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## Heroic Drama between Passions and Politics

**Review: Brandon Chua. *Ravishment of Reason. Governance and the Heroic Idioms of the Late Stuart Stage, 1660–1690*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2014.**

It has become common to understand the English Restoration as a “series of cultural re-orientations” (Berensmeyer 81), continuously re-conceptualising political authority and collective identity: Far from constituting a monolithic reaction against Cromwell’s Protectorate, crises of royal representation collided with cultural efforts to “create a useable past” (Neufeld 18) in competing regimes of memory and oblivion. Brandon Chua’s monograph *Ravishment of Reason* pays tribute to the importance of the public stage in these processes, integrating earlier insights into the political preoccupation of Restoration drama with the cultural history of emotions. Challenging the common conception that these plays constitute little but a “desperate reactionary attempt [...] to reinscribe feudal, aristocratic, monarchical ideology” (Canfield 1), Chua explores how the plays critically and dynamically experiment with the affective solutions offered as answers for political problems in a re-established system of monarchic order.

The volume begins with a discussion of William Davenant’s grand layout for the theatre, mapping the political efficacy of the “affective technologies of a new stage” (15),<sup>1</sup> and the amplified passions of heroic figures as outlined in the preface to *Gondibert*. Following from there, the largest part of the study traces the erosions of this framework in six separate case studies, which chronologically arrange examples of Restoration serious drama from the early 1660s to the 1690s. The heroic, in this context, is largely conceived of in terms of recognisable generic and literary conventions, consolidating into what Chua calls ‘heroic idioms’. As they were entangled with specific emotional regimes, these heroic idioms become productive as a lens through which political authority, obligation and agency could be interrogated.

Chua’s first case study is Roger Boyle’s – the Earl of Orrery’s – *Henry V* (1664), an adaptation of Shakespeare’s eponymous history play set in the Hundred Years’ War. Juxtaposing love and friendship as models of political relatedness, the play is shown to explore intertwining plots of

shifting political loyalties, and takes a strongly royalist stance in trying to “recover the terrain of civic virtue and political agency” (27). This is posited against a Hobbesian concept of political order based on fearful self-preservation, re-casting the Restoration as “a new narrative of subjection and obligation after a destructive moment of interest and faction” (26).

The chapter on Dryden’s *Conquest of Granada* (1670–72) acknowledges the play’s significance as a defining model of the heroic genre as well as its political complexity. While Boyle’s play, as Chua argues, strongly relies on the traditions of the earlier court masque, the *Conquest of Granada* showcases the integration of on-stage spectacle with the heroic templates of the Renaissance epic, which are used to enquire into questions of political obedience and autonomy: Almanzor, the hero of the play, is led only by his private sense of honour, not integrating into productive political structures. Although finally entering the service of the Spanish king, his relation to authority is never fully harmonised, highlighting the popular susceptibility to heroic impact in ongoing crises of political allegiance. Chua here associates the ‘epic’ formatting of Dryden’s hero as well as the notion of the ‘noble savage’, which Almanzor himself seems to relate to, with an ultimately Weberian concept of unaccountable charismatic power.

In contrast to these early royalist plays, Crowne’s *The Misery of Civil War* and Lee’s *Lucius Junius Brutus* (both 1680) are hardly ever contested to be overtly political, revisiting questions of representation and authority in the light of the so-called ‘Popish Plot’, an alleged Catholic conspiracy to assassinate the king, and the Exclusion Crisis, seeking to exclude his brother – the later king James II – from the throne. In a meticulous close reading, Chua shows how Crowne’s play casts its concerns with new and competing modes of obligation against its principal dramatic source, Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*. In particular, he attempts to discern the disintegration of idealised forms of political relatedness in a contingent political order. However, these

inflections of the heroic genre in Crowne's *Misery* are not (yet) directed at a fundamental attack on the Stuart monarchy. Instead, the play is read as a "strident defense of the status quo" (83), using spectacles of on-stage violence to warn against any illegitimate opposition.

Lee's *Brutus* similarly zooms in on questions of political obedience. In decomposing the generic conventions of the heroic play, Lee is shown to re-define the role of emotions in this context, ranging from erotic attraction to coercive fear, and thus seems to be anticipating the shift towards affective tragedy. Chua, however, refrains from streamlining *Brutus* into a monolinear evolution of heroic into affective drama, reading it "rather as an uncertain and anxious attempt to preserve the heroic restoration plot in the wake of the eruption of unfounded, but politically useful fears and the breakdown in transmission of both political and cultural ideals of order and civic purpose" (91). Lee's negotiations of the heroic are characterised by an emphasis on theatricality, thus highlighting the intrusion of the theatrical into the political sphere, with the inherent danger of collapsing rationality with the seductions of spectacle. This argument extends, obviously, onto the reframing of Lucrece's suicide, conventionally read as an act of self-sacrifice leading into the foundation of the Roman republic: "The narrative of republican beginnings is presented as a generic crisis, as the rape of Lucrece is turned into a contested site of interpretation as one theatrical performance competes with another for primacy over the affections and actions of their beholders" (109).

The subsequent, slightly shorter chapter turns to Aphra Behn's tragicomedy *The Widow Ranter* (1689), set in colonial Virginia. Commonly considered her very last play, *The Widow Ranter* is usually read as reflecting problematic loyalties to James II, spelling out "a sense of dissolution [...] whereby every configuration of authority or disobedience is replicated in contradictory variants" (Hughes, *Aphra Behn* 188). While quoting generic patterns of the heroic play to reformulate questions of heroic courage and virtue, as Barbara Korte has shown, the tragicomic ending of the play seems to highlight the provisionality and contrived nature of its conclusion: While the renewed colonial community anticipates new political stability with the arrival of the new governor, the latter never sets foot on stage. Contextualising the play in a political climate of collective uncertainty, Chua largely follows previous readings, but highlights the essentially moral opposition between courage and cowardice. Bacon, the rebel, is fashioned as a hero of Drydean format, set against an ineffectual governing council

staffed by cowards. Through this constellation, the play disrupts the link between courage and political obedience, and thus "revisits and complicates the careful opposition between intentioned, selfless political service and passive, fearful sedition" (113). Based on a thorough discussion of fear and fearful imagination in early modern discourse, Chua argues that the play points to a development which supplanted a system of affective relations by "irrational interpretations of security and safety" (118), thus rewriting the tragic affects of fear and pity as mechanisms of self-interested calculation. Chua might have included the qualitative distinction of a righteous, loving fear (*timor filialis*) and a slavish, self-centered fear (*timor servilis*), as outlined by Augustine or Thomas Aquinas (cf. Bähr 79–95, Loughlin, Kahn).

Dryden's *Don Sebastian* (1690), aptly chosen as a final case study, shares with Behn's play an effort to negotiate increasingly difficult structures of political authority in the light of eroding heroic paradigms. While critics have quibbled over the ambivalent status of this play's hero in an intricate plot of mistaken identities, love and incest, Chua compellingly argues that such "interpretive quagmires" (141) extend into the dramatic structure of the play itself, which uses the inconsistency of internal points of view to stage a fragmentation of perspective. As such, the play refrains from pushing at clear political dichotomies, but centres on the "problem of conceiving a political community no longer grounded in conventional moral authority" (132), and investigates the very ambiguities of interpretation and evaluation.

Chua's study thus essentially follows – and confirms – Hughes' description of Restoration drama as drifting from a "drama of hierarchy" to a "drama of dislocation" (Hughes, *English Drama* 25), and succeeds in systematically relating questions of political authority with negotiations of the passions. Plays, dramatic paratexts and contemporary treatises on the passions integrate into case studies of an often dazzling complexity, demonstrating the use of literary tradition and generic templates in these cultural negotiations. A conclusion, devised as an overview of critical assessments of the newly opened theatres, links back rather elegantly to the opening chapter on Davenant's poetics of the stage. However, the study at this point might have benefited from a more explicit summary of the results of the preceding chapters. A systematic final comparison of the individual analyses crystallising the connections between them would have been particularly helpful to readers not specialising in the field.

Chua makes a point in tackling both well-known plays – such as Dryden’s seminal *Conquest of Granada* or Lee’s *Brutus* – and others that rarely make the list, such as Crowne’s *Misery of Civil War*. But the study pays relatively little attention to the distinctive sub-genres emerging on the Restoration stage, whose more or less explicit poetic and aesthetic programmes competed with the short-lived Drydean model. This might include the spectacular horror play as well as the later development into pathetic tragedy (or ‘she-tragedy’). Here, Hermanson’s monograph on the Restoration horror play (also published in 2014) complements Chua’s findings, as does the collected volume edited by Cuder-Domínguez (2014), which focuses on the overlapping and, at times, transitional genres in English literature in the second half of the seventeenth century. It is, however, the specific merit of Chua’s book to demonstrate the importance of generic models – and their respective heroic ‘idioms’ – in cultural endeavours to (re)negotiate authority, political legitimacy and emotional relatedness in a period of rapid and radical change. It undoubtedly constitutes an important contribution not only to studies of the Restoration stage, but also to studies of political culture(s) in the late seventeenth century more generally.

<sup>1</sup> All direct quotations are from Chua’s study, unless otherwise indicated.

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