

# Restoration tragedy assignment

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Restoration tragedy THE lesser tragic writers of this period, uninspired as most of their work seems when judged on its own merits, fall inevitably to a still lower level by comparison with the amazing literary powers of their great leader, Dryden. They have all his faults and only a small and occasional admixture of his strength and resource.

In tragedy, as in other departments of literature, the genius of Dryden overtops, on a general estimate, the productions of his lesser contemporaries, and how closely his lead in the drama was followed may be correctly estimated from the fact that, in 1678, on his abandoning the use of rimed verse in the drama, his followers also dropped this impossible form, wisely reflecting, no doubt, that when Dryden was not satisfied as to its success, they might be sure of its failure.

The productions of the lesser tragedians, however, in which a desire to catch the humour of the public and to flatter the mood of the hour is the most frequently recurring characteristic, remain most valuable as helping to furnish a clear idea of the state of the drama and the prevailing standard of taste. The drama on the re-opening of the theatres was subjected to a flood of new influences. Paramount among these was the influence of the court, to which dramatists and actors alike hastened to pay the homage of servile flattery.

This lack of independence on the part of the dramatists of the day, coupled with the general relaxation of morals consequent on the restoration, account, in a large measure, for the degradation into which tragedy in England sank. While comedy retained, in its brightest manifestations at all

events, some redeeming wit and humour, tragedy fell to a level of dulness and lubricity never surpassed before or since.

It should not be overlooked that, in this period attendance at the theatre became a constant social habit, and the theatre itself a great social force; and in this way alone can be explained the success on the stage of much portentous rubbish. People went to the theatre not because they were interested in the drama but because, to the exclusion of almost all other interests, they were interested in one another. This is strikingly brought out by Crowne in the epilogue to *Sir Courtly Nice*, where he says of the audience: [????????????] They came not to see plays, but act their own, | [????] | | | And had throng'd audiences when we had none. | | | It must also be remembered that this was an age which bred a succession of great actors and actresses, who occupied an unprecedentedly large share of the public attention.

As Colley Cibber said, speaking of Lee's *Alexander the Great*: | When these flowing Numbers came from the Mouth of a Betterton the Multitude no more desired Sense to them than our musical | | Connoisseurs think it essential in the celebrate Airs of an Italian Opera. 1?? | The same must have been even more true of such a woman as Mrs. Barry. Lee, Crowne and a host of others were perfectly capable of writing plays, with a French polish, to suit these new conditions; but they are unreadable to-day.

The crowd of lesser restoration dramatists perfectly understood what would be effective on the stage, and for the rest they relied on incredible bombast and threadbare stage devices. It has been seen how, notwithstanding all the

changes which had taken place in the literary and social conditions of the times, and in those of the performance of plays, the theatres were reopened in 1660 with favourite old plays; but now, side by side with the surviving traditions, new influences were at work. ?? Among these influences, the operatic element, which owed its first introduction to D'Avenant, became specially powerful in tragedy, and helped to bring about its degradation | Another important factor in the development of tragedy, viz. the influence, direct and indirect, of French romance and drama, |???? 3| | produced its first important result in the heroic play, which has been discussed in treating of the works of its chief | | | representative and unapproached master, Dryden. 3?? | | |???? The heroic play was not, however, an entirely new growth.

For the most part, it was French, but the influence of the | | | Elizabethan dramatists may also be traced in it; and though, at first sight, it may appear to represent a departure from | | | previous methods and ideals, and to be a distinct breaking-away from the established traditions of tragedy in England, yet a | | | more careful examination shows that, in the main, it was the natural successor of the late Elizabethan drama, modified | | | according to prevailing tastes, and confined within the pseudo-classical limits which were the order of the day.

Under these | | | conditions, it is not surprising that the heroic play did not take deep root in English soil. By 1680, tragedies in verse were | | | going out of fashion, and the English tragic manner, as opposed to the French, began to re-assert itself in the work of | | | contemporary dramatists. | | The works of the great French dramatists had, also, a considerable direct influence on

English tragedy during the restoration period; and this is particularly true of Pierre Corneille.

A version of the Cid by Joseph Rutter had been acted before 1637 “ before their Majesties at Court and on the Cockpitt Stage in Drury Lane”??? it is said under the special patronage of queen Henrietta Maria. This, the first translation of Corneille into English, was followed, in 1655 and 1656, by two very poor blank-verse versions of Polyeucte and Horace respectively, executed by Sir William Lower. Neither piece seems to have been acted. The masterpieces of French drama were, therefore, not unfamiliar in translation, and, shortly after the restoration, Corneille found a worthy translator in the person of Mrs.

Katherine Philips???” the Matchless Orinda. ” Her version of Pompee, in rimed verse, was produced in Dublin early in 1663 with great eclat, and increased her already high reputation. It was also successfully produced in London, and published there, in the same year. In 1664, another version of Pompee “ by certain Persons of Honour”??? Waller and lord Buckhurst were the moving spirits??? was successfully produced; and, in the same year, Heraclius was reproduced by Lodowick Carlell. This last met with great success, though it does not attain the respectable level of others in the same batch of translations.

Mrs. Philips, meanwhile, encouraged by the success of Pompey, began to translate Horace; but she died before completing more than the first four acts. Her version, completed by Sir John Denham, was published in 1669 together with her other works; but, in later issues, a conclusion by Charles

Cotton was printed. Charles Cotton had himself printed a translation of the whole play in 1671; his version, however, was never acted. In the same year, 1671, John Dancer's translation of *Nicomede* was acted at the Theatre Royal in Dublin.

While Corneille thus became known and appreciated in England, his contemporary Racine had to wait for anything like general acceptance until the next century, though signs are not wanting that he was being studied in England during the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The industrious Crowne put forth, in 1675, an utterly inadequate version of *Andromaque*, which did not meet with any favour, no hint being given of the extraordinary coming success of Ambrose Philips's adaptation of the same piece in 1712.

Otway's *Titus and Berenice*, though a careful and scholarly version, and abounding in the pathetic touch which was his secret, met with but moderate success on the stage. The same was the case with two other versions of plays by Racine: *Achilles, or Iphigenia in Aulis* by Abel Boyer (1700); and *Phaedra and Hippolitus* (1706) by Edmund Smith (who, a few years later, supplied Rowe with material for his *Lady Jane Gray*), when the tragedy was first produced.

Public taste, no doubt, was being educated, for, in 1712, *The Distrest Mother*, Ambrose Philips's skilful adaptation of *Andromaque*, met with immediate and lasting popularity, and Smith's *Phaedra and Hippolitus* was revived many times, with marked success, from 1723 onwards. On the whole, French influence on English tragedy, at this time, has been exaggerated; such as it was, it affected rather the outward form than the inward spirit.

Much was written to prove that the French mode, which was a reversion to classic rules, was the right mode, and most of the earlier plays of the period bear marks of the influence of these discussions. But, for the last quarter of the century, the drama in the hands of Otway, Southerne and Rowe was essentially a descendant of earlier English work. The result of the controversy is admirably summed up by Thorndike: "The laws of the pseudoclassicists," he says, "were held to be measureably good, but Shakespeare without those laws had been undeniably great. After Dryden, the foremost place among the dramatists of the restoration age is, undoubtedly, held by Thomas Otway. Born in [???? 9] | 1652, at Trotton in Sussex, he was educated at Winchester and Christ Church, Oxford, but he left the university without taking| | | a degree. After an unsuccessful appearance in Mrs. Aphra Behn's *Forc'd Marriage* (1671), he devoted himself to writing for the | | | stage. His first play, *Alcibiades*, a tragedy in rimed verse, was acted in 1675 at the new theatre in Dorset garden by the duke| | | of York's company, including the Bettertons and Mrs. Barry.

It is a dreary and stilted piece, and, though the heroic play was | | | then at the height of its vogue, *Alcibiades* met with but little success. In his next play, *Don Carlos* (1676), Otway was more | | | happy. Though still hampered by bombast and rimed verse, the scenes are handled with some vigour, and the play seems to have | | | been effective on the stage, and very popular. It ran for ten nights and was frequently revived. The plot is taken from the | | | Abbe de Saint-Real's historical romance of *Don Carlos* (1673), of which a translation into English had appeared in 1674.

The same source, at a later period, supplied Schiller with the plot of a tragedy bearing the same title as Otway's; but, though the English poet was not unknown in Germany, there is no evidence to show that Schiller made use of this work. The part of Philip II was played by Betterton, who produced all Otway's subsequent plays a remarkable proof of their attractiveness from an actor's point of view. Two capable versions of French plays followed (1677) Titus and Berenice from Racine's Berenice and The Cheats of Scapin from Moliere's Fourberies de Scapin.

The latter held the stage for more than a hundred years. After Dryden, the foremost place among the dramatists of the restoration age is, undoubtedly, held by Thomas Otway. Born in 1652, at Trotton in Sussex, he was educated at Winchester and Christ Church, Oxford, but he left the university without taking a degree. After an unsuccessful appearance in Mrs. Aphra Behn's Forc'd Marriage (1671), he devoted himself to writing for the stage. His first play, Alcibiades, a tragedy in rime verse, was acted in 1675 at the new theatre in Dorset garden by the Duke of York's company, including the Bettertons and Mrs. Barry. It is a dreary and stilted piece, and, though the heroic play was then at the height of its vogue, Alcibiades met with but little success. In his next play, Don Carlos (1676), Otway was more happy. Though still hampered by bombast and rime verse, the scenes are handled with some vigour, and the play seems to have been effective on the stage, and very popular. It ran for ten nights and was frequently revived.

The plot is taken from the Abbe de Saint-Real's historical romance of Don Carlos (1673), of which a translation into English had appeared in 1674. The

<https://assignbuster.com/restoration-tragedy-assignment/>



|| same source, at a later period, supplied Schiller with the plot of a tragedy bearing the same title as Otway's; but, though ||| the English poet was not unknown in Germany, there is no evidence to show that Schiller made use of this work. The part of ||| Philip II was played by Betterton, who produced all Otway's subsequent plays??? a remarkable proof of their attractiveness from ||| an actor's point of view. |||??? Two capable versions of French plays followed (1677)??? Titus and Berenice from Racine's Berenice and The Cheats of Scapin from ||| Moliere's Fourberies de Scapin. The latter held the stage for more than a hundred years. ||| Otway produced (1680) The History and Fall of Caius Marius,?? 6?? half of which tragedy, as he frankly admits in the prologue, is taken bodily from Romeo and Juliet. In the same year (1680) appeared The Orphan, a tragedy in blank verse, and the earlier of the two plays upon which Otway's reputation rests.

The plot is supposed to have been suggested by Robert Taylor's comedy The Hogge hath lost his Pearle (1614), which it resembles, or, more probably, by a work entitled English Adventures. By a Person of Honour (attributed to Roger Boyle, earl of Orrery), published in 1676, which narrates the escapades of Charles Brandon, duke of Suffolk. With this play, Otway stepped out of the rank and file of restoration dramatists into his own particular place among great English tragedians. He abandoned the artificial emotions of heroic personages in favour of the joys and sorrows of ordinary human life.

The Orphan is, for the period, a singularly domestic play. Two brothers, Castalio and Polydore, are in love with Monimia, their father's ward. Castalio secretly contracts himself to her in marriage; but Polydore, overhearing their <https://assignbuster.com/restoration-tragedy-assignment/>

plans for meeting, and unaware of the nature of the tie which unites them, contrives to supplant his brother on the wedding night. Castalio, seeking admittance to the bridal chamber, is supposed to be Polydore and rudely repulsed; and he spends the night cursing all womankind. With the morrow come explanations, and the misery of the situation becomes clear.

Whether the plot makes too large demands on the reader's credulity, or whether it shocks his sense of decorum, the pathetic irony of the situation in which the characters find themselves is indisputably brought home with great tragic force. Otway's next play, *Venice Preserv'd, or a Plot Discover'd*, a tragedy in blank verse, was first acted in February, 1682. The story of this tragedy is taken from an anecdotal history entitled *La Conjuration des Espagnols contre la republique de Venise en 1618*, published in 1674 by the Abbe de Saint-Real.

An English translation had appeared in 1675. In *Venice Preserv'd* and, to a less extent, in *The Orphan*, Otway produced plays which, for intensity of feeling and for the display of elemental emotions, are worthy to rank with the later masterpieces of the Elizabethan age, and with some of Fletcher's plays in particular. The language of their finest passages is of a notable simplicity, admirably conveying the poet's conception of his characters. Unfortunately, passages of noble poetry are, at times, intermixed with lines of almost ludicrous ineptitude.

More pathetic and convincing pictures of women overwhelmed by grief, confusion and hopelessness cannot be imagined than those drawn by Otway in his *Monimia*???" the trembling, tender, kind, deceived *Monimia*???? and

the still finer *Belvidera*??? a masterpiece of insight into the human heart. Both characters were originally performed by Mrs. Barry, the celebrated actress who appeared in Otway's first play, *Alcibiades*, and for whom the poet had conceived a hopeless passion. Some of his letters to her have been preserved, and prove how deeply he had fallen under her influence.

His unrequited passion for this fascinating woman had a manifest share in the uplifting of his genius from the dusty commonplaces of lesser rectorian drama to the heights of characterisation and expression which he reached in his two great tragedies. Nathaniel Lee, son of clergyman, was born about 1653, and educated at Westminster and Trinity college, Cambridge, where he graduated B. A. in 1668. His early experiences bear a strong resemblance to those of Otway. His first play, *Nero, Emperour of Rome* (1675) was succeeded, in 1676, by *Sophonisba, or Hannibal's Overthrow*; which seems to have been inspired by Orrery's *Parthenissa*.

To 1676, also, belongs *Gloriana, or The Court of Augustus Caesar*. These three are heroic plays, for the most part in rimed verse, and thoroughly typical of the period. In 1677, Lee, following Dryden's lead, produced the blank verse play entitled *The Rival Queens, or The Death of Alexander the Great*, which proved an immediate and lasting success. It is founded on *Cassandre*, a romance by La Calprenede, upon whose *Cleopatre* Lee had already drawn for some of the incidents in his *Gloriana*. There followed, in 1678, *Mithridates, King of Pontus*, another blank verse play; and, in 1679, Dryden and Lee co-operated in the composition of *Theodosius, King of Thebes*. *Theodosius, or the Force of Love*, one of Lee's most successful plays, was produced in 1680, and was acted very frequently throughout the eighteenth

<https://assignbuster.com/restoration-tragedy-assignment/>

century. Caesar Borgia, Son of Pope Alexander the Sixth (1680), Lucius Junius Brutus, Father of His Country (1681), and The Princess of Cleve, acted in 1681, but not printed until 1689, are all more or less reminiscent of French romances of the Scudery type. (*La Princesse de Cleves*, by the countess de La Fayette, was a late masterpiece of this school of fiction. ) In 1682, Dryden and Lee again joined hands in *The Duke of Guise*.

Most of this play was Lee's work, and was drawn from a piece called *The Massacre of Paris*, which, though written some years previously, had not then been produced. In 1684 appeared *Constantine the Great*, his last play, if we except the aforesaid *Massacre of Paris* (1690). Lee went out of his mind in 1684 and was confined to Bedlam until 1689, when he was released. He had been given to drink all his life; and, in 1692, an excess of this kind brought about his death. Lee's plays are not without a certain imposing picturesqueness and broad effectiveness; but he entirely lacked the sense of measure and proportion, with that of humour.

Neither delicacy of perception, nor the power of characterisation??? in short, none of the finer qualities of the dramatist??? are to be found in him. His personages talk at the top of their voices on all occasions??? happy or the reverse??? while rant and confusion, blood and dust, ghosts and portents and hysterics, effectually conceal from all but the most persevering student the occasional nobler features of Lee's imagination. It is hardly fair, perhaps, to judge his plays by reading them in cold blood. They were intended for acting; and, as acting plays, they have abundantly justified themselves.

Now and again, a stray verse or metaphor reminds us of the Elizabethan heights from which the restoration dramatists had fallen so far. But these beauties are few and far between, and it must be frankly confessed that, today, Lee is almost unreadable. The birthday and parentage of John Crowne, one of the most prolific of the crowd of restoration dramatists, are alike unknown. From recent researches it appears probable that he was the son of William Crowne, who emigrated to Nova Scotia, and that he was born about 1640. He was certainly in London in 1665, for his first work appeared in that year, the romance entitled *Pandion and Amphigenia*.

In 1671 was acted and published his tragi-comedy *Juliana, or the Princess of Poland* the first of a long series of dull and half-forgotten tragedies. It was succeeded by *The History of Charles the Eighth of France* (1672), in rimed couplets, and *Andromache* (1675), in prose. The last seems to have been a mere adaptation of a translation, chiefly in verse, by another hand, of Racine's *Andromaque*. Crowne's three tragedies of absolute dulness, *The Destruction of Jerusalem* (1677); *The Ambitious Statesman* (1679), of which the theme and sources are alike French; and *Thyestes*, taken from Seneca (1681).

The concentrated horror of the last-mentioned piece has led to its receiving more notice from Crowne's critics than his other tragic productions;?? 12?? but there is not any nobility in his treatment of the awful story. Shortly before the appearance of this tragedy, Crowne, in 1680, produced a hash of Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part II*, which he called *The Misery of Civil-War*, and followed this, in 1681, with *Henry the Sixth, the First Part. With the Murder of*

Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. The tragedies of Darius (1688), Regulus (1692) and Caligula (1698) call for no more than a passing mention.

Lee has been called an inferior Otway, and Crowne, so far as his tragedies are concerned, might be called a second-rate Lee. His plays have all Lee's turgidity, with none of that author's redeeming though crazy picturesqueness. They preserve a dead level of mediocrity, and it seems almost incredible that such a piece as *The Destruction of Jerusalem* could ever have gained the marked success which it undoubtedly secured. Nothing but mounting elaborate enough to impress an uncritical audience could have saved such plays as these from immediate and final damnation.