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## Heroic Poesy/Drama (Theatre II: (Post)Restoration Theatre)

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*Restoration & Eighteenth-Century English Literature (ANGBA3- Literature Survey Course)*

# Heroic Poesy/Drama (Theatre II: (Post)Restoration Theatre)

Larisa Kocic-Zámbó

## SUMMARY:

In this lesson we will revisit John Dryden and the developing English literary criticism forming around the topic of the genre of tragedy, more specifically “heroic poesy” – the later term being used in conviction that heroic drama is an epic poetry for the stage. In a sense, the debate over heroic drama will be a continuation of the debate over epic. It also shares in the fate of the epic in that it too will soon come out of favour, albeit for somewhat different reasons. Restoration tragedy, more than any other literary genre of the period, is embroiled in the political intrigues of its time, offering spectacles of the newly established monarchical power masked under the disguise of heroic feasts. The growing disillusionment of the English with the absolutist tendencies of Charles II (and his leanings toward Catholicism, especially in the person of his brother James, the presumptive heir, and the king’s mistress Louise de Kéroualle), the allegorical nature of the Restoration tragedies (requiring an exclusive audience), and the gradual rise of the middle-class demanding a theatre closer to their sensibilities will make this era of stage spectacles short lived. Their importance lies more in the development of English literary criticism. Also, some of its elements will survive in the medium of baroque opera (to be discussed in the next lecture).

Topics will include:

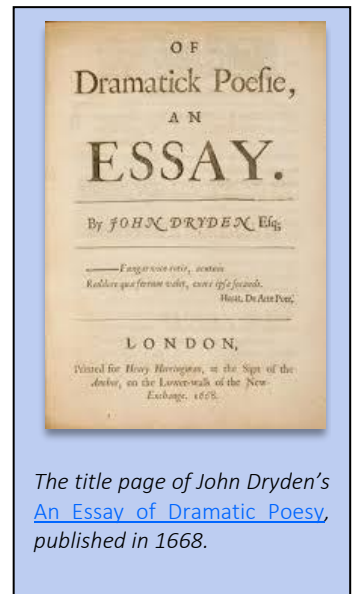
- Tragedy as epic for the stage
  - Dryden’s *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (summing up the debate surrounding French and English drama, as well as the continued battle between the Ancients and Moderns)
  - Tragicomedy as the native English genre
- The allegorical and political character of Restoration tragedy
  - Case study: Dryden’s *All for Love, or the World Well Lost*
- The turn towards 18<sup>th</sup>-century domestic tragedy and sentimental comedy

# 1 HEROIC DRAMA: AN EPIC POETRY FOR THE STAGE

While Restoration comedies are fairly known and some of them are still being performed, the serious drama of the age had a very short span of popularity from mid-1660 to the late 1670s. Embroiled in the politics of its time the *heroic drama* was a manifestation of “conservative, even reactionary cultural stylisation of the power and absolutist ideology” of the newly restored monarchy in the wake of the English Civil War and the Puritan Commonwealth (Berensmeyer 2011, 131). As such it could not survive its immediate historical context and declined round about the time of the “Exclusion Crisis” (see lecture on the historical background).

The Restoration understanding of heroic drama developed as the continuation of the debate on epic, the most elevated mode of writing based on the classics of antiquity, Homer’s *Iliad* and Vergil’s *Aeneid*. John Dryden (1631-1700), “the father of English [literary] criticism,” again played a major role in this debate. Much of his extensive literary criticism was published in the prefaces/prologues to his own dramatic works and translations in which he justified “the honour of our English Writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them.” However, his thoughts on heroic drama or dramatic poesy were articulated in a standalone piece written during a lock down of theatres due to the Great Plague in 1665/1666 and published in 1668 as *Of Dramatick Poesie, an Essay*.

*An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* is a dialogue between four speakers, each representing a contemporary of Dryden and the poet himself: **Eugenius** (Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, and patron of Dryden to whom the Essay is dedicated), **Lisideius** (Sir Charles Sedley, an English noble, writer and politician noted for his wit and rakish behaviour), **Crites** (Sir Robert Howard, politician and playwright, whose sister Elizabeth Howard was married to Dryden), and **Neander** (Dryden himself).



The title page of John Dryden's [An Essay of Dramatic Poesy](#), published in 1668.





Excerpt from William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress – The Tavern Scene* (1735).

Restoration libertine and rake culture was not only tied to the genre of comedy. Sir Charles Sedley was just as notorious for his rakish behaviour as was John Wilmot, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rochester. Samuel Pepy's diary entry of 1 July, 1663 records an oft quoted story:

Mr. Batten telling us of a late trial of Sir Charles Sydly [Sedley] the other day, before my Lord Chief Justice Forester and the whole Bench, for his debauchery a little while since at Oxford Kates; coming in open day into the balcone and showed his nakedness – acting all the postures of lust and buggery that could be imagined, and abusing of scripture and, as it were, from thence preaching a mountebanke sermon from that pulpitt, saying that there he hath to sell such a powder as should make all the cunts in town run after him – a thousand people standing underneath to see and hear him. And that being done, he took a glass of wine and washed his prick in it and then drank it off; and then took another and drank the King's health. (Latham 1978, 54)


The *Essay* addresses five critical questions:

1. the merit of ancient versus the modern poets (cf. **quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns**)
2. French drama's superiority to English drama
3. the superiority of the Elizabethan dramatists to those of Dryden's times
4. does the conformity to *the rules laid down by the ancients* improve the plays?
5. does the use of rhyme (instead of blank verse) improve serious drama?

 &  Read the selected passages below from *An Essay of Heroic Poesy* and try answering the following questions:

- Which speaker claims that the Ancients are better than the Moderns? And why? (remember what Nature signifies in this context → see our lecture on epic conventions)
- Which speaker claims that the Moderns are better than the Ancients? And why?
- Which speaker claims that French plays are superior to English? List a few reasons the speaker mentions (the characteristics of French drama).
- Which speaker claims that English drama is superior to French? In what respect?
- Why do they talk about drama as poems or poetry?
- How does this claim by Eugenius relate to Dryden: "Tragedies and Comedies were not writ [in Antiquity] as they are now, promiscuously, by the same person; but he who found his genius bending to the one, never attempted the other way"? Check out Dryden's works before answering.

Note (underline) especially the references to the innovations/transformations of the Restoration theatre (cf. previous lecture). Which are the **rules of tragedy laid down** by the Ancients? Which of these were echoed in Goldsmith's article on Laughing versus Sentimental Comedy and why in relation to the genre of comedy (i.e. what was his major objection to English Sentimental Comedy)? Also note an instance when political ideology becomes the justifying principle for a structure of a play.

 ... *Crites* a little while considering upon this Demand, told *Eugenius* he approved his Proposition, and if he pleased, he would **limit their dispute to Dramatic Poesy**; in which he thought it not difficult to prove, either that the Ancients were superior to the Moderns, or the last Age to this of ours. [Also] *Lisideius* [suggested that] it was necessary, before they proceed further, to take a standing measure of their Controversy; for how was it possible to be decided who writ the best Plays, before we know what a Play should be? [Namely,] neither *Aristotle*, nor *Horace*, nor any other, who writ of that subject, had ever done it. [So being asked by the others to provide a definition, he said he] had a rude Notion of it; indeed rather a Description than a Definition: but which served to guide him in his private thoughts, when he was to make a judgement of what others writ: that he conceived a **Play ought to be, A just and lively Image of Human Nature, representing its Passions and Humours, and the Changes of Fortune to which it is subject; for the Delight and Instruction of Mankind.**

[Having more or less agreed on this, *Crites*] spoke on behalf of the Ancients, [saying that they] have been faithful Imitators and wise Observers of that Nature, which is so torn and ill represented in our Plays, they have handed down to us a perfect resemblance of her; which we, like ill [i.e. bad] Copiers, neglecting to look on, have rendered monstrous and disfigured. [*Crites* also maintained that the superiority of the Ancients is manifested in] all the Rules by which we practise the *Drama* at this day,

either such as relate to the justness and symmetry of the Plot; or the Episodical Ornaments, such as Descriptions, Narrations, and other Beauties, which are not essential to the Play; **were delivered to us from the Observations that Aristotle made.** [In particular, out of Aristotle's and Horace's *Art of Poetry*] has been extracted the Famous Rules which the French call, *Des Trois Unités*, or, The Three Unities, which ought to be observed in every Regular Play; namely, of Time, Place, and Action.

[The Unity of Time the Ancients] comprehend in 24 hours, the compass of a Natural Day; or as near it as can be contrived: and the reason of it is obvious to everyone, that the time of the feigned action, or fable of the Play, should be proportioned as near as can be to the duration of that time in which it is represented. [It is] therefore the Poets duty, to take care that no Act should be imagined to exceed the time in which it is represented on the Stage, and that the intervals and inequalities of time be supposed to fall out between the Acts.

For **the Second Unity, which is that of place**, the Ancients meant by it, that the Scene ought to be continued through the Play, in the same place where it was laid in the beginning: for the Stage, on which it is represented, being but one and the same place, it is unnatural to conceive it many; and those far distant from one another. **I will not deny but by the variation of painted Scenes, the Fancy (which in these cases will contribute to its own deceit) may sometimes imagine it several places, with some appearance of probability; yet it still carries the greater likelihood of truth, if those places be supposed so near each other, as in the same Town or City....** [F]or the Observation of this, next to the Ancients, the French are to be most commended. They tie themselves so strictly to the unity of place, that you never see in any of their Plays a Scene changed in the middle of the Act [...]

As for **the third Unity which is that of Action**, the Ancient meant no other by it than [...] the end or scope of an action: that which is the first in Intention, and last in Execution: now the Poet is to aim at one great and complete action, to the carrying on of which all things in his Play, even the very obstacles, are to be subservient [...] For two Actions equally laboured and driven on by the Writer, would destroy the unity of the Poem; it would be no longer one Play, but two: not but that there may be many actions in a Play [...] but they must be all subservient to the great one, which our language happily expresses in the name of under-plots [...] There ought to be one action, says *Corneille* [French dramatist, contemporary of Molière and Racine], that is one complete action which leaves the mind of the Audience in a full repose.

*Eugenius* in response of *Crites* thus began: [To the rules of the Ancients] we have joined our own industry; for (had we sat down with a dull imitation of them) we might then have lost somewhat of the old perfection, but never acquired any that was new. [...] For the Plot, which *Aristotle* call'd to *mythos* and often *Tôn pragmatôn synthesis*, and from him the Romans *Fabula*, it has already been judiciously observed by a late Writer, that in **their Tragedies it was only some Tale derived from Thebes or Troy, or at least some thing that happened in those two Ages; which was worn so threadbare by the Pens of all the Epic Poets**, and even by Tradition itself of the Talkative Greeklings (as *Ben Johnson* calls them) **that before it came upon the Stage, it was already known to all the Audience:** and the people so soon as ever they heard the Name of *Oedipus*, knew as well as the Poet, that he had killed his Father by mistake, and committed Incest with his Mother, before the Play; that they were now to hear of a great Plague, an Oracle, and the Ghost of *Laius*: so that they sat with a yawning kind of expectation, till he was to come with his eyes pulled out, and speak a hundred or two of Verses in a Tragic tone, in complaint of his misfortunes. But one *Oedipus*, *Hercules*, or *Medea*, had been tolerable; poor people they escaped not so good cheap [they did not get off so easy]: they had still the *Chapon Bouillé* [boiled capon, a dish of delicacy and luxury] set before them, till their appetites were cloyed with the same dish, and **the Novelty being gone, the pleasure vanished: so that one main end of Dramatic Poesy in its Definition, which was to cause Delight, as of consequence destroyed.** [As for the

Unity of Place], however it might be practised by them [the Ancients], was never any of their Rules: We neither find it in *Aristotle*, *Horace*, of any who have written of it, till in our age the French Poets first made it a Precept of the Stage. [Eugenius proceeds to give examples from Antiquity not complying with these rules.] **Tragedies and Comedies were not writ then as they are now, promiscuously, by the same person; but he who found his genius bending to the one, never attempted the other way.** This is so plain, that I need not instance to you, that *Aristophanes*, *Plautus*, *Terence*, never any of them writ a Tragedy; *Æschylus*, *Eurypides*, *Sophocles* and *Seneca*, never meddled with Comedy; the Sock and Buskin were not worn by the same Poet: having then so much care to excel in one kind, very little is to be pardoned them if they miscarried in it... **[Also] Love-Scenes you will find few among them, their Tragic Poets dealt not with that soft passion,** but with Lust, Cruelty, Revenge, Ambition, and those bloody actions they produced; which were more capable of raising horror than compassion in an audience: leaving love untouched, whose gentleness would have tempered them, which is the most frequent of all the passions, and which being the private concernment of every person, is soothed by viewing its own image in a public entertainment.

[In conclusion to what he said about the Ancients and the French following more exactly the rules extracted from the Ancients, Eugenius claimed], I am at all times ready to defend the honour of my Country against the French, and to maintain, we are as well able to vanquish them with our Pens as our Ancestors have been with their swords. [At this point *Eugenius* urges *Lisideius* to side with him.]

If the Question had been stated, replied *Lisideius*, who had writ best, the French or English forty years ago, I should have been of your opinion, and adjudged the honour to our own Nation; but since that time, (said he, turning towards *Neander*) we have been so long together bad Englishmen, that we had not leisure to be good Poets; *Baumont*, *Fletcher*, and *Johnson* (who were only capable of bringing us to that degree of perfection which we have [NOTE THE ABSENCE OF SHAKESPEARE!]) were just then leaving the world; as if in an Age of so much horror, wit and those milder studies of humanity, had no farther business among us. But the Muses, who always follow Peace, went to plant in another Country; it was then that the great Cardinal of *Richlieu* began to take them into his protection; and that, by his encouragement, *Corneil* and some other Frenchmen reformed their Theatre, (which before was as much below ours as it now surpasses it and the rest of *Europe*)... **[Are you] not convinced that of all Nations the French have best observed them [the many Rules of Stage borrowed from the Ancients]? [In contrast] there is no Theatre in the world has anything so absurd as the English Tragic-comedy, it is a *Drama* of our own invention, and the fashion of it is enough to proclaim it so; here a course of mirth, there another of sadness and passion; a third of honour, and fourth a Duel: Thus in two hours and a half we run through all the fits of *Bedlam*.\* [...]** The end of Tragedies or serious Plays, says *Aristotle*, is to beget admiration, compassion, or concernment; but are not mirth and compassion things incompatible? And is it not evident that the Poet must of necessity destroy the former by intermingling of the latter? That is, he



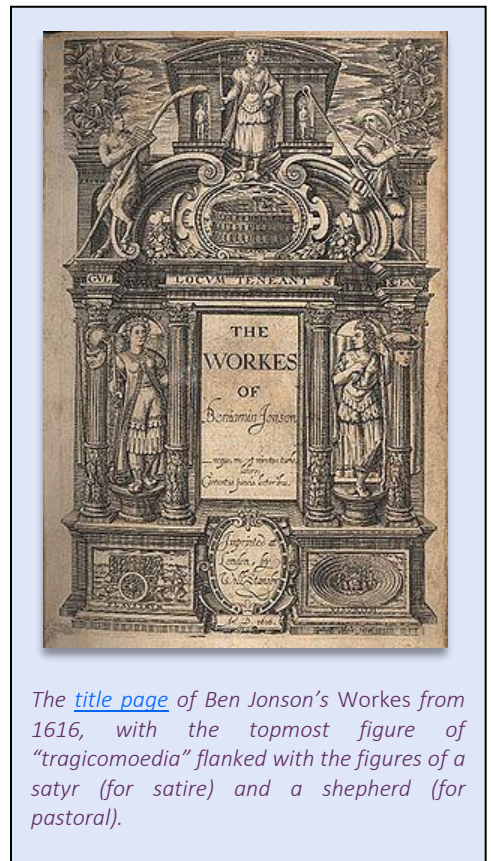
**i** *The engraving of the new Bethlem Hospital (Bedlam) by Robert White, c. 1676. In Edward Geoffrey O. Donoghue, The Story of Bethlem Hospital from its Foundation in 1247 (London, 1914). The inscription reads: Hospitium Mente-Captorum Londinense (London Hospital for the Mentally Ill). The new building was designed by Robert Hooke and built in Moorefields (northern suburb of London, outside the city walls) in 1676. In the early modern the public theatres the Theatre and the Curtain were in the vicinity of the hospital, itself a theatrical display as it was open to public visitations. The colloquial term used in reference to the institution, \*bedlam, has come to signify a scene of uproar, confusion and madness.*

must ruin the sole end and object of his Tragedy to introduce somewhat that is forced in, and is not of the body of it: Would you not think that Physician mad, who having prescribed a Purge [the use of vomiting or laxatives to clear the stomach and intestines], should immediately order you to take restringents [a medicine restricting secretion of fluids] upon it?

[...]

Another thing in which the French differ from us and from the Spaniards, is, that they do not embarrass, or cumber themselves with too much Plot: they only represent so much of a Story as will constitute one whole and great action sufficient for a Play; we, who undertake more, do but multiply adventures; which, not being produced from one another, as effects from causes, but barely following, constitute many actions in the Drama, and consequently make it many Plays. [...] **by pursuing close one argument, which is not cloyed with many turns, the French have gained more liberty for verse, in which they write: they have leisure to dwell upon a subject which deserves it; and to represent the passions (which we have acknowledged to be the Poets work) without being hurried from one thing to another** [...] they commonly make but one person considerable in a Play; they dwell upon him, and his concerns, while the rest of the persons are only subservient to set him off. [...] We see it so in the management of all affairs; even in the most equal Aristocracy, the balance cannot be so justly poised, but someone will be superior to the rest; either in parts, fortune, interest, or the consideration of some glorious exploit; which will reduce the greatest part of business into his hands.

[*Lisideius* also mentions the French's use of rhyme as a sign of their superiority but does not elaborate on it, saying that examples of rhyme use are present in English drama too – the defence of rhyme in English drama will fall on *Neander* aka Dryden, its chief advocate, after *Crites* criticises its use. Here **Neander defends the “English invention” of tragicomedy**]. As for their new way of mingling mirth with serious Plot I do not with *Lisideius* condemn the thing [...] He tells us we cannot so speedily recollect ourselves after a Scene of great passion and concernment as to pass to another of mirth and humour, and to enjoy it with any relish: but why should he imagine the soul of man more heavy than his Senses? Does not the eye pass from an unpleasant object to a pleasant in a much shorter time then is required to this? And does not the unpleasantness of the first commend the beauty of the latter? The old Rule of Logic might have convinced him, that contraries when placed near, set off each other. A continued gravity keeps the spirit too much bent; we must refresh it sometimes, as we bait upon a journey, that we may go on with greater ease. **A Scene of mirth mixed with Tragedy has the same effect upon us which our music has betwixt the Acts, and that we find a relief to us from the best Plots and language of the Stage, if the discourses have been long.** I must therefore have stronger arguments before I am convinced, that compassion and mirth in the same subject destroy each other; and in the meantime cannot but conclude, to the honour of our Nation, that we have invented, increased and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the Stage then was ever known to the Ancients or Moderns of any Nation, which is Tragicomedy.



The [title page](#) of Ben Jonson's Works from 1616, with the topmost figure of "tragicomoedia" flanked with the figures of a satyr (for satire) and a shepherd (for pastoral).

**i** Peter Ackroyd in *Albion: Origins of the English Imagination* writes that “[t]his conflation of sadness and absurdity [i.e. tragicomedy] has been the native and instinctive mode ever since drama first emerged in England” acquiring a distinctive generic identity in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ackroyd goes on to illustrate this penchant of the English for the mixed (“mungrell”) by quoting George Farquhar’s description of Dryden’s funeral: “And so much for Mr. *Dryden*, whose Burial was the same with his life; Variety, and not of a Piece. The Quality and Mob, Farce and Heroicks; the sublime and Redicule mixt in a Piece, great Cleopatra in a Hackney Coach” (2004, PAGE).

[*Neander* then proceeds to criticise the French drama’s penchant for lengthy monologues and speeches, throwing in a bit of national stereotyping and advocating for repartee, i.e. short, witty dialogues instead. Note how the idea of what is natural keeps popping up in the debate.]. ... their Actors speak by the Hour-glass, as our Parsons do; nay, they account it the grace of their parts: and think themselves disparaged by the Poet, if they may not twice or thrice in a Play entertain the Audience with a Speech of an hundred or two hundred lines. I deny not but this may suite well enough with the French; for as we, who are a more sullen people, come to be diverted at our Plays; they who are of an airy and gay temper come thither to make themselves more serious: And this I conceive to be one reason why Comedy is more pleasing to us, and Tragedies to them. But to speak generally, it cannot be denied that short Speeches and Replies are more apt to move the passions, and beget concernment in us then the other: for it is unnatural for any one in a gust of passion to speak long together, or for another in the same condition, to suffer him, without interruption. [...] As for Comedy, **Repartee is one of its chiefest graces; the greatest pleasure of the Audience is a chase of wit kept up on both sides, and swiftly managed.** And this our forefathers, if not we, have had in *Fletchers* Plays, to a much higher degree of perfection then the French Poets can arrive at.

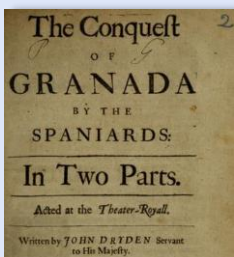
[*Crites against the use of rhyme in serious plays*] **Rhyme is unnatural in a Play because Dialogue there is presented as the effect of sudden thought. For a Play is the imitation of Nature; and since no man, without premeditation speaks in Rhyme, neither ought he to do it on the Stage;** [...] for there is a probability that men of excellent and quick parts may speak noble things *ex tempore*: but those thoughts are never fettered with the numbers or sound of Verse without study, and therefore it cannot be but unnatural to present the most free way of speaking, in that which is the most constrained. For this Reason, says *Aristotle*, It is best to write Tragedy in that kind of Verse which is the least such, or which is nearest Prose: and this amongst the Ancients was the iambic, and with us is blank verse, or the measure of verse, kept exactly without rhyme. [...] some have commended Rhyme: they say the quickness of repartees in argumentative Scenes receives an ornament from verse. Now what is more unreasonable then to imagine that a man should not only light upon the Wit, but the Rhyme too upon the sudden? [...] **The hand of Art will be too visible in it against that maxim of all Professions; *Ars est celare Artem* [Art is to conceal art]. That it is the greatest perfection of Art to keep itself undiscovered.** Nor will it serve you to object, that however you manage it, 'tis still known to be a Play; and consequently, the Dialogue of two persons understood to be the labour of one Poet. For a Play is still an imitation of Nature; we know we are to be deceived, and we desire to be so; but no man ever was deceived but with a probability of truth, for who will suffer a gross lie to be fastened on him? Thus we sufficiently understand that the Scenes which represent Cities and Countries to us, are not really such, but only painted on boards and Canvass: But shall that excuse the ill painting or designment of them; Nay rather ought they not to be made with so much the more diligence and



exactness to help the imagination? Since the mind of man does naturally tend to, and seek after Truth; and, therefore, the nearer any thing comes to the imitation of it, the more it pleases.

[Neander asserts] that in serious Plays where the subject and characters are great, and the Plot unmixed with mirth, which might allay or divert these concernments which are produced, Rhyme is there as natural, and more effectual then blank Verse. [His main objection against Crites is] that some of his Arguments against rhyme reach no farther than from the faults or defects of ill rhyme, to conclude against the use of it in general. May not I conclude against blank verse by the same reason? If the words of some Poets who write in it, are either ill chosen, or ill placed (which makes not only rhyme, but all kind of verse in any language unnatural;) Shall I, for their vicious affection condemn those excellent lines of *Fletcher*, which are written in that kind? Is there anything in rhyme more constrained than this line in blank verse? "I Heav'n invoke, and strong resistance make," where you see both clauses placed unnaturally; that is, contrary to the common way of speaking, and that without the excuse of a rhyme to cause it: yet you would think me very ridiculous, if I should accuse the stubbornness of blank Verse for this, and not rather the stiffness of the Poet. Therefore, *Crites*, you must either prove that words, though well chosen, and duly placed, yet render not Rhyme natural in itself; or, that however natural and easy the rhyme may be, yet it is not proper for a Play. [...] It has been formerly urged by you, and confessed by me, that since no man spoke any kind of verse *ex tempore*, that which was nearest Nature was to be preferred. I answer you therefore, by distinguishing betwixt what is nearest to the nature of Comedy, which is the imitation of common persons and ordinary speaking, and what is nearest the nature of a serious Play: this last is indeed the representation of Nature, but 'tis Nature wrought up to an higher pitch. The Plot, the Characters, the Wit, the Passions, the Descriptions, are all exalted above the level of common converse, as high as the imagination of the Poet can carry them, with proportion to verisimilitude. Tragedy we know is wont to image to us the minds and fortunes of noble persons, and to portray these exactly, Heroic Rhyme is nearest Nature, as being the noblest kind of modern verse.

[Neander ultimately defends the use of rhyme in tragedy based on the latter's close affinity to epic.] ... your [*Crites*] Argument is almost as strong against the use of Rhyme in Poems as in Plays; for the Epic way is everywhere interlaced with Dialogue, or discursive Scenes; and therefore you must either grant Rhyme to be improper there, which is contrary to your assertion, or admit it into Plays by the same title which you have given it to Poems. For though Tragedy be justly preferred above the other, yet there is a great affinity between them as may easily be discovered in that definition of a Play which *Lisideius* gave us. The Genus of them is the same, a just and lively Image of human nature, in its Actions, Passions, and traverses of Fortune: so is the end, namely for the delight and benefit of Mankind. The Characters and Persons are still the same, *viz.* the greatest of both sorts, only the manner of acquainting us with those Actions, Passions and Fortunes is different. Tragedy performs it *viva voce*, or by action, in Dialogue, wherein it excels the Epic Poem which does it chiefly by narration, and therefore is not so lively an Image of Human Nature. However, the agreement betwixt them is such, that if Rhyme be proper for one, it must be for the other. 📖



The model play following Dryden's rules of heroic poesy or drama is his *The Conquest of Granada* in two parts (performed in 1670 and 1671 and published in 1672). In its prefatory essay Dryden sets down the main rules:

- composed in heroic verse (closed couplets in iambic pentameter);
- focusing on a subject pertaining to national foundations, mythological events or important and grand matters;
- and its hero must be powerful, decisive, and like Achilles, dominating even when wrong.

## 2 THE ALLEGORICAL AND POLITICAL CHARACTER OF RESTORATION TRAGEDY

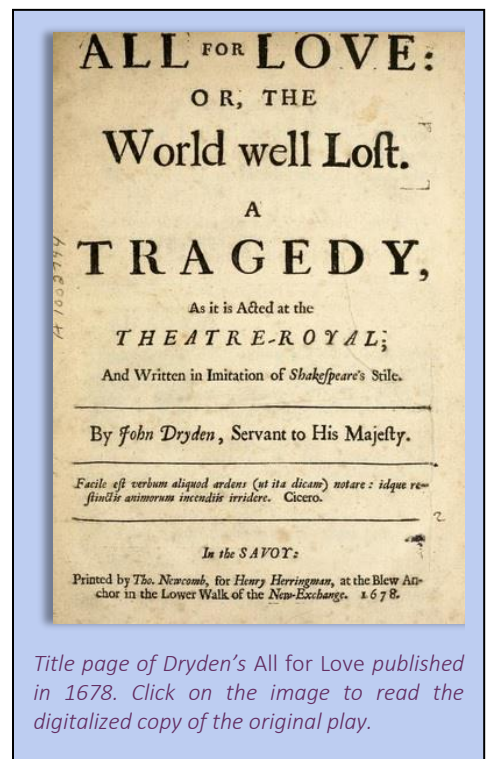
Despite their differences the speakers of Dryden's *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy* seem to agree in one respect, namely, that theatrical plays should have a moral end, i.e. having an improving effect on the viewers (a view shared also by theatre critics as a way of judging particular plays or types of plays). In case of comedy, the goal was to present human foibles and vices in an exaggerated and repulsive way, so as to impress on the viewer the imperative to shun those vices. In case of tragedy, the goal was to present primarily admirable qualities and virtues so as to encourage their imitation, hence, exaggeration is employed to represent the heroes as 'larger than life' characters. As Dryden puts it (reaffirming yet again the intrinsic connection of tragedy and epic):

... what virtue is there in a tragedy, which is not contained in an epic poem, where pride is humbled, virtue rewarded, and vice punished; and those more amply treated, than the narrowness of the drama can admit? The shining quality of an epic hero, his magnanimity, his constancy, his patience, his piety, or whatever characteristic virtue his poet gives him, raises first our admiration. We are naturally prone to imitate what we admire; and frequent acts produce a habit. If the hero's chief quality be vicious, as, for example, the choleric and obstinate desire for vengeance in Achilles, yet the moral is instructive [...] The courage of Achilles is proposed to imitation, not his pride and disobedience to his general, nor his brutal cruelty to his dead enemy, nor the selling his body to his father. We abhor these actions while we read them; and what we abhor we never imitate. The poet only shows them, like rocks and quicksands, to be shunned. ([1909, 8](#))

Simply put, tragedies represented heroes as they ought to be, while comedies how they ought not to be – neither really strived to represent humans as they were (which kind of flies in the face of the whole *let's imitate Human Nature* argument).

Also, the didacticism of the **Restoration tragedy was strongly tied to political imperatives**, primarily to validations of Charles II absolutist tendencies. **These imperatives were coded using allegorical events** from the Bible and the mythological and/or historical narratives of the past, **featuring masked representations of prominent aristocratic and/or political figures of the age**. The decoding and, hence, the enjoyment of these plays **relied heavily on an inside knowledge of courtly and political intrigues**, catering to an exclusive audience, which along with the political crisis of the 1680s contributed to the short-lived popularity of these plays.

A rare exception to this short lived popularity is **Dryden's play *All for Love, or the World Well Lost***, first performed at the Theatre Royal in 1677, for it is **among the few restoration tragedies that continue to be staged to this day**. The tragedy is that of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, and although the title page of the play published in 1678 claims that it is "Written in Imitation of Shakespeare's Stile" – which in this case means that it is written in blank verse and not in a heroic couplet – the execution of it has little to do with Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. As Dryden himself notes in his inevitable Preface to the play: "The death of [Anthony and Cleopatra](#), is a Subject which has

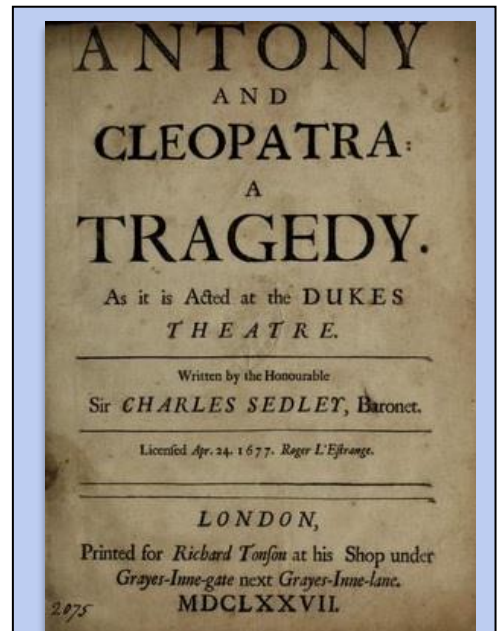


*Title page of Dryden's All for Love published in 1678. Click on the image to read the digitalized copy of the original play.*

been treated by the greatest Wits of our Nation, after Shakespeare's and by all so variously." As a matter of fact, Sir Charles Sedley (Lisideius in Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*) himself has produced a tragedy on the same topic licensed on April 24, 1677 to which allegedly Dryden's play is but a response. (In the preface to his own play, Dryden expresses resentment towards John Wilmot and his coterie which included Sedley.) Both Sedley's and Dryden's version is far more observant of the neoclassical unities of time, place and action (Sedley follows the advice professed by Lisideius in that the shift of place is conducted only between acts). Dryden in particular made sure that "the Unities of Time, Place and Action, [are] more exactly observ'd, than, perhaps, the English Theatre requires" especially in regard to Action, as there is only one main Action in *All for Love* "without Episode, or Underplots; every Scene in the Tragedy conducting to the main design." In depicting the play's tragic heroes Dryden has consciously steered a middle course to comply with the expectation that "the Heroe of the Poem, ought not to be a character of perfect Virtue, for, then, he could not, without injustice, be made unhappy; nor yet altogether wicked, because he could not be then pitied." However, it is not as clear whether Dryden consciously designed his tragedy as a political subtext identifiable by the contemporary courtly audience well versed in allegorical reading of Restoration plays as Charles II relationship with Louise de K roualle, Duchess of Portsmouth (cf. previous lecture on Restoration Comedy). It certainly did not go unnoticed:

At a time when the country was enraged by the exalted position of a courtesan in court, and a French and Catholic courtesan at that, Dryden surrounds such love with some magical virtues. Dryden's Antony and Cleopatra have done great things in their lives, but nothing greater than the degree to which they sacrifice everything for love. [...] Dryden's attempt to raise the passions of monarchs to a level above military glory or great acts of virtue did not go unobserved. John Dennis [cf. our lesson on epic conventions] placed his objections to the pernicious moral of *All for Love* in a political context... [and viewed the tragedy] as deliberately directed toward inculcating a message that combined libertinism and absolutism, as if Dryden were acting on the orders of the court of Charles II to turn the story of Antony and Cleopatra into a work that exalted the libertine manners of the monarch and placed his values and actions beyond the reach of ordinary political and moral judgments. (Novak 1984, 375-377).

And yet, despite Dryden's exculpating intent (especially of Cleopatra whom Sedley's drama version depicted as the *femme fatale* responsible for the fall of Antony), his choice of historical analogy in which Charles II is aligned with the defeated Antony has been read as a sign of Dryden's own disillusionment of a monarch once praised by him as the August of a triumphant age.



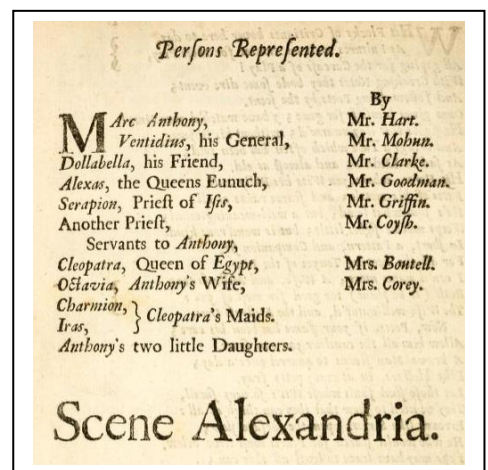
Sir Charles Sedley's take on the story of Antony and Cleopatra, licensed in 1677. Click on the image to read the digitalized copy of the original play.

Note the absence of dedicatory epistle and of preface in Sir Charles Sedley's play. What do you make of it?

### 3 THE TURN TOWARDS 18<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY DOMESTIC DRAMA AND SENTIMENTAL COMEDY

According to Ingo Berensmeyer, Dryden's *All for Love* points at a turn towards domestic drama in that its characters, Antony and Cleopatra, "escape the formulaic posturing and rather absurd speeches of heroes and heroines in earlier heroic plays" by being "presented in a more domestic, even 'realistic' fashion" (2011, 139).

More importantly, Dryden's own acknowledged fault in the play, the moral critique of John Dennis (Dryden's contemporary) and the shift in casting of Cleopatra are clear signs of **the change in the morality of stage presentations**. Namely, in the preface to *All for Love*, Dryden identifies the introduction of Octavia into Alexandria (the sole location of the play) as his greatest error, for Octavia as Antony's lawfully wedded Roman wife and mother of his two children, will divide the compassion of the Audience which he "reserved for Antony and Cleopatra" and their mutual, though elicited love. Dryden attempts two things to counterbalance the unwanted effect the character of Octavia might have on the audience. First, to justify Antony's actions to some measure, Dryden makes "Octavia's departure [from Alexandria] proceed wholly from herself", thus, reversing the role of the abandoned in their relationship. Second, in the original cast of the tragedy, Cleopatra was played by Mrs. Boutell, renowned for her child-like, innocent appearance, while Octavia was played by Mrs. Corey who "was a large woman who specialized in playing shrewish wives" (Novak 1984, 377). This casting dynamic in favour of Cleopatra, however, changed dramatically in the 1704 revival of *All for Love*, in which Cleopatra was played by Mrs. [Elizabeth] Barry "with her reputation for sexual license both in the roles she played on the stage and in her personal life" (378) opposite Mrs. Bracegirdle's Octavia, the latter actress' repute in polar opposition to Mrs Barry: "never any Woman was in such general Favour of her Spectators, which [...] she maintain'd by not being unguarded in her private Character" (Cibber 1889 [1740], 170-71).



With this **radical change in representation**, Dryden's story of Antony and Cleopatra dominated the stage. Shakespeare version was revived in an abridge version (as almost all of Shakespeare's plays at the time) by David Garrick in 1759 but the play, according to the Drury Lane prompter, "did not seem to give y<sup>e</sup> Audience any great pleasure or draw any Applause" (Stone 1937, 27). Allegedly, "so popular was *All for Love* that it held, from the Restoration until well into the nineteenth century, possession all but undisputed of the stage" (35).

A final note should be made about the fate of (Shakespearean) tragedies in this era, namely, the [freedom with which writers of late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century altered their source material](#). Some of this freedom will be addressed in the lecture on **dramatic opera**. Let us conclude with a Garrick verse echoing Dryden's claim (made as Neander) on the preference of comedy by the English:

What trims a Frenchman oversets a Briton;  
In us reflection breeds a sober sadness,  
Which always ends in politics or madness:  
I therefore now propose — by your command,  
That tragedies no more shall cloud this land;

Send o'er your Shakespeare to the sons of France,  
Let *them* grow grave. — Let *us* begin to dance!  
Banish your gloomy scenes to foreign climes,  
Preserve alone to bless these golden times,  
A farce or two—and Woodward's pantomimes!  
([Epilogue](#) to *Barbarossa: A Tragedy* by John Brown)



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