

Classic Poetry Series

Sir William Davenant
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Sir William Davenant(1606 - 1668)

Sir William Davenant (or D'Avenant), dramatist and theater manager, poet and courtier, is a link between the older Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and the new Restoration drama. From his innovations improving the platform stage our modern playhouse is derived; he refined the genre of the heroic drama with the accompanying themes of love and honor; by tradition he first brought women onto the English stage; and his dramas influenced those of the next several generations, particularly John Dryden's. If he is remembered only for his "adaptations" of Shakespeare we do him disservice.

Davenant was born in Oxford in late February 1606, the son of John Davenant, vintner and proprietor of the Crown Tavern, who at his death was mayor of Oxford, and Jane Shepherd Davenant. William Shakespeare, who lodged at the Crown "once a year," according to John Aubrey, may have been his godfather and, according to subsequent gossip, his natural father as well. The source of this rumor seems to have been Samuel Butler, whose report of a comment by Davenant was recorded by Aubrey: "it seemed to him [Davenant] that he writ with the very same spirit that Shakespeare [did], and seemed content enough to be called his son." Davenant never claimed he was Shakespeare's son, and his reference to the kinship is probably an acknowledgment of literary indebtedness.

Davenant was educated in Oxford at St. Paul's Parish under Edward Sylvester, "a noted Latinist and Grecian," according to Anthony à Wood; Aubrey adds that Davenant "was drawn from school before he was ripe enough," but at twelve he had written an "Ode in Remembrance of Shakespeare." In 1620-1621 he went to Lincoln College at Oxford, leaving, because of his father's death, to become page to the Duchess of Richmond. Wood says Davenant "wanted much of university learning"; but he also remarks on the playwright's "high and noble flights in the poetical faculty" and styles him the "Sweet swan of Isis."

After several years of service to the Duchess, Davenant entered the household of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, friend of Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, where he served most likely as a clerk until Greville's murder in 1628. During his intermittent stay at Brooke House, broken by his residence in the Middle Temple, Davenant's dramatic career began. Here he wrote four plays: *The Tragedy of Albovine, King of the Lombards*, a revenge tragedy completed in 1627, which the actors declined to produce (it was published in 1629), and *The Cruel Brother*, another tragedy of the same year which was acted in Blackfriars; also *The Colonel*, a tragicomedy that was retitled *The Siege* when it was published in 1673, and *The Just Italian*, both acted in 1629.

His career as courtier, begun with service in the houses of Richmond and Brooke, led to his joining the blundering first expedition of the Duke of Buckingham in the 1627 siege of the Isle of Rhé; he may have been in the second, 1628 expedition as well. For the rest of his life, save during a three-year illness, he served the court in various ways--in literature and in military and diplomatic service.

After he was cashiered out of Buckingham's forces, riddled as they were by incompetence and contagion, he contracted syphilis, or, as it was called then, the Grand Pox. For three years, probably in poverty, he endured a treatment of mercury that saved his life but marked him for the rest of it. His disfigured nose, a consequence of the disease and its treatment, was an object of ridicule by his enemies and of tolerant acceptance by his friends. They recognized that "His art was high, though his nose was low." At least one person who commented on his nose suffered for it. During his recuperation, probably incensed by a low jest, Davenant attacked a tapster, Thomas Warren of Braintree, with his rapier and wounded him several times. Warren died a few days later. Davenant, who fled to Holland, was convicted of murder and his property sequestrated. But because the King was petitioned for his pardon, he was able to return to England in 1633. A full pardon was not granted until five years later. Despite his nose, Queen Henrietta Maria received him into her service through the intercession of his friend Endymion Porter.

His first play presented before the court on 28 January 1634, *The Wits*, was "well liked." One of his most successful plays, it reflects Jonsonian humors and satire and anticipates the Restoration wits and witwounds. Another Jonsonian realistic comedy, *News from Plymouth*, was written in 1635 for a vacation audience at the Globe and for the replenishment of a lean purse; as he wrote in a burlesque poem,

Forth he steals, to Globe does run,

And smiles and vows four acts are done;

.....

And all to get (as Poets use)

Some coin in pouch to solace muse.

Love and Honor, acted at Blackfriars theater on 12 December 1634, is based on Fletcherian Neoplatonism and anticipates the later heroic drama where characters represent abstract ideals, especially virtue and honor. Samuel Pepys was so delighted with the tragicomedy that he saw it three times during its revival after the Restoration. The play, which reflects the Queen's interest in French romances and seems to have pleased the "courtly love" coterie surrounding her, secured him his first commission from her, a masque celebrating Platonic love. The Temple of Love, presented at Whitehall on 10 February 1635, praises love and comments with careful wit on Platonic nonsense. It secured the Queen's servant his livery. Based on the same idea, The Platonic Lovers (produced in 1636) did not succeed, most likely because it played too lightly with Platonic idealism to be well received by those, like the Queen, who cherished it.

His second masque, the Triumphs of the Prince D'Amour, was written in three days to celebrate the visit of the King's young nephews and produced before them at Court on 23 February 1636. It is a series of semicomical spectacles ending with a table of refreshments for all. The Queen, who had put on "a citizen's habit" for the occasion, "liked it very well," Sir Henry Herbert tells us.

In these halcyon days, Davenant was gaining favor with the court and his fellow poets; he was friend to the Queen and had a wide acquaintance among poets such as Sir John Suckling, Thomas Carew, Henry Vaughan, and George Sandys. On 13 December 1638 King Charles granted him an annuity of £100; there is no mention in the grant of the office of poet laureate, a term not used officially until Dryden's appointment. But Davenant was so accepted, even without the title, by his contemporaries, as Jonson had been by his.

After his annuity was granted, Davenant worked with the well-known architect and set designer Inigo Jones, now estranged from Jonson, in the production of three masques, by now a dying form in the impoverished court: Britannia Triumphans; Luminalia, or The Festival of Light (both acted in 1638); and Salmacida Spolia (performed in 1640). In Salmacida Spolia, the last of the Caroline masques, the Queen, then pregnant, made her entrance descending by a theatrical device from a cloud.

Besides his court productions, he briefly managed the Cockpit theater in Drury Lane, where he had already seen his plays produced, replacing William Beeston, from June 1640 to his arrest for complicity in a plot against Parliament in May 1641. The popular The Unfortunate Lovers (1638), a revenge play, had three command performances, was later given by his rival Thomas Killigrew, and was

acted as a tribute to the writer on the day after his death. *The Fair Favorite* (1638), a tragicomedy, may reflect again his respect for the court and his idealized portraits of royalty. His last play before the civil war, *The Distresses*, or *the Spanish Lovers* (written in 1639, but probably not produced), has been noted for its anticipation of Restoration drama in its witty repartee and in its portraits of the rake and the independent woman. It appeared in the folio edition of his works (1673).

Before his career was interrupted by the war, he had established himself not only as a playwright and manager, but as a poet by the publication of *Madagascar; With Other Poems* in 1638. Hoping for a laureateship, he wrote to royalty and courtiers, even honoring with an "Epick Ode" the Queen's dwarf; the book includes elegies, epithalamia, and other occasional poems. He pays respectful tributes to, among others, Shakespeare and Jonson, whose influence, along with other Renaissance poets, he acknowledges. But his dramatic career came to an end, not only with the closing of the theaters in 1642, but with his arrest for treason the previous year and his flight to France.

His service during the civil war was that of an ardent and faithful royalist. A messenger of the Crown, a supply officer, a privateer, he generously--perhaps too generously--spent his own funds for arms and ammunition. For his service he was knighted at the siege of Gloucester in September 1643. After the execution of Charles I, Davenant served his son, who named him treasurer of the colony of Virginia and, to replace Lord Baltimore, lieutenant-governor of Maryland. Davenant, his ship, and his crew were captured by Parliamentarians on 4 May 1650, the day after they sailed from Jersey. In prison, first at Cowes Castle and then in the Tower, he continued work on his epic poem *Gondibert*, which was placed on sale by mid December 1650 though it was dated 1651. Apparently John Milton and others secured his release from the Tower in 1652, but he was still under arrest until 1654. Before then he had resumed writing some poetry and drama, especially dramatic and literary "entertainments."

To avoid the restrictions still attached to the words theater and play, Davenant and others presented *The First Day's Entertainment at Rutland House*, by *Declamations and Music* in May 1656, a beginning for better things to come. It used music as an auxiliary to the words, as had been done by the ancients. Urged by its success, within three months of 1656 he had composed *The Siege of Rhodes*, part one, "a heroic story in stillo recitativo," a play more than an opera. Produced at Rutland House in September 1656, it has been called with more than small justification "the most epoch-making play in the English language."

For this "first heroic drama," there was a platform stage and for the first time a

proscenium arch--improving the designs of Inigo Jones for royal masques--a curtain, and five moveable scenes on flats or "shutters." Also notable was the presence in the play of the first Englishwoman, Mrs. Coleman, to act on an English public stage. Henry Lawes, Milton's friend and composer for *Comus*, furnished the music--as he had for *The First Day's Entertainment*--and a protégé of Inigo Jones, John Webb, designed the scenes. Crowds and armies were represented, for the first time on the English stage, on painted canvas. Rutland House could not long hold such entertainments, and by July 1658 the Cockpit was showing *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*, a succession of songs, declamations, dances, and acrobatics mounted against simple backdrops painted in perspective. Despite its theatricality, the play was written to support Cromwell's war with Spain. *The History of Sir Francis Drake* followed in winter 1658-1659, and a second part of *The Siege of Rhodes*, a full-length, fully equipped play.

The first part of *The Siege of Rhodes* is the story of the siege of 1522, an incident well known to Davenant's contemporaries, when Solyman the Magnificent subdued the city through blockade and assault with 200,000 men. Among the outnumbered Rhodians is Alphonso, a visitor to the fortress, who chooses to stay rather than to escape to Sicily and to his new bride, Ianthe, a character invented by Davenant. When *The Siege of Rhodes* was revised for the opening of the more spacious Duke's Playhouse in 1661 Davenant, because he now had more than one actress, added the character Roxalana, who is jealous of the virtuous Ianthe. Roxalana was played by Hester Davenport, the first well-known English actress. Part two of *The Siege of Rhodes*, given in alternate performance with part one, is more from Davenant's imagination than from history; it establishes firmly, through Roxalana's conversion by Ianthe's purity, the convention of expressing the conflict of love and honor in heroic couplets.

The first part of the play had been produced under the protectorate without objections, the second after the Restoration of the monarchy. Although Davenant had supported the return of Charles II, he seems to have had little political influence, save in behalf of John Milton who was allowed to come out of hiding but placed under house arrest. However, he continued to serve as poet laureate without pension. But the Restoration allowed him an opportunity to become manager and innovator in the blossoming theater of the time.

He and his great rival, Thomas Killigrew, a favorite of the court, were given a patent to establish a theater and a virtual monopoly on London playhouses. They were first at the Cockpit in Drury Lane until Killigrew took the older and more experienced actors to the Red Bull. Davenant, in turn, after directing his company briefly at Salisbury Court, moved to Lisle's Tennis Court in Lincoln's Inn

Fields; the theater there, which became known as the Duke's Playhouse, opened in late June 1661. His company became known by a patent of 1663 as the Duke of York's Players, Killigrew's more elegantly as His Majesty's Players.

At his theater Davenant trained, among others, Thomas Betterton and Henry Harris, admired by some over Betterton; Pepys said that he "was a more airy man." The company also included eight women, four of whom lived with the Davenant family. One of them, Ann Gibbs, became the wife of Thomas Shadwell, the dramatist and poet; another, "Moll" Davis, became a mistress of Charles II.

Old plays formed the basis of the repertoire at the theater; Davenant had exclusive rights to his own work and nine old plays from the King's Company--seven of Shakespeare's, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Sir John Denham's *The Sophy*. He rescued others from his old days at the Cockpit and received a few new ones from Sir George Etherege, Dryden, and Shadwell. Samuel Tuke's *Adventures of Five Hours* was given here; its plot had been suggested by the King, and Pepys admired it over Shakespeare.

But Davenant also wrote or altered plays for his theater. The first, *The Law Against Lovers* (produced in 1662), is an altered version of *Measure for Measure* with the importation of the Beatrice-Benedick plot from *Much Ado About Nothing*. His second--and more original--is *Playhouse to be Let* (produced in 1663), "several pieces of different kinds handsomely tacked together," according to the dramatic historian Langbaine. It is a play about a playhouse where a varied group of performers exhibit their talents and provide the fare for the remainder of the entertainment. One act is Davenant's translation of Molière's *Sganarelle*, the first of his plays to reach the English audience; two other acts revive two of Davenant's own plays, *The History of Sir Francis Drake* and *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*; and the last act is a burlesque of a popular and now forgotten tragedy. *The Rivals* (produced in 1664) is a free adaptation of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* with two acts, the first and the last, completely new. Considered an improvement upon Shakespeare and Fletcher's original, it was revived for the court as late as 1667. The last of Davenant's dramas is *The Man's the Master* (produced in 1668), a redaction, as Alfred Harbage has pointed out, of Paul Scarron's *Le Maître Valet*, which was found entertaining enough to be given as late as 1775.

But it was in Davenant's handling of Shakespeare's plays at his theater in Lincoln's Inn Fields that he is probably most often remembered. He loved Shakespeare next to idolatry and wanted his audience to share that love. To convince them of that greatness, he recast Shakespeare's plays in the image and taste of his own times. Before one joins unthinkingly the chorus of denigrators,

he should cast a critical eye on some Shakespeare productions of our time where a director insists on emerging egotistically from a submerged text; without approving Davenant's meddling, one can at least understand his motivation.

Hamlet, cut and with its diction mutilated, was the first Shakespearean play to be given on Davenant's new picture stage. No succeeding tragedy, it was said, got more reputation and money for the company, partly because Betterton "did the Prince's part beyond imagination"--according to Pepys, who had declared that "the old plays begin to disgust this refined age, since his Majesty's being so long abroad." Macbeth was elaborately staged, oddly omitting the apparitions in the last scene with the witches, but enlarging the part of Lady Macduff and suppressing the porter, whose speech seemed too indecorous for such a "refined age." Before the "restored" Macbeth was produced in 1774, Londoners saw more than two hundred performances of Davenant's version, which was first acted in 1663.

The Tempest, or the Enchanted Island (produced in 1667), which Davenant adapted from Shakespeare's play with the assistance of John Dryden, was given in this version for nearly two centuries, surely an indication of its theatrical effectiveness. This recasting by an experienced dramatist and his apprentice shows clearly--if in the extreme--the results of adaptation. Miranda, who has never seen a man except her father, is balanced by Hippolito (actually an actress in breeches as the prologue points out), a man who had never seen a woman. By this addition, Miranda must be given a sister, Dorinda. Once such balancing begins, restraint ends, it appears: Caliban gets a sister named for their mother, Sycorax, and Ariel is given a sweetheart, Milcha. The ship's motley crew are joined by Mustacho and Ventoso, adept tricksters who carry the farcical subplot. Much of Shakespeare's lyricism is cut, but there are additional songs, duets, choruses, dances, a drunken hornpipe, and a masque that replaces the original one to Ceres. Perhaps the most effective features of the play were the wind machines. This version of The Tempest was so popular that the King paid for five performances in the next six months.

In his adaptation, Davenant, knowing his audience, emended for clarity, elegance, and theatricality. Alfred Harbage has written that "as a result, abstract and lyrical passages, those most figurative and imaginative, in a word, most Shakespearean, were recast, abbreviated, or completely excised." Arthur Nethercot deplores Davenant's "violating hand [that] rove murderously among the greatest lines in English literature." That hand resisted no temptation to rewrite and there was no restraining it; what was right, it often wronged.

Although his literary career was chiefly in drama and entertainments, Davenant

was a nondramatic poet as well. His early *Madagascar* (1638) was a gallimaufry of adulatory poems worthy of an aspirant to the laureateship. His *Gondibert*, a "Heroick Poem" as he called it, was some years in the making and was published in 1651. Based on admirable intentions--judged and encouraged by Thomas Hobbes--it was his chief occupation during his exile and subsequent imprisonment. Joseph Knight, writing on Davenant in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, pronounced it "a book to be praised rather than read ..., insufferably dull." For Davenant the poem is of "old, unhappy, far off things/And battles long ago." It is peopled with an exemplary hero and heroine and, of course, a melodramatic villain, all eighth-century Lombards. The poem's plot is unfinished, and no modern reader--if there are any--could wish for its being a line longer.

His collected *Poems on Several Occasions* was published posthumously in the 1673 folio volume of Davenant's works under the watchful eye of Lady Mary Davenant who, taught well by her husband, saw that the handsome and weighty collection of all his writings was dedicated to Prince Charles. These poems reflect the attitudes of the Cavalier poets and the received tradition of earlier poets, particularly Shakespeare, Jonson, and Donne. This volume contains his best-known lyric, "The lark now leaves his wat'ry nest," a poem whose sensitivity shocks the reader who knows what Davenant could do in meddling with Shakespeare's lines.

Altogether his poems are those of an aspirant to greatness who too largely desired approbation and fame. Without his contributions to the theater, Davenant scarce would be remembered. He died a famous playwright on 7 April 1668. His wife took up his work, and for twenty-two years she occupied herself by finishing the Dorset Garden Theater and managing its business, the first Englishwoman to manage a theater. She was his third wife; his first, whom he married at eighteen, bore him two children but died before they were fully reared. We know little else about her. His second wife, Dame Anne Cademan, whom he married in 1652, was a widow with four sons; she died in 1655 and was buried at St. Andrew's Holborn on 5 March 1655. He married his third wife, Henrietta-Maria du Tremblay, in the same year. He and "Lady Mary," as she was known, had seven sons.

Davenant was buried in Westminster Abbey two days after his death. On a marble stone above his grave is inscribed "O rare Sir Will. Davenant," in imitation of Ben Jonson's epitaph. He was denied a laurel wreath set on his coffin, the finest that Sir John Denham ever saw; Aubrey thought it should have been done.

Although his poems are almost completely forgotten and his plays rarely

performed, Davenant has an assured place in English dramatic history. He stands between Shakespeare, whom he acknowledged master, and Dryden, his apprentice. He schooled actors, preserving the Elizabethan traditions and continuing the work of Richard Burbage; the greatest of the Restoration actors, Thomas Betterton, was Davenant's pupil. He gave us a picture stage with its proscenium arch and curtain; his productions--with their greater reliance upon moveable scenery and their elevation of music, song, dance, and elaborate machinery--were significant advances on the Elizabethan private theater. From his innovations is derived our modern theater auditorium. Inspired by the French theater, he was the first to bring women to the English stage. He established the genre of the heroic play and thus influenced two generations of playwrights, Dryden among them. He was an innovator and preserver who marked the beginning of the modern theater by building on the old.

This "inoffensive, good-natured man," as Theophilus Cibber called him, might be remembered also for a story that can be traced to him. He assured his listeners that in his early penniless days Shakespeare held horses outside the Globe theater for the patrons within. In this happier and more human way, Davenant, "the sweet swan of Isis," is linked again with the other of Avon.

Aubade

THE lark now leaves his wat'ry nest,
 And climbing shakes his dewy wings.
He takes this window for the East,
 And to implore your light he sings--
Awake, awake! the morn will never rise
Till she can dress her beauty at your eyes.

The merchant bows unto the seaman's star,
 The ploughman from the sun his season takes,
But still the lover wonders what they are
 Who look for day before his mistress wakes.
Awake, awake! break thro' your veils of lawn!
Then draw your curtains, and begin the dawn!

Sir William Davenant

Ladies In Arms

LET us live, live! for, being dead,
The pretty spots,
Ribbons and knots,
And the fine French dress for the head,
No lady wears upon her
In the cold, cold bed of honour.
Beat down our grottos, and hew down our bowers,
Dig up our arbours, and root up our flowers;
Our gardens are bulwarks and bastions become;
Then hang up our lute, we must sing to the drum.

Our patches and our curls,
So exact in each station,
Our powders and our purls,
Are now out of fashion.
Hence with our needles, and give us your spades;
We, that were ladies, grow coarse as our maids.
Our coaches have driven us to balls at the court,
We now must drive barrows to earth up the fort.

Sir William Davenant

The Coquet

TIS, in good truth, a most wonderful thing
(I am even ashamed to relate it)
That love so many vexations should bring,
And yet few have the wit to hate it.

Love's weather in maids should seldom hold fair:
Like April's mine shall quickly alter;
I'll give him to-night a lock of my hair,
To whom next day I'll send a halter.

I cannot abide these malapert males,
Pirates of love, who know no duty;
Yet love with a storm can take down their sales,
And they must strike to Admiral Beauty.

Farewell to that maid who will be undone,
Who in markets of men (where plenty
Is cried up and down) will die for even one;
I will live to make fools of twenty.

Sir William Davenant

Weep No More For What Is Past

WEEP no more for what is past,
For time in motion makes such haste
He hath no leisure to descry
Those errors which he passeth by.
If we consider accident,
And how repugnant unto sense
It pays desert with bad event,
We shall disparage Providence.

Sir William Davenant