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Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

New Habits on the Stage

REHEARSING CULTURES?

On October 18, 1666, John Evelyn approvingly recorded the adoption of a new fashion at the Carolean court:

18 To Lond: Star-Chamber: thence to Court, it being the first time of his Majesties putting himselfe solemnly into the Eastern fashion of Vest, changing doublet, stiff Collar, bands and Cloake etc: into a comely Vest, after the Persian mode with girdle or shash, and Shoe strings and Garters, into bouckles, of which some were set with precious stones, resolving never to alter it, and to leave the French mode, which had hitherto obtained to our greate expense and reproch: upon which divers Courtiers and Gent: gave his Ma[jesty] gold, by way of Wager, that he would not persist in this resolution: I had some time before indeede presented an Invectique against that unconstancy, and our so much affecting the french fashion, to his Majestie in which [I] tooke occasion to describe the Comelnesse and usefullnesse of the Persian clothing in the very same manner, his Majestie clad himselfe; This Pamphlet I intituled *Tyrannus* or the mode, and gave it his Majestie to reade; I do not impute the change which soone happn'd to this discourse, but it was an identitie, that I could not but take notice of: This night was acted my Lord Brahals Tragedy cal'd *Mustapha* before their Majesties etc: at Court.¹

The pamphlet to which Evelyn refers was published in 1661 and seems likely to have less to do with Charles II's decision to put on "the Eastern fashion of Vest" than the concurrent staging of the spectacular Oriental drama, Orrery's *Mustapha* (1665), to which he also alludes. Indeed, given the valorization of native costume in "Tyrannus", which signifies political independence, and the stigmatizing of the slavish adoption of foreign fashions, the diarist's self-satisfaction at seeing the King dressed in Persian garb is somewhat surprising: "'Tis not a triviall Remark (which I have somewhere met with) that when a nation is able to impose, and give laws to

the habits of another (as the late *Tartars* in China) it has (like that of Language) prov'd a Fore-runner to the spreading of their Conquests there."² Nathaniel Lee will make the point several years later in *The Rival Queens* (1677), in a scene in which Alexander's loyal commander Clytus refuses to give up his Macedonian dress to wear clothing he sees as emblematic of Eastern decadence:

Away, I will not wear these Persian robes;
 Nor ought the King be angry for the reverence
 I owe my country. Sacred are her customs,
 Which honest Clytus shall preserve to death.
 O let me rot in *Macedonian* rags
 Rather than shine in fashions of the East.³

Although Evelyn's hostility to the assumption of fashions derived from the absolute, Catholic court of Louis XIV is not surprising, this enthusiasm for the adoption of costume from the infidel and despotic Persians seems to require explanation.

Evelyn's response can be accounted for quite simply by tradition; as S. C. Chew demonstrated in *The Crescent and the Rose*, the courtly practice of wearing Eastern dress both informally, and in the performance of pageants, processions, masques and even mock sea-battles, had been in place since the middle of the sixteenth century.⁴ Attempting to interpret other such "rehearsals" of exotic cultures in the early modern period, Steven Mullaney has suggested that the performance of aspects of alien cultures may be accounted for by the impulse to establish a stronger sense of European selfhood against a clearly defined cultural other.⁵ In this schema, rather than comparing and assimilating other "nations" through the discovery of similitudes, as was the practice in previous periods, the temporary adoption of alien ways on stage or in masques and pageants underlined the irreducible difference of exotics. European culture extended its boundaries by first consuming and then reforming and/or expelling the other through representation.

Mullaney's characterization of dramatic performances as reformatory projects intended to strengthen national identity is suggestive in the context of Restoration drama. Many of the serious plays of the last half of the seventeenth century, the heroic drama especially, narrativized episodes from imperial history, whether that of the Romans, the Ottomans, the Spanish or the Portuguese. The

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comedy of the period was much more narrowly focused on London life but even in the comedy, a concern with the definition of a civil, national identity clearly separable from the French in particular, is manifest. Those comic or tragi-comic plays which thematize life abroad in the colonies, in the Indies, among pirates and in utopias satirize the novel social types produced by colonial expansion and settlement.

This pervasive concern with the staging of cultural contact and conflict is unsurprising given the huge expansion of colonial activity in this period but it has only rarely been addressed by literary historians, although the rise of new historicism in Renaissance studies has rendered such interpretations common in the preceding period. Critics have traditionally read through the exoticism of the Restoration heroic drama, to locate a local political meaning allegorized. In the fullest recent study of the Carolean heroic play, Nancy Klein Maguire argues that the tragi-comedies produced by Davenant, Orrery and Dryden between 1658 and 1671 repetitively enacted a drama of rebellion against, usurpation of and restoration of royal power in an attempt to negotiate and perhaps exorcise the traumas of recent political history.⁶ As earlier critics have noted, however, these plays are about “empire” as well as sovereignty and subjecthood. Anne Barbeau argued in 1970 that Dryden’s heroic plays encoded a theory of history which celebrated the gradual triumph of Christianity, an account developed by John Loftis who suggested that the representations of conflicts between Europeans and American Indians and Moors illustrated “the historical process as conceived to embody a widening territorial expansion of Christendom.”⁷ More recently, David Kramer has analysed Dryden’s construction of an “imperial” literary persona in the context of the Restoration literary and military rivalry with France.⁸ None of these critics, however, attempted to relate their analysis of the imperial theme in the heroic drama to Restoration debates over empire, nor extended their account beyond Dryden’s texts to encompass the genre as a whole. Yet much of the heroic plays’ significance in the two decades of the genre’s emergence turns on its role in representing theatrically those processes of imperial expansion and decline, the *translatio imperii* and the clash between Christian European and pagan non-European societies which were central topics in political as well as cultural debate in this period. The genre’s utility in negotiating issues of empire is

equally apparent in the decades following the Glorious Revolution, when the mode, never fully moribund, was revived. In heroic plays of the 1690s and the early 1700s, female dramatists used the genre to figure the enslavement of women in exotic despotisms, Tory playwrights criticized an overtly mercantilist colonial state and Dennis represented a specifically Whig theory of empire.

It is less surprising that commentary on the comic drama has been unconcerned with questions of national identity and colonialism, given the plays' pervasive focus on local social and sexual conflict. Yet even in the most metropolitan of comedies, such as *The Man of Mode*, the definition of national as well as class-based manners is at stake. The colonies themselves are occasionally the site of comic representation, as in *The Widdow Ranter* (1689); emergent types such as the nabob make their appearance (in *Sir Courtly Nice* [1685]) and emigration and piracy serve as subjects in *Cuckolds-Haven* (1685) and *A Commonwealth of Women* (1686). Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* has a nautical protagonist whose excoriating analysis of city manners uses the Indies as a benchmark of savagery, in a comparison by which London gains nothing; and in the comic-operatic redaction of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, serious issues of sovereignty and settlement and the possibility of European degeneration into savagery in new plantations are canvassed.

It is, however, in the serious drama that issues of empire are most evident. Historical scholarship which can help explain this imperial dimension of the plays has emerged only recently. The current literary historical emphasis on the heroic plays' allegorization of domestic politics reflects the dominant trends of historical research, which has stressed that in the years following the Restoration, the political classes of England were preoccupied with local and, at most, national concerns rather than questions of foreign policy.⁹ Recent scholarship has begun to modify this view considerably. Developing a theme explored earlier by John Miller,¹⁰ Jonathan Scott has argued that the interconnected anxieties over popery and arbitrary government which fueled the Exclusion Crisis and the Glorious Revolution reflected English awareness that Protestantism was under threat all across Europe during the latter half of the seventeenth century.¹¹ In his study of London politics from 1688 to 1715, Gary De Krey identifies a split along the emergent Whig/Tory axis within the mercantile community from the late 1670s on, as

dissatisfaction grew among those debarred from participation in the lucrative commerce with the Levant, Russia, Africa and the East Indies, by the monopolistic and restrictive companies authorized by the Crown, which jealously guarded its prerogative in regulating trade. In the 1690s, he notes, “the transformation of the City’s trading and financial institutions . . . signalled the rise of a new Whig mercantile and financial oligarchy,” much resented by City Tories and the landed interest.¹² More generally, Paul Seaward suggests that, although the English were consumed by domestic concerns in 1660, Cromwellian military successes had greatly increased national confidence in foreign affairs and that, over time, European politics were recognized as central to events at home.¹³

The strongest challenge to the previous consensus has come, however, from Steven Pincus, who has argued that the period 1650–68 saw the ideological changes in England which allowed for the transformations in the state necessary for an imperial power after 1688, detailed by John Brewer in *The Sinews of Power* (1989).¹⁴ Arguing that while the first Dutch War was driven by the Rump’s disgust at the perceived backsliding of their once idealized republican co-religionists, and a strongly Providentialist conviction of their own rectitude, Pincus suggests the second conflict saw a transformation in the discourse of patriotism, as religious rhetoric was replaced by a more secular conception of the national interest which included, but was certainly not entirely defined by, trade. During these years, Pincus demonstrates, the English came to believe that “they were defending their religious and political liberties against a universal monarch.”¹⁵ The usual distinction between foreign and domestic concerns, he argues, has obscured the extent to which the English, both elite and populace, understood their own polity in a European, as much as a local, context. When they went to war with the Dutch or the French, therefore, they were not simply concerned with narrow commercial advantage (as economic and diplomatic historians have suggested) but with their proper and traditional role in preventing universal monarchy. Along with the transformation in notions of the national interest, the concept of universal monarchy was itself undergoing revision in a period which saw maritime and commercial power challenge traditional assumptions about the territorial and institutional bases of imperial authority.

Whether the focus is on the role of internal or external competition over foreign and colonial trade; or on the increasing anxiety

over the perceived threat of expansionist Catholic absolutism (to which I would be inclined to add the fears attendant on a resurgent Ottoman empire, finally brought to terms only in 1699¹⁶), recent historical work placing issues of colonial expansion and empire squarely at the centre of Restoration political discourse has important implications for the literary historical interpretation of this period.¹⁷ With the exception of Michael McKeon's analysis of *Annus Mirabilis* in terms attentive to its imbrication in Anglo-Dutch colonial rivalry, Thale's and Kramer's accounts of the patriotic dimension of Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* and the considerable recent literature on Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and *The Widdow Ranter*, very little attention has been directed to the nationalist and colonialist dimensions of literary culture in the Restoration.¹⁸ Yet discussion over English poetry from Dryden through Rymer to Dennis is conducted with precisely that competitive and nationalist awareness of a European context which Pincus emphasizes also informed political debate: the concern over the *translatio imperii* was matched by an equally acute interest in the *translatio studii*. Poetic and political power, politeness and greatness, were regarded as interdependent. The most famous example is doubtless what Thale has described as Dryden's "patriotic frame" for the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* in which an argument over the superiority of French or English drama is conducted on "that memorable day, in the first Summer of the late War, when our Navy ingag'd the *Dutch*: a Day wherein the two most mighty and best-appointed Fleets which any age had ever seen, disputed the command of the greater half of the Globe, the commerce of Nations, and the riches of the Universe."¹⁹ The linkage of poetry and inter-state rivalry is persistent, with Dennis arguing some thirty-five years later in the *Epistle* dedicating his *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* to the Earl of Mulgrave in 1701, that the cultivation of criticism and the "Poeticall art" in France in the seventeenth century was "very instrumental in . . . raising the esteem of their Nation to that degree, that it naturally prepar'd the Way for their Intrigues of State, and facilitated the Execution of their vast Designs."²⁰ As an "encourager of Arts, and a great States-man," he suggests that Mulgrave "knows that the bare Endeavour to advance an Art among us, is an Effort to augment the Learning, and consequently the Reputation, and consequently the Power, of a Great People" (1,207). It is no accident that Dryden's invocation in the *Essay* of that peculiarly English form of

military power, the navy, recurs in later major discussions of British literary superiority. In Rymer's "Short View of Tragedy" (1692), the critic celebrates Waller's "To the King, on his Navy" (1632) as evidence of his contention that "Since the decay of the Roman Empire this Island, peradventure has been more fortunate in matters of Poetry, than any of our Neighbours."²¹ Just as Waller's verses suggest that the "Navy Royal might well give (the King) pre-eminence in power, above *Achilles*" (127), Rymer claims that Waller's "Poetry distinguish'd him from all his contemporaries, both in *England* and in other Nations; And from all before him upwards to *Horace* and *Virgil*" (127). When Dennis picks up the citation of Waller in the third dialogue of *The Impartial Critick*, his 1693 response to Rymer, the choice of poem recalls (in a complimentary fashion) the naval frame of Dryden's *Essay*. It also underlines, however, the importance of Waller's role as celebrant of English naval power, not just in the "Verses on the Fleet" and the "Instructions to a Painter" but in "Of a War with Spain, and a Fight at Sea" and the three poems written to celebrate the defeat of the Turks in the 1680s.

The navy's prominence in literary debate reflects the crucial role of the fleet in Restoration economic, military and political affairs (as well as the dislike for armies documented by Lois Schwoerer).²² By 1660, Spanish ambitions to be "Masters of the Universe," in the period's resonant phrase, were widely regarded as dead. "The vast increase in power by land and sea which other nations have made upon them since Queen Elizabeth's time," wrote the English Ambassador to Spain Sir Richard Fanshawe in 1662, "hath so altered the balance that Spain must no more pretend to universal monarchy."²³ In English analyses, the defeat of the Armada (significantly, of course, a failure at sea) symbolized the failure of an empire which had neglected to cultivate the population, the commerce, the industry and the agriculture necessary to maintain a powerful state. The control of trade and power at sea was now understood to be crucial to aspirants to imperial power: "To pretend to *Universal Monarchy* without *Fleets* was long looked on as a *Political Chymaera*" argued John Evelyn in his 1674 account of *Navigation and Commerce*.²⁴ English speculation about the new aspirants to empire centered first on the Dutch, possessors of a formidable navy and colonial power in the East Indies, and, increasingly, on the French. Suspicion of the aggressively Catholic and absolute Louis XIV was fostered by his energy and ambition but assumed particular

relevance in England as Charles' predilection for Gallic culture, mistresses, funding and alliance became obvious.

The English were direct rivals of the Dutch in terms of trade and sea-power but the most frequent articulation of their position within the European theatre was a claim that they held the balance of power, rather than a direct expression of ambition for empire. As Charles Davenant put it in 1701, "For many years we have pretended to hold the Ballance of Europe and the Body of the People will neither think it Consistent with our Honour nor our Safety to quit that Post."²⁵ David Armitage's account of a specifically republican ideology of empire, developed under Cromwell but resurgent at various points through the eighteenth century, is equally emphatic in disavowing claims to the absolute power implied in the term universal monarchy, or "imperium." Armitage argues that the Commonwealth ideologues of empire drew on the Roman notion of *patrocinium*, which implied a federation of autonomous states rather than a single political unit with a centralized government.²⁶ The notion of confederation was also attractive to Andrew Fletcher, Scottish patriot and neo-Machiavellian whose *Account of a Conversation* of 1703, written in the shadow of Williamite ambition to a universal monarchy of trade, argues for the value of a Europe in which states in geographical proximity and sharing a common language could be grouped together after the fashion of the Achaian League.²⁷

The frequent English disavowal of claims to empire reflected the dawning suspicion that imperial states were bound, inexorably, to a process of expansion followed just as inexorably by decline; that they were despotic and, in all previous forms, hostile to commerce, the new engine of social and political change. The disavowal, however, was as factitious, ultimately, as Sir John Seeley's claim that the British Empire was acquired in a fit of absence of mind. The Republican tradition provided an alternative model to universal monarchy through its invocation of *patrocinium* but all the later Stuarts showed considerable enthusiasm in pursuing dominion over the seas. Further, Charles and James showed no signs of wanting to loosen control over their North American plantation colonies or the trading companies and their factories in the Levant, Africa and the East Indies and, however great popular revulsion from France became, Louis XIV's centralized model of national and colonial control was alluring to English monarchs. Assessments of

Charles's and James's foreign policy are disputed but tend to suggest they failed to maintain the authority commanded by Cromwell on the European stage, whether through ineptitude or preoccupation with domestic affairs.²⁸ It is incontrovertible, however, that, following the passing of the Navigation Acts, foreign and colonial trade grew enormously, with customs revenues contributing substantially to the Crown's relative fiscal well-being in the 1680s and laying the foundations for the extended period of warfare after 1688.²⁹ James had a particular interest in the navy and was a substantial investor in the Royal African Company and both brothers pursued policies of "royalization and centralization" in the American colonies in the 1680s.³⁰

Jealous of their prerogative in foreign and colonial affairs, both Charles and James Stuart maintained a strong grasp over policy in this area.³¹ The visions of expansion presented in the heroic plays, in particular, presumably appealed to the monarchy insofar as they focused on precisely those foreign and colonial arenas in which their authority was less open to local dispute.³² The dramatists whom they patronized are also notable for their involvement in colonial policy: Orrery, for example, who wrote so many of the early, successful examples of the genre at Charles's behest, was "The Man of Munster," the dominant magnate of Northern Ireland. *Altemera* (1661), sometimes described as the first heroic play, had its initial production in Dublin. William Davenant, who was known for his poem *Madagascar*, dedicated to the Lord High Admiral Prince Rupert, later wrote propagandistic celebrations of English expansionism for Cromwell as well as *The Siege of Rhodes*, and was on his way to take up the Governorship of Maryland when he was halted by Parliamentary troops in 1642. Dryden had no personal experience in colonial administration but his Yorkist affiliations informed his poetic as well as dramatic praise of English naval power in *Astraea Redux*, *Annus Mirabilis* and the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*. Aphra Behn famously claimed the authority of her own experience in Surinam as the basis for her novella *Oroonoko*, successfully dramatized by Southerne.

There was also, as noted above, considerable ambivalence about aspirations to empire, a skepticism more apparent before 1688 in figures like Shadwell than enthusiastic royalists like Orrery. Consistently scornful of colonial adventuring conceived of primarily as commercial, and degenerationist in his assumptions, as the

Stuart regimes ran deeper into crisis, Dryden gradually abandoned the idealized representation of empire as Christian expansionism. After 1688, dramatists with past or continuing Tory affiliations, such as Behn and Southerne, criticized the emergent empire of trade, even as Rowe and Dennis hymned William's achievements as Protestant Liberator. Literary debates play out the contradictions between the appetite for a cultural dominance understood to be the accompaniment of great power and the assertion of liberty as the central political and hence cultural characteristic of the English. As Tim Harris has shown, a concern for "liberty" was claimed by all sides in the political conflicts of Charles's reign and it continued to be a disputed category after the Glorious Revolution.³³ The nature and status of the serious drama, whose traditional role was that of staging and glorifying the nation's past, provided a significant context for this continuing dispute over liberty as well as the increasingly important issue of the relation between liberty and greatness.³⁴

My account of relations between empire and the stage in the Restoration thus begins with a discussion of literary debates over the drama, from 1660 to 1714, followed by an account of the imperial ambition encoded in authorial personae, generic assumptions and the thematics of the heroic plays in particular. A crucial aspect of their effect was their spectacular scenic presentation of exotic locales, custom and costume and the tension created between the plays' heroic elevation and the violence and historical "irregularity" they display. In a chapter devoted to representations of Spanish and Portuguese empire, I examine the process by which the English elites witnessed heightened but critical accounts of the foremost European empire, as dramatists presented the Peninsular states in expansion, corruption and decline. In chapters on Levant and Asian plays, I discuss the representation of Oriental, especially Ottoman, empire, the other main contemporary instance of aspiration to universal monarchy. The heroic plays deploy an emergent Orientalist discourse of despotism, irreligion and sexual license, against which England could be defined as civil politically, religiously and sexually. In the utopian and Amazonian plays of the period, the questioning of conventional European assumptions about the ordering of the gender and political order, provoked by the discovery of new societies, is analyzed. In a chapter on comic and tragi-comic representations of metropolitan manners,