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THE COMEDY OF SIR WILLIAM DAVENANT

by

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For my mother and father

PREFACE

The man with a general interest in seventeenth-century letters will probably be aware of Sir William Davenant as a somewhat opportunistic courtier who attempted to aggrandize himself by circulating the story that Shakespeare was his father. The college student with a more specialized study of the period probably concerns himself with Davenant as the man who introduced "opera" to England and fathered what was to become known as heroic drama. In this work I propose to ignore the first point; though intriguing, to be sure, still it should never have warranted the excess of attention it has received. As for the second point, certainly of importance, it has already been examined with housewifely thoroughness. Rather I wish to make a critical study of Sir William Davenant's dramaturgic treatment of the Comic Spirit.

Davenant was the only important playwright to span the Stuart, Caroline, Interregnum, and Restoration periods. During this time remarkable changes in the treatment of dramatic comedy were to be noted, and, as to be expected of a man who adjusted so well to the varying political and social fortunes of the time, Davenant reflected the changing mode. Yet of his concern with the Comic Spirit, little of worth has been written. Most critics up to the time of A. W. Ward did little more than mention that Davenant had written comedies. Ward showed more interest for he valued Davenant as a chief link between the Elizabethan and Restoration drama. Still he, too, is often condescending in his appraisal, and at times he is curiously obtuse, a failing that is to be noted in the statement, "but of the humor in which Fletcher abounded,

Davenant seems to me to possess little or nothing". Again, later, his own inability to recognize rightly a play's relation to its time is expressed in the curiously cavalier remark, "The comedy of *The Wits* . . . seems to me to have been greatly overvalued." Such pronouncements by such an authority have had their effect: no one reads Davenant today – except for *The Siege of Rhodes* – but all who have heard of him are quick to claim that he is tedious.

The first modern scholar to assess this dramatist's worth was Leslie Hotson in his *The Commonwealth and Restoration Stage* (1928), which grew out of his unpublished Harvard dissertation, "Sir William Davenant, and the Commonwealth Stage" (1923). Both works are concerned with Davenant as a producer and theatrical innovator, not with an internal study of his drama. In 1935, Alfred Harbage published his research biography and critical reevaluation, titled *Sir William Davenant, Poet Venturer, 1606-1668*. In this very readable work Harbage includes a short chapter on Davenant's treatment of comedy, but outside of witnessing that a definite talent in that line existed, there is no intensive or extensive study of its dramaturgic treatment. Three years later Arthur Nethercot's *Sir William D'Avenant, Poet Laureate and Playwright Manager* appeared, which is of value solely for its more scholarly accumulation of biographical details. Then, too, in Montague Summers' *The Playhouse of Pepys* (1935) there is a brief but informative chapter on various performances and casts of individual plays by Davenant. No other work of value on this dramatist exists, and certainly none that seriously treats this playwright's concern for the comic.

In this examination of Davenant, I propose to reveal him as a creator of various forms of dramatic comedy, of humors, satire, manners, and even burlesque which, incidentally, Davenant introduced to the Restoration stage, thereby establishing a theatrical mode of continuing interest. I propose to reveal Davenant as a playwright who employed a not inconsiderable talent to portray the types of comedy that were then favored, and thus aided in transporting the valued traditions of one age of comedy across the gap of two decades into a period of significantly more brilliant comedy. To succeed in this task will be to restore Davenant to a

position no higher than he deserves, but certainly more lofty than that which he could boast of now.

Of the several obligations which I have incurred during my study, I must acknowledge first the late professor of English at Brown University, Mr. Robert Gale Noyes. His patience and tact will long be remembered. A more considerate mentor a student could not have.

For his sense of humor, a desired quality when a book is in the process of being written, Professor John Gearey of New York University was indispensable.

To my several friends at Ohio's Oberlin College and Liberia's Cuttington College, too numerous to name here, I also owe thanks for their encouraging support.

Suakoko, Liberia *H. S. C.*

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CAREER, LITERARY AND OTHERWISE

If we may accept legend, and legend usually has some basis in fact, Sir William Davenant's literary baptism was foreshadowed auspiciously by his physical baptism. For it is said that on March 3, 1606, at the church of St. Martin's in Oxford, William Shakespeare himself acted as chief sponsor for this future Laureate of England.[1] Be it true or not, Davenant, all his life, was to flatter himself with the thought that he was a "literary son" of the great dramatist.

William Davenant's formative years do not demand detailed attention. His home life might be considered respectably bourgeois. In what was probably the liveliest university town in the world, John Davenant, his father, was a successful vintner. There, in back of the tavern, Jane Davenant reared her seven children, keenly desirous of pressing every opportunity that the advantageous town-and-gown relationship might offer her growing family.

Unfortunately, William, unlike his older brothers, showed little

[1] The legend of Shakespeare being Davenant's godfather with its accompanying scandalous suggestions has been noted in several sources. Probably John Aubrey did most to circulate this story. See *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (London, 1950), p. 85. William Oldys, Alexander Pope, and John Taylor, the "Water Poet", are other names involved in its telling and retelling, by no means to their credit. Of his recent biographers only Alfred Harbage seems to discredit the tales. Arthur Nethercot would like to believe it simply because he finds it a tantalizing tidbit, and Montague Summers in *The Playhouse of Pepys* (London, 1935), p. 5, writes "... although myself I see no reason at all why the story may not be accepted." Since it is unlikely that the truth will ever be known, the reader can, with equal justification, accept either view.

inclination towards a University education. Perhaps if he had, his later ambition towards a literary career would have been less frustrated. In any case, before his parents died in 1622, it was clear that other means of livelihood must be secured for a boy whose very restlessness and lack of inner direction might prove an obstacle to himself and the other Davenant heirs. Thus it is not surprising that the father's will stipulated that William was to "be put to prentice to some good merchant of London or other tradesman".[2] In doing so he spurred his son's departure from humdrum respectability towards a world that would shape more surely the way to fame.[3]

An ambitious lad could hardly learn more swiftly how to function in court life than through employment as a page in an aristocratic household. As such in the service of the arrogant and

[2] Arthur Acheson, *Shakespeare's Sonnet Story 1592-1598* (London, 1922). See the "Will of John Davenant (of Oxford)", pp. 658-663.

[3] *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Joel E. Spingarn (Oxford, 1908-1909), pp. 29-30. In his "Preface to Gondibert", Davenant admits that his reason for writing was a desire for fame: "Men are chiefly provok'd to the toyl of compiling Books by love of Fame, and often by officiousness of Conscience, but seldom with expectation of Riches; for those that spend time in writing to instruct others may finde leasure to inform themselves how mean the provisions are which busy and studious minds can make for their own sedentary bodies: And learned men, to whom the rest of the world are but Infants, have the same foolish affection in nourishing others minds as Pellicans in feeding their young, which is at the expence of the very subsistance of Life. 'Tis then apparent they proceed by the instigation of Fame or Conscience; and I believe many are persuaded by the first (of which I am One) and some are commanded by the second. Nor is the desire of Fame so vain as divers have rigidly imagin'd, Fame being, when belonging to the Living, that which is more gravely call'd a steady and necessary reputation, and without it hereditary Power or acquir'd greatness can never quietly govern the World. 'Tis of the dead a musical glory, in which God, the author of excellent goodness, vouchsafes to take a continual share: For the remember'd vertues of great men are chiefly such of his works, mention'd by King David, as perpetually praise him; and the good fame of the Dead prevails by example much more than the reputation of the Living, because the later is alwayes suspected by our Envy, but the other is cheerfully allow'd and religiously admir'd; for Admiration, whose Eyes are ever weak, stands still and at gaze upon great things acted far off, but when they are neer, walks slightly away as from familiar objects. Fame is to our Sons a solid Inheritance, and not unuseful to remote Posterity; and to our Reason, 'tis the first though but a little taste of Eternity."

aging Duchess of Richmond, Davenant became acquainted with a social brilliance that few courtiers could equal. But such an education was of short duration. The Duke of Richmond died in 1624, leaving his wife in reduced circumstances. Davenant was inevitably one of her "small economies". Lack of employment, however, was no immediate hardship, for about this time Davenant received the £150 stipulated in his father's legacy. Supported by such, he undertook to get married. Concerning this first wife, Mary, little is known, except that she bore two children and then died before they were grown. Before long Davenant entered into the service of Fulke Greville, the onetime companion of Philip Sidney. Undoubtedly association with a man who had belonged to the Pembroke circle would be of inspiring influence to one with literary aims. In fact, it was during this time that Davenant was to try his hand at writing tragedies. But in 1628 Greville was murdered by a dissatisfied servant, and once more Davenant was without occupation.

Having authored two tragedies, one a closet piece called *Albovine* and the other, *The Cruel Brother*, which reached the theatre in performance, Davenant had been sufficiently encouraged not to forsake his goal. Still he had to find a new patron. His first step was to seek contacts at the Inns of Court. Taking lodging there he soon met scions of the most illustrious families. Fraternizing with them, indulging in the frenzied pleasures they too often enjoyed, must have consumed many precious hours of a poet's time, and yet he managed to continue playwriting. *The Siege* appeared in 1629, soon followed by *The Just Italian*. Youth was on his side. By pleasing others as well as pleasing himself, Davenant was forcing his wedge into fashionable circles. But his youth was also to lead him into pranks that were to be severely regretted. According to Aubrey, it was a "black, handsome wench that lay in Axe-yard, Westminster" that favored the poet with venereal disease. In any case, at the time Davenant was on a brief expedition with Buckingham's army, and like many foolish young men in military service he was more eager than prudent in choosing his female company. Treatment for the Grand Pox, as it was then called, required mercury. Unwisely administered its results

could be most unfortunate. Davenant's reminder of such a ravaging cure was a nose so mulitated that it was to be an object of scorn, or pity, but usually the former, for the rest of his life. Then hardly was this affliction mended when his rash temper caused him to wound an ostler fatally. Protection from the law he found in Holland, and there he remained until hot tempers at home had been quenched and his own volatile spirits somewhat sobered. In 1633 Davenant was again in London where he was to find his patron at the King's Court.

His first comedy, *The Wits*, brought him to the attention of Charles I because of a dispute over its suitability for licensing. The matter settled, the play was "well likt" at court, and its author was in time commissioned to flatter the Queen's latest craze. Henrietta Maria, schooled as a girl under the influence of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, having digested thoroughly the precious L'Astrée of Honoré d'Urfé, was determined to bring Platonic Love to her husband's somewhat wayward court. How better and more entertainingly could she do it than presentation through theatricals? Jonson, having refused to work with Inigo Jones, and the latter being utterly indispensable for his gorgeous scenic effects, Davenant was recruited to fulfill the subsidiary role. For the writer of *The Wits*, a masque celebrating an unconsummated relationship between the sexes was indeed no easy commission. That his *The Temple of Love* pleased is evident in that the Queen honored the poet with her livery.

Other works on the same topic were to follow. *Love and Honour*, a tragi-comedy, in its very title hailed a theme that was to have great vogue on the stage. *The Platonick Lovers* approaches it again as a tragi-comedy, though veering close to satire. *The Triumphs of the Prince D'Amour*, a masque, presented the same idea in lavish production in honor of the visiting Palatine princes. Yet none of these works can begin to equal in quality the one play that is an exception to those which Davenant was writing at this time. *News from Plymouth*, a roistering comedy, was his only early work not written for an aristocratic private audience. Presented at the plebeian Globe, it catered to a more basic appreciation of comedy, and in doing so it has more right to be termed comic.

Until the Interregnum Davenant's social, financial, and literary successes were to continue. It would be unfair to denounce Davenant as a mere court flunkey, yet it cannot be denied that he was willing to dazzle his benefactors at their request. *Britannia Triumphans* and *Luminalia* were two masques of magnificent splendor and sometimes soporific rhetoric. *Salmacida Spolia* even allowed for the Queen herself, obviously pregnant, to take part in the rather dangerous if not ridiculous role of being hoisted by a machine in order to make an entrance as if descending from a cloud. *The Unfortunate Lovers* was another Italianate tragedy, while *The Fair Favorite* foreshadowed the approaching heroic drama, delicately diluted with strains of sentimentality. *The Distresses* revealed the Spanish influence that was to become so prevalent among dramatists in the decades to come. Considering this output, it is not surprising that Charles should deem Davenant worthy of being Jonson's successor. Though he was never to have the title of Poet Laureate officially by letters patent, still it was obvious to his contemporaries that the king's financial grant in 1638 was sufficiently significant.

From 1640 to 1656 the new Laureate was not to have a play produced. Political events prevented any such frivolity. Nor would Davenant, loyal as he was, care to shirk his more important responsibilities to the ousted Crown.

It would be impossible in a brief biographical sketch to enumerate the intrigues involving Davenant. He was a Royalist, sincerely so, and as such supported his patron with unswerving devotion. Before attending the Queen to France in February, 1642, he had already been apprehended for his political contrivances and barely averted execution for high treason. On the Continent and again at home he served under William Cavendish, Earl of Newcastle, as Lieutenant-general of the ordnance. For one who only five years before had been a mere "ancient", he advanced swiftly. But his honor was to be still magnified. At the siege of Gloucester, Charles I dubbed his faithful servant a knight. Such recognition was warranted. As the royal forces continued to disintegrate and the monarch's position became increasingly perilous, Davenant entered upon his most desperate mission. The

Queen and her advisers believed the King could save himself only by abjuring Episcopacy and in uniting with the Scottish and English Presbyterians against the English Independents and anti-monarchists. As special envoy in this cause, Davenant pleaded with expected eloquence. Needless to say, to the King's credit, the poet failed. Though the King was later to weaken and offer concessions equal to Davenant's prpoosal, it was then too late. His doom was fixed. In 1649 the Cavalier cause was lost when Charles was beheaded at Whitehall.

Tedious exile was to continue, during which Davenant returned to his vocation and began work on what would become the unfinished epic *Gondibert*. Engrossed as he was, he was evidently urged to put it aside and enter upon a more exciting venture. For in the early months of 1650 he was making preparations to sail to America in order to become the new Governor of Maryland. But his plan was foiled. Hardly had he set sail than some parliamentary ships appeared. Taken prisoner he spent the entire summer in Cowes Castle and then was moved to the Tower. Pending trial he whiled away his hours in working on his epic, but as to how well he could concentrate, it would be difficult to judge. Certainly the charges against him were serious. Yet they were never pressed. As to the exact circumstances surrounding the Council of State's signed order for his release, no one seems to know. Of the several surmises, the most appealing, though there is no supporting evidence, is that Milton himself intervened in his behalf. Probably what did happen was simply that Parliament was of a calmer temper, becoming more objective in its definition of treason. After two and a half years of imprisonment, two of them spent in the Tower, Davenant was freed on the promise that he would remain in London.

Literature was not his immediate goal upon securing freedom. Rather, his wife being dead, he married the widow of the physician who had cured his disfiguring malady some twenty years earlier. Whether or not this marriage was an act of gratitude because she had provided his bail is unknown. In any case this move was not for a fortune, since soon afterwards he was again in prison, hounded by creditors. Fortunately, the matter was temporarily