The Origin of the English Heroic Play

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THE ORIGIN OF THE ENGLISH HEROIC PLAY.

It is generally recognised by competent critics that the post-Restoration drama simply continues and develops the habits of the Caroline drama. Certain allowances must be made for the exercise of new influences and for certain new theatrical conditions. French influence has been asserted and denied again and again, but I hope to show that a certain definite French influence is incontestable. Alterations in the shape of the stage, the introduction of scenery, the appearance of female actors, and the far-reaching influence of the new opera must be taken into account, but the main elements of the Heroic Play, the heroic *personae dramatis*, the love-interest, and the point of honour, are as clearly seen in the plays of Goffe or Cartwright or Carlell as in those of Orrery or Dryden. It is principally in form and in the employment of mechanical contrivances on the stage that the post-Restoration drama is original.

In both these respects it is usual to look to Davenant as the pioneer. *The Siege of Rhodes* is an important document, but its importance as an influence is questionable. It exhibits, no doubt, the earliest expression of heroic material in rhyme, but it must be noted that the verse is not mainly heroic. The couplet appears, but the staple is lyrical. It is worth while to notice, too, that Davenant was not an enthusiast for the heroic couplet, even for non-dramatic uses, and employed in his *Gondibert* the so-called heroic quatrain. It would have been a strange irony if the contemner of the couplet for its natural employment had succeeded by his example in establishing it for its least appropriate use in the drama! In spite of this, however, *The Siege of Rhodes* is interesting to us. It indicates the strong heroic tendency of the age, and in an interesting passage of the preface casts a light upon the 'Heroic Play' (perhaps the earliest use of the phrase) as a protest against the domestic comedy and tragedy of the Elizabethans.

It is not only in literature that we find this reaction against the *Bartholomew Fair* of everyday life. The societies that grouped themselves around the Duchess of Newcastle and Mrs Katherine Philips illustrate the same process. Mrs Philips, who becomes 'the matchless Orinda,' will interest us later, so she deserves our chief attention here. She and her friends seem to have created for themselves an ideal world,

based on the most lofty ideas of virtue and friendship, rejecting their everyday names and titles to become Sylvanders and Ardelias, Antenors and Lucasias. It is small wonder that, in the literature cultivated by these circles, a dramatist should claim the liberty of 'drawing all things above the ordinary proportion of the stage as that is beyond the common words and actions of human life' (Dryden, *Of Heroic Plays*). Heroic literature is simply the reflection of the endeavour to realise the Heroic ideal in actual life.

When we leave the Heroic Temper and come to the problem of form, there is less unanimity. We must all admit the necessity for the abandonment of the blank verse of Suckling and Carlell, but there is not much agreement as to the circumstances and causes of the adoption of rhyme. Mr Gosse, in his *XVIIth Century Studies*, argues for the priority of Etheredge. 'As a point of fact,' he says, 'Dryden was the first to propose, and Etheredge the first to carry out, the experiment of writing plays in rhyme.' Now Dryden's preface to *The Rival Ladies* is dated 1664, *The Comical Revenge* belongs to the same year, so we may take it that Mr Gosse dates the introduction of rhyme from 1664. Unfortunately for his argument, an essay on 'the matchless Orinda' in the same volume relates the story of the completion by the middle of October 1662, and the performance in Dublin in the following February of her rhymed translation of Corneille's *Pompée*. Writing in the *M.L.R.* of January, 1917, Mr Montague Summers speaks of the priority of Roger Boyle as having been established by quite recent research. I do not know to what research Mr Summers refers, but Orrery's claim was known to Dr Johnson. 'The practice of making tragedies in rhyme,' he says, 'was introduced soon after the Restoration, as it seems by the Earl of Orrery, in compliance with the opinion of Charles the Second, who had formed his taste by the French theatre.' There is also the evidence of Dryden's dedication of *The Rival Ladies* to the Earl of Orrery in which, though Mr Gosse seems to have missed the point in referring to it, the poet supports his argument in favour of rhyme by an appeal to his Lordship's practice.

The actual date at which Orrery began to write plays in rhyme is determined by a passage in his *State Letters* (2 vols., Dublin, 1745). He writes to the Duke of Ormonde, then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, from Dublin, January 23, 1661/2:

May it please your grace,

When I had the honour and happiness the last time to kiss his majesty's hand, he commanded me to write a play for him. I did not scruple therein to evidence my great weakness, since thereby I did evidence the greater obedience; and

therefore, some months after, I presumed to lay at his majesty's feet a tragi-comedy, all in ten feet verse and rhyme. I writ it in that manner upon two accounts, first because I thought it was not fit a command so extraordinary should have been obeyed in a way that was common; secondly, because I found his majesty relished rather the French fashion of writing plays than the English. I had just grounds to believe, at least fear, that my play would have been thought fitter for the fire than the theatre, but his majesty's mercy having condemned it to the latter, and then giving it to be acted by Mr Killigrew's company, my old friend, Will. D'Avenant, appeared so displeased his company missed it, that nothing would reconcile me to him but to write another purposely for him. Therefore this last and this week having gotten some few hours to myself from my public duties, I dedicated those to please my particular friend, and wrote this unpolished draught of two acts....The plot is such that I wish you could but as much like the rest of the play as I flatter myself you will like that, when by the finishing of what is begun you will know it. And that your grace may have some guess at it, I will tell you here, that Acores is Romisa in disguise...The humour of Hilas, of which your grace will see some touches in the beginning of the second act, shall be interwoven, if your grace dislike it not, in every one of the three remaining, though I despair to make my Hilas as famous on the theatre as the marquis of Urfé has made his in the romance; for besides his genius being exceedingly above mine, his Hilas was not limited to numbers and rhyme as mine is....

Writing again on February 26, we find Orrery saying 'I have presented about a fortnight since to your grace the whole play.'

It appears, then, that in February 1661/2 Orrery had written two plays in rhyme. His visit to London was extended at any rate to December 1660, as one of his letters shows, so the first play in all probability dates from 1661. In February 1662/3 Charles writes (*State Letters* as before) expressing his intention to produce the play 'as soon as my company have their new stage in order, that the scenes may be worthy the words they are to set forth.'

The King's House (the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane) was opened on the 7th May, 1663, according to Pepys, but we have no record of the production of any play by Orrery in that year. In a letter to the King, the author speaks of the second play as superior to the first, 'the plot, humours and discourses being more proportionate to the genius of those who frequent the theatre.' *The General* is the first play by Orrery we know to have been performed at the King's house (September 28, 1664) and it was certainly a failure, being described by Pepys, in words reminiscent of the author's own, as utterly inferior 'in words, sense and design' to *Henry the Fifth*, produced by Davenant a month earlier. The identification of this with the first play is hazardous, as Orrery may conceivably have written two bad plays for Mr Killigrew. The second play is certainly lost, for there is no known play which corresponds to the description given to Ormonde, so we have a precedent for assuming the loss of the first.

Whatever the fate of these early plays, Orrery was not discouraged.

Reckoning the two lost plays we find that he contributed nine examples of the Heroic Play, and by the volume of his work, no less than by the popularity of some of it or by his personal example, exercised a great influence upon his contemporaries. The dedication of *The Rival Ladies* (1664) indicates Dryden's willingness to follow his leadership; Sir Robert Howard's preface to *Four New Plays* (1665) recognises in him the chief force in the new movement, while six years later, John Crowne dedicates to Orrery his first play, *Juliana, or the Princess of Poland* with a fulsome panegyric of *Mustapha* and *Henry the Fifth*. More convincing than the flattery of dedications is the sincere imitation in the use of rhyme. We have already alluded to Dryden's *The Rival Ladies*, to Etheredge's *The Comical Revenge* and to Mrs Philip's *Pompey*. Of these the last is the most interesting to us, being the earliest of the three and the only one entirely in rhyme. It is not without significance that this play was shown to Orrery when only one scene had been translated, that it was at his instigation that the work was completed, and that it was finally by his influence that it was produced at the Smock-Alley Theatre in Dublin in February, 1662/3.

By a curious coincidence, while Orinda was preparing her *Pompey*, another version of the same play was being made in England. One act and the original plan were due to Waller, who made a point of translating some portion of each new play by Corneille, and among his collaborators are named Sedley and Dorset. The success of Orinda's play postponed the publication of this translation, but it saw the light in 1664, over a year after the announcement that it was completed and about to appear. One feels a certain satisfaction in connecting Waller, 'an obstinate lover of rhyme to the very last,' with the rise of the Heroic Play, whose vogue he supported not only in this but in his rhymed alteration of *The Maid's Tragedy*, and a similar moral certainty with regard to Denham, who shares with him the credit for the refinement of our numbers, is vindicated by his use of rhyme in one scene of *The Sophy* as early as 1641 and by his completion of Mrs Philip's *Horace*.

In the rather pathetic figure of Lodowick Carlell the development of the Heroic Play is epitomised. In his youth an execrable botcher of blank verse, the recipient of a dedication from Thomas Dekker, and an exponent of the Heroic temper in drama, in his later years he accepts 'the troublesome bondage of rhyming.' Carlell's plays were praised by Ward and Mr C. H. Gray has edited *The Deserving Favourite*. Another American, Professor Schelling, writing in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, assures us that Carlell's *Heraclius* met with great

success, though not equal in merit to other translations from Corneille. I do not know from what source Professor Schelling derives his opinion of the merit of the play, but even if it was not possible for him to consult the text he might have learnt from the *Biographia Dramatica* or from Genest that Carlell's play was never acted, another version by an unknown author being preferred for the performance on the 8th March, 1664. Carlell's play was printed in the same year. The references to the Duchess of Orleans and to the Queen Mother in the advertisement are especially important: 'Though my humble respects to her Royal Highness prompted me to undertake a translation in verse, because she loves plays of that kind, and is as eminent in knowledge as in dignity, yet I presume not to beg her protection; only as it took birth at Sommerset House, I hope she will not despise it from the report of others. For my most gracious Mistress whome I have so long serv'd, and in former Playes not displeas'd, I dare not address this, because my first essay of this nature.'

In these earliest rhymed plays certain features must be noticed. Orrery, speaking of rhyme, calls it the French manner, while Carlell, Waller and Orinda use rhyme in translations from Corneille. Again Orrery and Carlell adopt this manner in frank deference to the opinions and taste of the Court, Waller and Orinda because they move in the aristocratic circle of Court influence. No doubt the personal taste of the monarch, or mere imitation of the French, will not explain the vogue of rhyme, but, while we appreciate the importance of those circumstances which made the adoption of rhyme seem necessary and desirable, we must not ignore the channels by which the new form came to England.

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BELFAST.