

The Heroic Tragedy

Heroic Tragedy is a name given to the form of tragedy which had some vogue in the beginning of the Restoration period (1660-1700). It was drama in the epic mode – grand, rhetorical and declamatory at its best and often bombastic at its worst. Its themes were love and honour, and it was considerably influenced by French classical drama, especially by the works of Corneille and Racine. John Dryden thus defined it in the preface to *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) : “ An heroic play ought to be an imitation, in little, of an heroic poem ; and consequently ... love and valour ought to be the subject of it”. In these plays, as in an epic, the protagonist is a large-scale warrior whose actions involve the fate of an empire. A noble hero and an equally noble heroine are typically placed in a situation in which their passionate love is in conflict with the demands of honour and with the hero’s patriotic duty to his country. When the conflict ends in a disaster, the effect is a tragedy.

Heroic drama was staged in a spectacular and operatic fashion, and in it one can detect the influences of opera which, at this time, was establishing itself. The two main early works of this genre were *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) and *The Spaniards in Peru* (1658) by Sir William Davenant who was virtually the pioneer of English opera and who promoted heroic drama. The main plays thereafter were Robert Howard’s *The Indian Queen* (1665) and those by Dryden. This kind of tragedy was satirized and burlesqued by Buckingham in *The Rehearsal* (1672) and much later again by Sheridan in 1779. Heroic drama was initially written in closed heroic couplet, and later in blank verse.

John Dryden (1631 – 1700) was the chief exponent of this dramatic form. *The Indian Emperor* (1665), *Tyrannick Love* (1669), *The Conquest of Granada* (1669-1670) and *Aureng-zebe* (1675) are his important works in heroic couplet. Being in course of time weary of “ his long-loved mistress, Rime,” as “ Passion’s too fierce to be in fetters bound, / And Nature flies him like enchanted ground”, he replaced heroic couplet with blank verse. His play, *All for Love or The World Well Lost* (1678) written in blank verse on the theme of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* is considered to be his dramatic masterpiece. Although it was a daring thing to attempt what Shakespeare had already done, he did not copy it despite following Shakespeare very closely. His play is of distinctly different nature and high merit – his characters are well-drawn and vivid, and the style ,though not as forceful as Shakespeare’s, is grand and restrained. After the Revolution, he wrote *Don Sebastian* (1690), *Cleomenes* (1692) and *Love Triumphant* (1694). The last was a tragic-comedy and a failure, being of far less merit than the kind of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. And the other two were average and not attractive like *All for Love*. At various stages of his career, he attempted, in collaboration with Nathaniel Lee, to improve upon Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and *Troilus and Cressida* with results as lamentable as they were sure to be.

Thomas Otway (1651-85) is another name in the field of Heroic tragedy. His first play, *Alcibiades* was staged in 1675, and this play was followed by *Don Carlos* (1676), *The Orphan* (1680) and *Venice Preserv’d* (1682), the last one being his masterpiece. Although Otway came out with a heroic play in *Don Carlos*, its reputation was feeble. *The Orphan* was successful, and it struck the note of deep pathos, characteristic of Otway. The play has a calmness of tone and lacks in heroic rants. Otway’s finest work was *Venice Preserv’d* , a tragedy written on a grander scale than *The Orphan*. The characters are handled adroitly, especially those of Jaffier and Pierre. The play has rugged and sombre force, and reveals the playwright’s considerable skill

in writing out high drama. In the opinion of an authority on the drama, the play has been revived more often than any play outside Shakespeare's – an undeniable proof of its dramatic qualities.

The next name worthy of mention is Nathaniel Lee (1653 ? – 92) . In spite of the fact that Lee who had an unbalanced nature and whose short existence on earth was darkened by mental troubles and hastened by the excesses he committed does not preclude him from being admired as a Romanticist, remarkable for the individuality of his soul. He was a belated Elizabethan, inspired by the spirit of heroic tragedy. He wrote in blank verse, unusually indeed. Of his many tragedies, some important works are Nero (1674), Sophonisba (1676), The Rival Queens (1677) and Mithridates (1678). He also collaborated with Dryden in the production of two plays. In his own time, Lee's name became a byword to distinguish a kind of wild, raving style, which, in part at least, seems to have been a product of madness. But when he is tranquil, he writes brilliantly . He has a command of deep pathos, and all through his work he has touches of real poetic quality.

John Crowne (c. 1640 – 1703?) was a voluminous playwright whose best known works are Caligula (1698), a heroic tragedy, and Thyestes (1681) also a heroic tragedy ,though written in blank verse. Crowne also wrote a comedy , Sir Courtly Nice (1685) which received good appreciation from the viewers, if not from the critics. Crowne was an average Restoration dramatist. The plays show some talent and a fair amount of skill in versification.

Nicholas Rowe (1674 – 1718) who, during his lifetime, was a person of eminence and who became Poet Laureate in 1715 wrote a number of heroic plays. The best known among them are Tamerlane (1702), The Fair Penitent (1703) and the popular Jane Shore (1714). Johnson says of him , “ His reputation comes from the reasonableness of some of his scenes, the elegance of his diction, and the suavity of his verse.”

The Heroic Tragedy, an important genre of the form, occupies a silver shelf in the literary history of England. Although the *Mount Shakespeare* stood out overlooking the field, the dramatists could produce some works like *All for Love* and *Venice Preserved* which are still read with avid interest. The tragical faculty was dwindling all through the period *down the Shakespeare Lane* with characters becoming more stagy and situations acquiring the taint of horror more and more. This is an age of experiment though marked by a decline from the Shakespearian flight.