7-9)

In the Prologue to *All for Love* he further explains:

“His hero ... scarce rants at all:
He's somewhat lewd; but a well-meaning mind;
Weeps much; fights little; but is wond'rous kind”. (I;10-13)

and has a mistress who loves him truly. In the Preface to the play, he writes that “compassion” has been “reserved for Antony and Cleopatra” (p.9). Dryden now makes his hero and heroine more human and their failings are the results of the emotions with which most people would sympathise. The natural rhythm of his blank verse makes the emotions appear more human. For his other heroes, Maximin, Morat, Almanzor or Aurengzebe, passions are restless appetites always in motion towards new or unattainable ends in the Hobbesian manner.

All for Love has certain typical Heroic Tragedy characteristics. There is conflict between love and honour. The plot develops by a series of oscillations on the part of Antony, between his love for Cleopatra and the claims of Roman responsibilities of Empire, family and friendship. Antony declares: “I love/Beyond, life, conquest, empire, all, but honour” (423-24). In Act I Ventidius strongly urges him to stand up resolutely for the sake of honour making Antony determined to give battle to Octavius Caesar. In Act II he is won over by Cleopatra and love “outweighs” all considerations:

“Faith, honour, virtue, all good things forbid
That I should go from her, who sets my love
Above the price of kingdoms!”

and “I'll not be pleased with less than Cleopatra”. (II.443-49)

In Act III Antony is won over by Octavia who represents the principle of duty and honour: “I am vanquished: take me, / Octavia; take me, children” (III.366-67). Ventidius and Octavia convince him that Cleopatra has betrayed him and taken Dolabella as a lover. He is completely convinced of her betrayal when the Egyptian fleet crosses over to the Roman side. But when he hears of her apparent suicide he is overcome by remorse and is disillusioned with life. He falls on his sword and takes his life but before dying is convinced by Cleopatra of her faithfulness. Cleopatra, too, now takes her life by poisoning herself with the aspen's sting. There is admiration and Cleopatra is a heroic figure: “'tis well done, and like a queen, the last/of her great race”. (V.505-6)

Bonamy Dobree in *Restoration Tragedy* writes that love in these tragedies was “a law unto itself that overbore all other laws” and all virtues had to give way before it (RT,21). In *The Conquest of Granada* love is described as a heroic passion; Cortez in *The Indian Emperor* states how love can blind reason but is the noblest frailty of the mind. Errors of love were called upon to evoke pity mixed with admiration. Constancy in love and friendship was the highest virtue. Antony on hearing of Cleopatra's apparent death and seeing Ventidius kill himself says he will follow them: “My queen and thou have got the start of me, /And I'm the lag of honour” (V.336-37).

Dryden wrote this play in imitation of Shakespeare's style and rejected the heroic style; natural and passionate discourses became central to his purpose. In the Preface he attacks the decorum of French drama: “their heroes are the most civil people breathing; but their good breeding seldom extends to a word of sense” (p.10). Behind these attacks on decorum there is Dryden's most important critical value, the belief that the emotions raised in his audience towards the protagonists are of more importance than the formal structure of drama. He was yet bound by the rigid neo-classical theories favoured by the times. *All for Love* maintains the classical unities of time, place and action. The events take place in Alexandria on a single day and there is no sub-plot. The play is one long catastrophe and there is no comic relief as in Shakespeare's tragedies. The play is constrained by the “decorum” of the Unities. In *Essay of Dramatick Poesy*, Neander, Dryden himself, resents the tyranny of the three unities arguing that too close an attention to time factor brings about a dearth of plot for many surprising and interesting events cannot be depicted. Unities are restrictive and hamper an organic growth of design of the plot. Whereas Dryden wrote in the Heroic Tragedy mode, Shakespeare wrote his play in the “panoramic” method (RT,71). The Bard's canvas has a leisurely sweep spanning the historical period from 40 BC to the death of the death of Antony and Cleopatra in 30 BC; the unity of action reduces the characters from 34 to 13 in Dryden; in Shakespeare we witness the dissolution of the Herculean figure of Antony to become a strumpet's cuckold: “Let Rome in Tiber melt” (Sh.I.i. 38). The heroic and grand achievements of Shakespeare's Antony actively transforming the world is not dramatized in Dryden. The latter's play begins after the crisis of the Battle of Actium. After the catastrophic defeat and humiliating retreat from the battlefield at Actium, in despair Antony immures himself in the temple of Isis. Rather than a formidable leader, Dryden's Antony is a jaded figure, a “shadow of an emperor”, buffeted between the rival yet valid demands of Roman responsibilities of a statesman and family allegiances on the one hand and the passionate love for the mistress of his heart, Cleopatra. Antony is weighed down by age, a sense of moral fatigue, defeat and cynicism. Act I itself portrays him as “this vanquished man”, “his mighty ruins”, “his drooping spirits” which is indifferent to Octavius Caesar's challenge: “take all/The world's not worth my care” (I.176,77,112,121-22).

Norman Suckling in “Dryden in Egypt; Reflexions on ‘All for Love’” avers that it is “the greatest---perhaps the only great --- classical tragedy in English”. Further he writes that if there had been no *Antony and Cleopatra* then, Dryden's play would have been the most impressive outpost of English drama. He opines that *Antony and Cleopatra* “is not a tragedy of love at all, but of infatuation and coquetry” mostly (King,49-50). Unlike the superhuman heroes of the earlier Heroic tragedies, Antony is no bully. Though he claims descent from Hercules “his virtues lie so mingled with his crimes” as to be inseparable; his “vast soul” will not

forgive “what as man he did, / Because his other parts are more than man” (I.124,131-32). The play measures the “mortality of his godhead”, writes Kaufmann in his brilliant analysis “On the Poetics of Terminal Tragedy: Dryden’s ‘All for Love’”. He is stripped of his demi-god status but achieves the “special nobility” which tragedy gives us: “the felt essence of a man suffering enlightenment, thinking and dying” (Schilling, 94).

Dryden’s aim is to put love on a pedestal, rather than the projection of worldly achievements of Shakespeare’s Antony who loses the world caught in the hypnotic serpentine gaze of Cleopatra. His dramatic focus is very different from the Bard’s. The question before Dryden’s Antony is whether he should bow down before his Roman duties as leader and family man and abandon the genuine love of his mistress. On hearing about her apparent death, Antony is resigned:

“Let Caesar take the world---
An empty circle, since the jewel’s gone
Which made it worth my strife”. (V.306-13)

Cleopatra loves him with all sincerity and genuineness, unlike Shakespeare’s heroine. She rejects Octavius Caesar’s offer to maintain her status quo as Queen of Egypt and proves to Antony that she has no interest in Dolabella, his trusted lieutenant. Octavia is self-righteous, but for Cleopatra love is a “transcendent passion” and “my love’s a noble madness” (II.18,21). Cleopatra is willing to lose her life:

“.....Let dull Octavia
Survive to mourn him dead: my nobler fate
Shall knit our spousals with a tie too strong
For Roman law to break”. (V.416-19)

Charmion seeking the reason of her royal attire, instead of mourning attire, is told that she is obtuse because when Cleopatra first met Antony and won his heart she was “all sparkling, like a goddess; so adorned” ; she must now dress regally to match “my first glory” and dress as “the bride of Antony” (V.461-64). Cleopatra orders her waiting women to:

“seat me by my lord. I claim this place
For I must conquer Caesar too, like him,
And win my share of the world”. (V. 465-67)

Both Antony and Cleopatra put themselves to death and die steadfastly asserting their “immortal love” for each other. The words of the priest, Serapion, render an apotheosis of Love:

“See how the lovers sit in state together...
...she died pleased with him for whom she lived,
And went to charm him in another world”. (V.509-13)

The priest calls them “blest pair”, safe from the buffetings of the storm of life:

“And fame to late posterity shall tell,
No lovers lived so great, or died so well”. (V.519-20)

Indeed, the alternate title “The World Well Lost” brilliantly conveys the meaning and ethics. In their death they become the conquerors of Caesar and win the world. In the Epilogue Dryden is sanguine of the hope that young gallants and ladies would applaud Antony over Octavius Caesar, as love has conquered the temporal: “But grace you him who lost the world for love!” (I, 23).

CONCLUSION

Though Dryden in the Preface to the play writes that he will be revealing “the excellency of the moral”, yet there is no poetic justice that prevails. The lovers are vindicated because their love is an ennobling passion with a deep commitment to each other. It evokes sympathy in the audience and deep admiration for the nobility and greatness of their passion. In the Preface, Dryden writes that this legendary love story has been treated by many poets and writers, yet in rewriting it he desires “to take my own measure, in aiming at the mark” (pp.8). As Kaufmann rightly states, Dryden’s *All for Love* is the “splendid consolidation of his mature poetic” (Schilling,87).

Dryden’s style informs and lends aesthetic beauty to his poetics. The colour palette of his canvas uses the hues of flickering embers dying to a blackness. Antony is described as cold ashes, an uprooted tree, and at other times to a lion, the son of Hercules or a meteor: images which convey his emotional state torn between duty and love. Cleopatra is the priceless jewel he covets; the Nile throws up monstrous creatures doomed to die, which anticipates the faded glory, decay and ruin that accompanies temporal time. Imagery supports thematic significance.

In this play Dryden uses blank verse instead of the heroic couplet. The pithiness, terseness and antithetical style together with the rigid beat of the couplet, dulled cognition and appreciation of the varied and fast -moving passions on the dramatic stage. His well-modulated poetic utterance through the blank verse is intrinsic to the beauty of play. In *Essay of Dramatick Poesy* he writes that a play ought to represent human passions, the vicissitudes of fortune and is meant “for the delight and instruction of mankind” (Works,302). In rendering his vision of the exaltation of love, Dryden, the consummate craftsman, delights and instructs his audience and caters to the psychological needs of his age. He is considered the “last poet of a golden/Order” (Schilling,181). The popularity of theatre is enduring because it is a place which creates a community of people grasping and sharing ever evolving definitions of humanity and evoking empathy, hope and love.

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