

CULTURAL LIFE DURING THE ENGLISH INTERREGNUM (1649-1660): POETRY, MUSIC AND THEATRE

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ABSTRACT

The years of Oliver Cromwell's protectorate, also known as the English Interregnum (1649-1660), brought not only political, social and religious changes, but also witnessed a clear turning point in the use and meaning of English arts and literature. The year 1649 constituted a historically important landmark which marked the conviction and execution of King Charles I, together with Oliver Cromwell's overthrow of the English monarchy till the restoration of King Charles II in 1660. This review article aims at exploring and discussing a variety of scholarly attitudes to the general state of the arts during the English Interregnum and more particularly to some controversial critical views with regard to the state of poetry, music and theatre.

KEYWORDS: English Interregnum, restoration, culture, arts, literature, criticism, Cromwell, poetry, music, theatre.

1. INTRODUCTION

The course of the arts in England from the start of the Civil War (1642) to the restoration of Charles II (1660) has always been a topic of scholarly debate. Some literary critics believe that it was a period of dislocation, disruption and change which affected all forms of art during that time. In his *Preface to the Poems* (1656), Abraham Cowley describes the period as follows: "If *wit* be such a *Plant* that it scarce receives heat enough to preserve it alive even in the *Summer* of our cold *Climate*, how can it choose but wither in a long and a sharp *winter*? A warlike, various, and a tragical age is best to *write of*, but worst to *write in*." [1]

In *John Dryden and His Age*, an important analytical insight and biography of John Dryden, James Anderson Winn also discusses the course of the arts and artists in England during the Interregnum. He argues that "many foreign artists returned to the continent. Some English artists were killed in action; many others spent some of these years in exile or in prison." [2]

Other critics, however, argue that conditions were more favorable to the arts in England during the Interregnum than it had been expected. Graham Parry shares this view and while discussing the English cultural life during the Civil War and the Commonwealth, he tries to distinguish between what critics used to think of the course of the arts in England and the way he perceives it. Parry puts it:

The conventional view of the Commonwealth years is that they were hostile to the arts and the pleasures they aroused, but this is by no means the case upon investigation, especially after the rule of the Major-Generals gave way to Cromwell's Protectorate in 1653 [...] the arts revived a little, encouraged by Cromwell's civilized character. It seems proper to speak of a revival of the arts under Cromwell. [3]

Parry's view calls into question the extent to which Cromwell's character as a conservative was "civilized." Additionally, Parry's standpoint with regard to the "revival of the arts" is very debatable, especially in the light of the puritan and conservative environment during the Cromwellian years. Hence, the course of the arts in England during the Interregnum will be discussed under three different headings: poetry, music and theatre.

2. POETRY

Oliver Cromwell's conduct of his Protectorate gave rise to a poetry of political appraisal. It tackled, among other things, the refined manners characterizing the world of the court, the good life of the Protectorate and the poetic fictions of love, virtue and friendship. During the English Interregnum, poetry was a medium that served those who continued to show loyalty to the executed monarch, king Charles I, who daydreamed of the restoration of his heir as it also served the advocates of the Republican and Cromwellian Protectorate. Hence, two poetic genres came into being during the Interregnum: Elegy and Panegyric, with the former being associated with the Royalists and the latter with the Republicans.

2.1 FROM MASQUES TO ELEGIES AND PANEGRYRICS

Immediately after his execution on 30 January 1649, a cult of Charles 'the martyr' sprang up and relics of the king's blood and character were very much treasured by his Royalists through elegies. King Charles I was very much involved in the cultural life of the time, especially through masque performances. Many performed masques during Charles's reign were about the noble and happy royal couple: Charles and Henrietta Maria. Their love story was considered mythical and became a dominant poetic theme. Unlike his predecessor King James I, King Charles I and his wife used to rehearse and play in many masques where pastoral scenes were omnipresent. This representation of the English country life used to be one way of translating the ideas of peace and harmony in relationship with politics. "His [Charles] entry into the spectacle and his appearance as a masquer as well as the subject matter of so many masques made masques thrive," says Stephen Orgel. [4]

With the rising tension between King Charles I and the Parliament, King James' "Golden Age" became threatened under Charles's rule, especially after the outbreak of the Civil War. King Charles' images of prowess and heroism, as often evoked by many royalist poets of the time, finally came to a close after the execution of the king. "Grieving for a king unjustly killed also becomes mourning for the passing of an era and a civilization" [5] says Nigel Smith. Henceforth, elegies became a substitute for masques which expressed the downfall of the church, honored the memory of the executed monarch and mourned the livelihood of a nation. According to Nigel Smith, many elegies were found in forms of manuscripts whose writers dared to write but did not dare to publish for fear of punishment. Smith puts it:

Many elegies were not published in 1649 for obvious reasons of discretion, and many never found their way into print. The fact that so many elegies for Charles were published is remarkable. In the world of manuscript poetry, in commonplace books and poetry collections, a flurry of elegiac writing is to be found. [6]

2.2. PANEGRYRICS

Whereas King Charles I's loyal Royalists wept through elegies, the Republicans and defenders of Oliver Cromwell expressed joy and glorified their Protector through panegyrics. One very illustrative example would be John Milton. In his classical epic poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton draws on the heavenly "Muse" of astronomy

and poetry as his divine source of inspiration. Milton's poetic aim is to be haunted by a power that will inspire him to write a powerfully religious poem that is full of divinity, spirituality and real artistic creation:

I thence invoke thy aid [muse] to my adventurous song
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. (LL. 12-16) [7]

In his famous panegyric poem entitled: *To the Lord General Cromwell*, John Milton portrayed Cromwell's character as an earthly force and an agent of a divine power whose inspiration illuminated Milton's heart. Milton's lines in the Cromwell sonnet reiterate, in a Miltonic language, some of the themes recurrent in his heroic epic poetry such as religion and heroism and the relationship between the earthly and the divine. The structure of the sonnet is threefold, with the first six lines depicting Oliver Cromwell as a source of inspiration himself, whose power is glorified and whose prowess is unparalleled:

Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud
 Not of war only, but detractions rude,
 Guided by faith and matchless fortitude,
 To peace and truth thy glorious way has ploughed,
 And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud
 Hast reared God's trophies, and his work pursued. (LL. 1-6) [8]

The following three lines depict Cromwell as a peerless warrior. John Milton's enumeration of the "Lord Protector's" victories over the Scots and the Irish also reveals a larger than life character whose actions are heroic and supernatural:

While Dardwen stream, with blood of Scots imbrued,
 And Dunbar field, resounds thy praises loud,
 And Worcester's Laureate wreath. (LL. 7- 9) [9]

In his panegyric *To the Lord General Cromwell*, John Milton typifies the image of Cromwell as the God of war 'Mars'. By deploying a set of fricatives and sibilant sounds in words like "stream"; "Scots"; "resounds" and "Worcester's", Milton transforms the sonnet into a thematically true epic. In the closing five lines, Milton invokes Cromwell to calm the tensions rising in the English Church and react against the very teachers of the doctrine of the Gospel whose shift from purity to impurity was very "threatening":

[...] Yet much remains

To conquer still; Peace hath her victories

No less renowned than War: new foes arise,

Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains.

Help us to save free conscience from the Paw

Of hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw. (LL. 9-14) [10]

3. MUSIC

After the overthrow of both church and monarchy, Oliver Cromwell did not hamper the course of music as one of the significant artistic forms in the English cultural life of the time. Despite the Puritan sensibilities in suppressing obscene songs and improper ballads, several musical composers and publishers contributed to the production of many musical pieces and collections. James Anderson Winn, to whom we owe *John Dryden and His World*, gives the example of Henry Lawes and John Playford who, contrary to other musicians, managed to earn their living through the publication of their pieces. Yet, it is important to note that with the exception of such reputable musicians, music during the Interregnum remained conservative. In Winn's observation, "many of Playford's publications were reprints of Elizabethan composers." [11]

A discussion of the course of music in the Cromwellian period is also important in order to demonstrate the role this artistic form in the development of *opera* as a musical drama. Contrary to the Stuart masques that aimed at honoring the King and glorifying his monarchy, the musical style in Cromwell's time was of a "recitative" nature; a style of singing comparatively close to speech adding a novel taste and form to the masques. Graham Parry points out that "masques were beginning to evolve towards a new secular genre, opera." [12]

An excellent example of a seventeenth century literary figure whose poetic talent and artistic innovation have to be acknowledged in the operatic field is Sir William Davenant. He was a playwright, a masque maker and producer as well as the poet laureate after Ben Jonson during the reign of King Charles I. Davenant's experiments in musical drama and operatic features including scenery, singing, dancing and music was very influential. As an instance, Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* (1658) was the first successful English opera that was written entirely in rhyme. Starting from 1656, the grips of power were somewhat softened and only some dramatic performances, sung rather than spoken, were allowed on the stage. Priority was given to singing and dancing. *The Siege of Rhodes* was allowed to be performed since it was acceptable to the Puritan and conservative authorities who disapproved of stage performances. It was a harm neither for the authorities nor for the public and its staging took place right after Davenant's return from exile on the continent; that is at a time when the course of arts in Europe was very much 'refined' and thriving. In his *Short Discourse of the English Stage* (1664), Richard Flecknoe, one of Sir William Davenant's contemporaries, argued that operas and dramatic performances in general were behindhand in comparison with performances on other stages on the continent. "Of this curious art [opera] the Italians, this latter age, are the greatest masters, the French good proficient," says Flecknoe. [13]

Opera as a music genre was not to burst into general popularity and acceptance until the restoration of king Charles II in 1660 with the introduction of French opera. It is after the Restoration that English musicians such as Matthew Locke and Henry Purcell took up the writing of operas. However, during the Interregnum nothing excellent could be traced except Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes*. Davenant's opera involved significant innovation

as John Dryden himself acknowledged. It may be said to have opened a new era for the English stage and musical performances to be later manifested through the rhymed heroic plays of the Restoration. William Davenant's opera is echoed in two famous diaries of the seventeenth century: John Evelyn's diary and Samuel Pepys's. On 15 May 1658, Evelyn recorded that he:

[...] went to visit [his] brother in London, and next day to see a *new opera*, after the Italian way, in recitative music and scenes, much inferior to the Italian composure and magnificence; but it was *prodigious*, that in a time of such public consternation, such a vanity should be kept up or permitted. [14]

Douglas Liversidge believes that the "new opera" John Evelyn watched was Sir William Davenant's production, as he also assumes that its performance as the "first English opera" coincides with Evelyn's visit to London in 1658. Almost three years before Evelyn's visit to London, Davenant's opera had also been recorded in Samuel Pepys's *Diary*. On 6 December 1665, Pepys wrote the following: "I spent the afternoon upon a song of Solyman's words to Roxolana [From Davenant's *Siege of Rhodes*] that I have set. [...] I spent the night in an ecstasy almost." [15]

Similar to poetry during the Interregnum, music was also a subject of debate, especially in a puritan and conservative context. While some regarded it as an 'inferior' artistic genre when compared to the refined musical performances in the 'continent', namely in France and Italy, others were much contented with musical operas, taking William Davenant's operatic performance *The Siege of Rhodes* as a title of a refined artistic age.

4. THEATRE: "A VICTIM OF IDEOLOGICAL DIVISION"

During the Interregnum the number of Puritans was rising and had a potential influence. The Parliamentarians who were behind the execution of King Charles I were composed largely of Puritan fanatics. Their fanaticism was directed against all forms of secularism and paganism. Liversidge is among those who discussed the Puritan attitude to the theatre during the Cromwellian years. He argued that their extreme conservatism prevented people even from chanting their psalms or playing their musical instruments.

Religion is inseparable from culture and the harshness of the Puritan prohibitions and strict codes could be traced in the laws imposed on the theatre and actors. It is worth revealing that the Puritan hostility to the theatre dates back to the Elizabethans; that is, since the first years the first public theatres were built. From a Puritan point of view, the theatre was a place of corruption and immorality as well as a place for rebels and conspirators. Stage spectacles were sacrilegious and theatre going was considered as a substitute for church going and preaching. Consequently, a parliamentary ordinance ordered the closing of the theatre on 2 September 1642. Of this ordinance, Nigel Smith states:

Since 2 September 1642, one month after the outbreak of the English Civil War, the theatres and bear gardens in London had been closed by order of Parliament, partly for the sake of social control, partly out of a genuine sense of repentance and humiliation on the part of Puritan MPs. During the following fifteen years, the London theatres were dismantled and destroyed. The Globe was demolished in April 1644 to make room for tenement buildings and a similar fate befell the bear gardens in the mid-1650s. [16]

During the 1640s, the English theatre became in Smith's terminology "a victim of ideological division." In spite of the protests of the actors and playwrights against Parliamentary ordinances, and despite the various attempts made by some secular Parliamentarians and Republicans, the strong prejudice against stage spectacles remained

overwhelmingly dominant. Players and playwrights were the first victims. They felt an urgent need to reopen the theatres for the sake of their own livelihood. Some of the actors became soldiers and some of the playwrights went on writing for the public. Others went into exile and wrote plays, including John Denham, William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew. Conversely, for critics like Graham Parry, the closing of the theatre during the Interregnum did not mean a total blackout of the English drama. The popular party remained largely antipathetic to the Puritan severity and to the Parliamentarians' harsh ordinances which, though it hampered acting and theatre going, it enhanced playwriting and the circulation of manuscripts, as it also sharpened the printing of pamphlets and books. Parry goes further and argues that even play acting did not cease totally. He puts it as follows:

The common notion that the theatres were closed and acting suppressed from 1642 onwards is, upon investigation, only a half-truth, for there are many records of plays being performed during the 1640s, even though play-acting had been illegal. The Globe was pulled down in 1644, but plays were frequently put on at the Fortune, the Bull, the Cock Pit, and at Salisbury court and actors maintained a hole-in the corner existence throughout this time. [17]

5. CONCLUSION

During the English Interregnum, civil conflicts entered poetry, music and theatre as these arts entered the civil conflicts, too. The rising bulk of elegies, panegyrics and dramatic works evolved basically round the discord taking place between the different political parties as well as the various religious sects. Hence, cultural life during the Interregnum could never have existed without a literature to articulate it. Reciprocally, literature could never have existed without an English Civil War to spoon-feed it and which culminated in a series of revolutions in both form and genre.

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