

Restoration Tragedy or Heroic Tragedy

In the Restoration Period, tragic drama is represented by the heroic play. During the first twenty years after the Restoration, the rhymed heroic play reigned supreme. This form was introduced by Sir William Davenant and popularised by Dryden. This inferiority of the Restoration drama to the Elizabethan is one of the common places of criticism and perhaps one of its platitudes. The so-called "Heroic Tragedy" or "Restoration Tragedy" has led to the above conclusion which is perhaps true in particular cases but wrong upon the whole. Such an estimate overlooks the very important fact that the Restoration theatre evolved its own special dramatist genre, that is "Heroic Tragedy". Dryden the chief exponent of the new type of drama, defined its nature in one of his brilliant "Prefaces" as follows, "An heroic play ought to be an imitation of an heroic poem, and consequently that love and valour ought to be the subject of it". In other words, it was meant to be a union between the epic and the drama. It was an interesting experiment, but unfortunately it was proved that neither branch of the poetic art gained anything by this encroachment upon each other's territory. The heroic tragedy has neither the concentration of a dramatic plot nor the dignified march of an epic narrative.

In fact, it was D'Avenant who with

his Siege of Rhodes set up the first model of the heroic tragedy. This play is significant in literary history because it imported all the three chief ingredients of the heroic tragedy - first, Spanish ranting secondly elements of the French melodrama after the manner of Corneille, and thirdly the heroic couplet. Sir Robert Howard, Dryden's own brother-in-law followed suit and produced a really complete heroic tragedy, The Indian Queen. But it was not until Dryden, undoubtedly the greatest genius of the age, took it up that the heroic tragedy attained its fullest development.

The Tynamical Love is Dryden's first considerable attempt at writing a heroic tragedy. It is a strange document to prove what extraordinary absurdities a vigorous intellect may be responsible for the play is wholly improbable - a string of smart dialogues and stirring theatrical incidents. The Conquest of Granada which followed is a triumph and at the same time a 'reduction and absurdum' of the style. It is the touch stone of the heroic tragedy. It simply gives up all pretence to nature, reason and probability. But its worst offence is its bathos. The fantastic nature of the persons and speeches, the rapid changes of fortunes, the constant falling in and out of love, the old predicament in which heroes and heroines constantly find themselves produce the effect of farce - aided by unbridled scents of the principal characters. The next play Aurangzeb is "in many respects a noble play" - says Prof. Saintsbury. Still from the point of view of dramatic

But it is full of defects. The characters, however, though not subtle are better discriminated than in The Descent of Grandeur. There is also much less sordid and subtle and bathos in it. But the play excites neither pity nor terror, but leaves the reader stiff and yawning. This play, however, is a medley of fine things - a model of spiritual versification, and one cannot but feel sorry that so many purple patches are wasted by being declaimed by puppets.

Besides Dryden, Otway there were also many who wrote Several tragedies at the beginning of their career, Nathaniel Lee who wrote many tragedies, some of which are Nero, Sophonisba, The Rival Queen and Mithridates. He has a command of pathos and all through his work, he has touches of real poetic quality. John Crowne whose best known works are the tragedies of Caligula, a heroic play. Nicholas Rowe was a person of some importance, and was made poet laureate in 1715. His best known plays are Tamerlane, The Fair Penitent and the popular Jane Shore. But the form of heroic tragedy proved un congenial for Otway, and he soon reverted to the traditional drama written in blank verse; such as Venice Preserved.

Although the French classical drama contributed not a little to the inspiration that produced heroic tragedy, it is a dramatic genre, is more closely affiliated with the Elizabethan drama. The heroic tragedy is first and foremost romantic, but its romanticism is impoverished by the exclusive

pre-occupation of producing a single kind of effect. It strived to come nearer to Marlowe's Tamburlaine. The aim of these plays is to give, to sensibility, imagination and the sense strong impression of a surprising and super-human grandeur. In other words the heroic drama is more poetic in its intention than dramatic. It is full of inaffective bombasts. There is a lot of bombasts in the finest speeches of Shakespeare, but these are exclusively dramatic. The rhetoric of the heroic tragedy is frigid and lifeless, it is not conditioned by dramatic motivation. In the heroic tragedy or restoration tragedy the rhetoric roars while the drama ~~is~~ sleeps.
