

# *Chapter IV*

## CHAPTER-IV

### BAROQUE DRAMA

An essentially architectural terminology fails to encompass the progress of English poetical and dramatic movements in the seventeenth century. For example, John Donne, fulfils almost all the criteria for the mannered style, but he is contemporary with Ben Jonson, who is considered to be Baroque, and with Shakespeare who in his last plays turned to Baroque and all its supernatural concerns. Many of Shakespeare's plays, especially his great tragedies, Othello, Macbeth, and King Lear, have a distinctly Baroque quality, as do his later plays, in particular, his Dark Romances, The Winter's Tale and The Tempest.<sup>1</sup> The most Baroque of his plays is King Lear. The closing lines of the dying king were never excelled in their profound pathos even by writers like Calderón, Corneille or Milton. As Lear looks at the dead Cordelia, he cries :

No, no, no life ;  
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
 And thou no breath at all ? O, thou wilt come no more,  
 Never, never, never, never, never !

(King Lear Act V)

Although there is the piling up of words, they do not become grotesque as in writers like Gryphius. These lines are supremely lyrical.

Ben Jonson, too, showed Baroque characteristics. His many masques and antimasques are distinctly Baroque in feeling. In them the refined mixes with the grotesque, the elevated with the dull. The pervading lyricism is supported by music written by such composers as N. Lanier, and William and Henry Lawes.<sup>2</sup> This form of writing which combined delicate, poetry and contrasting songs which were lewd and vulgar, became very popular in England,

France, Spain and Italy. Out of it developed the opera. In Ben Jonson's The Vision of Delight (1619-20), Delight enters with a group of fairy-like attendants, and says :

Let your shows be new and strange,  
 Let them oft and sweetly vary,  
 Let them haste so to their change,  
 As the seers may not tarry ...”

(The Vision of Delight)

By contrast his masque Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue, which has a truly Baroque theme begins :

“Room ! Make room for the Bouncing Belly,  
 First father of sauce, and deviser of jelly.  
 Prime master of arts, and giver of wit,  
 That found out the excellent engine, the split ...”

(Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue)

In England and the European countries, the smooth and logical unfolding of seventeenth century culture was influenced by the social, political and religious upheavals of the period of disorientation, restlessness and insecurity, which marked the middle years of the century. In England, a magnificent theatrical tradition was broken by the uncongenial atmosphere and hostile attitudes of the Civil War and the Commonwealth. All these were directly opposed to the ethos of the Baroque. In 1642, the theatres in London were closed down. With the advent of the Restoration in 1660, they reopened. What had preceded the closure was the final blossoming of England's native Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic and cultural tradition. It was an insular development which at times, as in some of the affected and contrived romances and tragi-comedies of Beaumont and Fletcher - looked ahead towards a conception of stage illusion at least as much Baroque as it was Shakespearean. But it was only with the return of king and nobility in 1660 that England suddenly and with an upsurge of dramatic activity established a type of theatre that does indeed reflect

Continental Europe's Baroque obsession with the underlying theatricality of life. London enjoyed the attraction of numerous playhouses, with the new, baroque approach to stage entertainment, which was costlier and more artificial. In 1661, Sir William Davenant's Company opened the Lincoln Inn Fields Theatre, which was replaced in 1671 by the more splendid Dorset Garden Theatre (built by Christopher Wren) for a successive decade; and in 1663 the King's Company managed by Thomas Killigrew opened the Theatre Royal in Bridges Street and in 1674 transferred to the newly - built Drury Lane Theatre, also built by Wren.

It was the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre that clearly registered the changes in attitude and approach. It was the first stage in England to employ scenery in the Continental manner and the first to boast of a proscenium arch. This was an innovation marking a major departure, since it appeared to demonstrate the clear separation of the stage and audience and their separate worlds; the play now opened up like an animated picture, the actors voices alone reaching beyond the frame as they declaimed their heroic couplets.<sup>3</sup>

Where make - believe was an essential and everyday part of social behaviour, it was actually possible to explore the most unlikely confusions of appearance and reality without having to use the traditional masks of Italian comedy. All over Europe audiences were always ready to suspend their judgement and allow themselves the pleasure of being seduced into worlds of fantastic adventure and romance. Stark spiritual and social realities were never present in these performances. In Restoration England playgoers were notoriously addicted to extravagant displays of heroics which, initially, had little to do with contemporary life but had much in common with the artistic mood of Europe as a whole. Despite the fact that at least one author of eminence and two or three others of moderate talent devoted their time to the writing of serious drama, during the latter half of the seventeenth century, almost nothing of literary value was produced by the Restoration theatre. In France, Racine made some headway, through the creation of an adequate form of expression for this age of classical sentiment, but in England conditions were not favourable. France had not inherited any distracting romantic traditions to haunt the imagination of the playwright. English dramatists were never allowed to forget

the glories of Shakespearean tragedies. Subsequently all the efforts made in London to evolve a new tragic form were impaled by confusion of form and uncertainty.

A typical example of this uncertainty, is Thomas Otway, an author of mediocre talent. He tried to develop a style suited to the conditions of his time. He was fascinated by Racine, and his early plays, namely Alcibiades (1675) and Don Carlos (1676), obviously attempted (and failed to introduce the classical form, yet the influence of Shakespeare cannot be denied. After a poor attempt at trying to turn Romeo and Juliet into a Roman Catholic Marius (1679), he reverted totally to native English models producing a kind of romantically emotional domestic tragedy in The Orphan, or The Unhappy Marriage (1680) and another romantic tragedy with an Italian setting, Venice Preserved or A Plot Discovered (1682) which achieved almost some greatness. The audience, however, could not appreciate the austerity of spirit out of which this tragedy was wrought, and consequently noble as is Otway's attempt, the play failed. Considered in relation to the development of Restoration drama alone, Venice Preserved is a great play, but when it is set against the background of the theatre as whole, it pales amid the surrounding splendour of great drama.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the Restoration period John Dryden, the undoubted master of the form of heroic drama, wrote that a heroic play "ought to be an imitation in little of an heroic poem (i.e. epic), and consequently, that Love and Valour ought to be the subject of it. "He went on to justify spectacle and other imaginative effects, saying that they were necessary to convince spectators of the reality represented, and to say that he would refuse to weigh "Love and Honour.... by drams and scruples". Yet in his heroic plays Love and Valour are usually defined as Love and Honour, and weighed carefully, if not minutely as in contemporary French drama. Therefore, the conflict of love and honour was its staple theme; intellectualism ruled the actions of its scenes and inflated bombast was employed in a futile attempt to arouse that mood of admiration which tragic drama demands. The heroic drama was written in couplet verse.<sup>5</sup>

Dryden's Tyrannic Love or Royal Martyr was produced in 1669, when he was

at the height of his most histrionically Baroque phase and was intent on developing an English repertory which would imbibe something of the sophisticated brilliance and heroic tone of contemporary French literature while also satisfying the tastes of the fickle audiences of Restoration London. The result of this pursuit of intellectual cleverness together with brazen larger than life theatricality led in his hands to a form of stage entertainment which was not much appreciated in England. If seen in the context of the Baroque, it certainly represents a valid and enjoyable extension of European Drama. The play Tyrannic Love dramatizes effectively irreconcilable opposites: Christian virtue, self-confident and holy in its saintly heroine, is well contrasted with the virgin martyr. He tries to win his beautiful and unworldly captive's love: "There's not a God ... but for this Christian would all heaven foreswear," he exclaims ironically. But there is no common ground between saint and tyrant, only grounds for an exciting combination of theological and erotic argument in which all the characters in the play are caught up, and which causes excitement of an entirely Baroque kind. These figures with their exaggerated protestations of undying love and uncontrollable passion may well be marionettes manipulated by Dryden's flamboyant imagination. Yet the presence of St. Catherine herself in the whirlpool of a far-fetched world brings home something of the paradoxical quality of the Baroque age, which could produce a work which contains opposites so artificially combined yet giving an integrated impression. This is solely because the virgin heroine is herself characterized in flamboyant terms. Her main aim is to gain a martyr's status, and she is still sufficiently human to confess:

"Were there no sting in death,  
for me to die,  
Would not be conquest, but stupidity."

(Tyrannic Love Act II)

The prospect of martyrdom is thus conveyed with much of the seemingly erotic sadism for which Dryden's contemporaries, and Lohenstein were renowned:

Maximin:

Go, bind her hand and foot beneath the wheel,  
 Four of you turn the dreadful engine round ;  
 Four others hold her fastened to the ground;  
 That, by degrees, her tender breast may feel  
 First the rough razings of the pointed steel;  
 Her paps then let the bearded tenters stake,  
 And on each hook a gory gobbet take ;  
 Till the upper flesh, by piece-meal torn away,  
 Her beating heart shall to the sun display.

(Tyrannic Love Act III)

But faith is a “force from which there is no defence”, because it has vision of a life in the future behind the pangs of death. Maximin discovers that “To minds resolved, the threat of death is vain”. Death, to Catherine, is a plunge into eternity: one fleeting moment ends our pain. Hence, in an ecstatic mood she declaims :

“No streak of blood, (the relics of the earth)  
 Shall stain my soul in her immortal birth;  
 But she shall mount all pure, a white and virgin mind,  
 And full of all that peace, which she goes to find.”

(Tyrannic Love ACT IV)

At the end of Tyrannic Love it is ultimately the elevation of martyrdom and not its horror that calls forth the most Baroque passage in the play. As St. Catherine is taken to her death, the English language, too, proves itself capable of that “pious madness” that was possessed by the Baroque writers, musicians and architects who respectively wrote martyr plays, composed music and built ornate, imposing churches, and dedicated them to their saintly heroes and heroines.<sup>6</sup>

"Betwixt her guards she seem'd by bride-men led,  
 Her cheeks with cheerful blushes were o'erspread;  
 When, smiling, to the axe she bow'd her head,  
 Just at the stroke,  
 Aethereal music did her breath prepare,  
 Like joyful sound of spousals in the air;  
 A radiant light did her crown'd temples gild,  
 And all the place with fragrant scents was fill'd;  
 The balmy mist came thickening to the ground,  
 And sacred silence cover'd all around."

(Tyrannic Love Act V)

In the seventeenth century, the appeal of the New World and the Mediterranean was strongly felt and by none more strongly than John Dryden. He was a man who was deeply interested in topical issues, causing him to reflect as no other Englishman did, on the interests, ideas and enthusiasms of contemporary Europe. In London there was a fashion for heroic tragedies. These were entertainments of a lavish and extremely elegant kind on the model of French plays - such as those of Thomas Corneille. With the Restoration of the monarchy the French influence was felt even more strongly. In London there was therefore a demand for such dramas. Dryden catered to that demand and opened his campaign to naturalize a truly Baroque form of stage entertainment with The Indian Queen. It was extravagantly set in the Mexico and Peru of the Aztecs and Incas before the Spanish conquests. This unlikely choice does reflect something of the interest in transatlantic matters. Stage properties became very significant. This is born out by the fact that Mrs. Aphra Behn, the well-known authoress, actually supplied a set of plumes to the Indian Queen. These came from Surinam and were considered to be valuable by persons of quality. Mrs. Aphra Behn was herself later to use her personal experience in these exotic places in her novels, which exhibit a fine blend of romance and realism.

Dryden's next play was The Indian Emperor. The theme of the play is the headlong encounter between that unknown world and the new Europe



represented by the Spanish Cortez. Dryden following play The Conquest of Granada, is England's most resounding Moorish venture. It is in two parts, (1670-71). It is set against a background of conflict and intrigue, betrayal and selfless valour. Its hero Almanzor pursues his love for Almahide, with such passion and ardour that he touches the extreme bounds of what is credible :

"Vast is courage, boundless is his mind,  
High as a storm and humorous as wind.  
Honours the only idol of his eyes..."

(The Conquest of Granada Act I)

In spite of the preposterous bombast of these idealized figures and their heroic posturing Dryden cannot conceal the fact that his imaginary Moorish Granada is a state divided by party interests and factions and conflicting politics. Each faction pursues its own interests and represents an enemy within for more dangerous than the forces who attack from the outside. Both the lust for power and the intense pursuit of love and honour are shown to be disruptive, leading to a confusion of man's true aims. The hero is caught between the nobler impulses of pride and self-esteem and illusion, self-indulgence and wishful thinking. Almanzor is rebuked by Almahide for his piratical conduct, and the comparison is appropriate, as the piracy of the Barbary coast of Morocco and Algeria was common knowledge to all seafaring men in the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> But Almanzor is trapped between proud loneliness and buccaneering self-assertion and in a less aggressive mood expresses ideas of a kind which go right to the heart of the Baroque age's most serious concerns :

"O Heaven, how dark a riddle's thy decree,  
Which bounds our wills, yet seems to leave them free !  
Since thy foreknowledge cannot be in vain,  
Our choice must be what though didst first ordain."

( The Conquest of Granada Act V)

Such resounding words seem to be a summary of the most haunting concerns of Dryden's contemporaries, concerns which underlie its most deeply

contemplated and lasting achievements and which also stimulated the great discussions and differences which took place in many areas and in different forms, and which were such a characteristic manifestation of the intellectual atmosphere of the time.

At the end of 1677 Dryden produced his greatest and most popular play, All for Love, or The World Well Lost. It is a reworking of the story of Anthony and Cleopatra. Its very title communicates a Baroque readiness to desert all norms of morality and political decorum for the sake of ecstatic and all consuming love :

“See Europe, Afric, Asia put in balance,  
And all weighed down by one light, worthless woman!”

(All for Love Act I)

so exclaims Ventidius, the patriotic soldier, in reply to Anthony’s dotting caution:

“No word of Cleopatra; she deserves  
More worlds than I can lose.”

(All for Love Act I)

The ironic echoes of Alexander’s vain request for other worlds to conquer cannot hide the fact that for Anthony, there is only one world to lose - the world he lives in. But to die in losing it or lose it dying is the true justification of Baroque passion. The nature and the cosmic power of this world is embodied in the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra. Ventidius, the Roman soldier, is often the mouthpiece for Dryden’s deepest convictions. His speeches contain the most haunting insights and are expressed in exquisitely poetic language :

She’s dangerous

Her eyes have power beyond Thessalian charms,  
To draw the moon from heaven; for eloquence,  
The sea-green Syrens taught her voice their flattery,  
And, while she speaks, night steals upon the day,

Unmarked by those that hear; then she's so charming,  
 Age buds at sight of her, and swells to youth:  
 The holy priests gaze on her when she smiles;  
 And with heaved hands, forgetting gravity,  
 They bless her wanton eyes; even I who hate her,  
 With a malignant joy beyond such beauty;  
 And while I curse, desire it."

(All for Love Act IV)

Ventidius's picture is Baroque in every detail. The references to the dangers of love, the attraction of her eyes and voice, the allusions to the sea, which symbolizes the mysteries of life and is considered to be the birth place of Venus; the contrasts between age and youth; all these are Baroque elements and culminate in a picture of Cleopatra that makes her appear like Mary Magdalene, and so prepares us for the ultimate paradox, of love and hate in simultaneous fusion.

The Baroque age was fascinated with mythological lovers and delighted in historical love stories. Certain amorous situations recur throughout the literature of the period and it is significant that they are also found in art and music. Generally they are associated with a pair of lovers. Anthony and Cleopatra, Sophonisba and Massinissa, Titus and Berenice inspired numerous operas and paintings. Equally captivating are Dido, the Queen of Carthage and her Trojan lover Aeneas. Each of these representative Baroque subjects illustrates a memorable encounter between the disciplined European world of ancient Rome and other ways of life outside its confines, where different priorities and values are upheld. In each of these stories of deep passionate conflict, various loyalties and duties are brought out as a result of love, whose power is a elemental and universal. For seventeenth century Europeans the struggle between the claims of love and duty whether erotic or spiritual, political or all together, was the most immediate way of understanding their own ideals and attitudes. They loved to see this struggle represented on the stage or captured in the shapes and colours of paintings and in the tonalities and rhythms of music.<sup>8</sup>

The theatre provided the most characteristic literary form in Spain.<sup>9</sup> There all the world was a stage. The theatre was by no means a product of the court; in fact in Spain the King and the Queen could not openly attend performances in the theatre. In the theatre halls the men and women were seated separately, and the stage was so constructed in the public square that the more renowned nobles and ladies could watch from windows in the houses that overlooked the square. In spite of these restrictions, the literary productivity of the Spanish playwrights of this period is incredible. Lope de Vega alone wrote nearly thousand dramas. Other prodigious writers are Molina (1571-1648), and the great Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-81).

These Spanish dramas and sacred plays were very simple in their structure. Most of them highlighted the characteristic Spanish values, especially honour. The prevailing view was that all kinds of crimes committed for honour's sake were a duty in this world and a sin before God. The main aim of all the dramatists of this period was to show the conflict between worldly and divine rules of honour in all their variations. Here perhaps the specific Baroque relation to the world of reality which occurs is called "illusionism". Calderón and Lope de Vega express the view that life is a dream. Shakespeare had sounded the same note in Macbeth.

"Life's but a walking shadow..."

(Macbeth Act V)

and again in The Tempest :

"We are such stuff

As dreams are made, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep."

(The Tempest Act IV)

The basis of this sense of the illusory quality of reality that is seen was a religiosity that was deeply felt and the conviction that the only true reality was God. All human endeavour and activity was vanity when compared to the true

reality. This inclination to look at life as something external and deceptive enabled Baroque writers to treat the subject of life in a light manner that was ideally adapted to dramatization. Lope de Vega's best plays are La dama boba (Lady dunce) and El ausente en el lugar (The Absent in the Village). The writer who represented a more fully developed stage of Baroque drama, nearer to that of Corneille, Vondel and Gryphius is Pedro Calderón de la Barca. In his plays, as in all Spanish plays, God remains at the centre. Calderón's view of human life is above all theocentric. His dramas are not psychological but symbolic. Calderón sees the world as a theatre, in which men play the parts assigned to them by God. Calderón is the first writer to make the God-directed "theatrum mundi" the subject of a sacred drama. E.R.Curtis says, "Calderón's work as a whole possesses the dimensions of a world-theatre in as much as the characters act their parts against a cosmic background."

Everything that happens takes place within the limits of a settled order which reflects the consciousness of an age whose monarchical and Catholic framework had not yet been shaken. Therefore, in Calderón's plays faith, honour, patriotism and loyalty to the king are the highest moral values. Yet, for all the stability of the world-order which it portrays, Calderón's work displays a freedom of form and content unparalleled in the rest of Europe. For him art is a game played before God, and so he gains a freedom and innocence which put the earthly in harmony with the supernatural and he adorns even the high seriousness of the mysteries with gay flourishes.<sup>10</sup>

One of Calderón's most famous plays is the tragedy The Steadfast Prince. Its hero, Don Fernando of Portugal falls into the hands of the Moors during the war. He could be saved if the Christian town of Ceuta were sacrificed as a ransom. But Fernando's conscience will not allow him to hand over the Christian churches to the heathens. he would rather suffer all the horrors of captivity, imprisonment, martyrdom and death. Before he dies he says :

"Even if more misfortune strikes me,  
 Even if I suffer still greater hunger,  
 Even if these rags scarcely cover my body

And my dungeon is dark and dirty,  
 I shall stand firm in my faith,  
 For my faith is the sun that shines for me  
 And the light that illumines me."

(The Steadfast Prince Act V)

He dies a martyr. In Fernando, Calderón has drawn an ideal picture of the man who is determined to fight and suffer yet, to show respect and tolerance even for a non-Christian adversary in war. Not a single angry word is uttered about the King of the Moors.

Calderón's outstanding masterpiece is La vida es sueño (1636). This play consists of a number of contrasting elements that make up the total picture of the Baroque. It contains the moral lesson that is central to Calderón's Baroque conception of the world - that is, life is a dream, and fantastic, and the happiness we desire is as fickle and illusory as any dream. In La vida es sueño all ends in comedy. But it is a comedy which in a true Baroque fashion emphasises basic human experiences and illustrates traditional themes.<sup>11</sup>

In Calderón, as in Vondel, the Baroque reached great heights. Calderón wrote his plays for both the church and court alike. The pomp and the spectacle that characterized the splendid theatre or the court, had their holy and most popular counterpart in the Corpus Christ plays - The autos sacramentales. Calderón was an imaginative and impressive exponent of this form. This is particularly evident in his play El gran teatro del mundo (1641), which gives the image of the world as a stage. God himself is the author of the play that is produced on the stage of the world when the curtain of confusion rises. The play is a spiritual allegory and the characters are stereotypes-ambitious king, and fair lady, overworked peasant and intimidated beggar, smug rich man wise priest - these are all the embodiments of stock characteristics, yet they are all realistically shown in the very act of living. As allegorical figures organized into a symbolical theatrical display, they have a spiritual function as well as a dramatic one. At the end, God invites all to His heavenly table to participate in His Sacramental supper, and the sacred elements of the Eucharist actually

become stage properties. Here Calderón is shown as staunchly upholding the Faith. The words and actions, like the monstrance, exhibit the mystery of the Christian faith. The end of the play is like some massive, ornate Spanish altarpiece of that age. It communicates to the audience something of the timeless lesson that is central to Christian drama - Christ's sacrifice and Man's salvation. Calderón's play is one of those instances when Baroque art and literature triumphantly succeeded in incorporating that Christian philosophy mixed with pagan ideas gave birth to the Baroque.

In these religious plays, Calderón was unsurpassed. His profound understanding of theological matters and his ardent devotion were combined with his superb lyrical language to produce dramas of unique beauty. The mystical strain in Baroque literature has nowhere found more eloquent and artistic expression.

In Germany and Holland, the greatest exponents of the Baroque dramatic art were, Andreas Gryphius and Joost van der Vondel respectively. Italy is the setting of the play Cardenio und Celinde (1650), by Gryphius. It is based on a Spanish story which the German poet had read in an Italian translation. The characters and the setting are truly Baroque. Vondel chose the stage as his predominant medium, and aroused the imagination of his fellow countrymen with an impressive sequence of Baroque tragic drama produced between 1610 and 1667; dates that span the years from Shakespeare's maturity to the drama of the Restoration. Vondel was a man of extraordinary creative range, who cast the conflicts which he felt, saw and dreamt of into large scale dramas, monumental and static in form, yet each was endowed with its own fiery force and lyrical eloquence.<sup>12</sup>

The Baroque developed at different speeds in different places, affecting different ideas of art and culture, and mixing more or less with native traditions. Yet it was by nature cosmopolitan, satisfying the tastes of the elite and the common man. In France, the development of the drama is closely associated with the names of princes and their ministers. Louis XIV was the patron of Molière and Racine, and during the earlier formative years Richelieu by his

direct, personal encouragement was responsible for the creation of the new theatre. Partly at least through his influence the theatre came to abandon the old style with its setting and adopted the proscenium frame with its perspective scenery. The theatre known as the Palais Cardinal and later as the Palais Royal, was established. Although the Palais Cardinal was originally a court play-house, its influence was spread widely among the public theatres that followed.

The more settled condition of life and the growth of Paris as the capital of France, facilitated the development of permanent companies. Although there were many abuses in the prevailing theatre, the general conditions were conducive to the development of creative activity, and it is by no means surprising that in France, Corneille, Racine and Molière became the leaders in the world of dramatics.

A dramatist of true Baroque quality in the abstract and stereotyped characters, the elaborate ornateness of his language and the dramatic conflicts in the plot, is Pierre Corneille. The drama with which he opened his theatrical account was Le Cid (1636). The play lent great distinction for the first time to the French tragic stage, although it gave rise to a literary controversy among the men of letters. The debate, however, was abstract. Hitherto no really great tragic drama had appeared to provide a concrete debatable issue. It was precisely such a concrete issue that Le Cid provided to the society of Paris. No one can deny its power. It was a drama of Honour par excellence. It is not only of Spanish, but of French and universal Baroque honour; everyone was moved by the feeling that all other values must be subordinated to this one aspect.<sup>13</sup>

Corneille takes his plot from a Spanish source. It contains brilliant and impressive verse and bold presentation of character. Externally the author abides by all the rules. The entire action takes place within a period of twenty-four hours and is confined to the royal palace. Nevertheless, the drama has five acts that are crowded with numerous incidents, and the end instead of being tragic bears a happy conclusion. For this Corneille was severely criticised. He was affected by this adverse criticism. In Horace (1640), he chooses a classical subject and tries to deal with it more simply than he had done with the content



of Le Cid. The tragedy deals with conflicting loyalties. Rome is at war, and against this background the dramatist sets Horace, a patriot of stoical disposition; Sabine his wife, and a native of the enemy country; Camille, his sister, in love with a soldier, Curiace. There is a nobility and grandeur about the total conception of the drama.

In Cinna (1641) Corneille turned once again to a tragedy with a happy ending. Unlike Horace this play is a political drama which became very popular with the King, the court and the public. It operates within a framework of reference which is more closely related to the Italianate Baroque tradition of Roman grandeur, and paradoxically to the anti-Baroque trends which were to later lead to the rejection of Bernini and Cavalli by the French court and its artistic advisers, in favour of a peculiarly French brand of noble and sophisticated form of Augustan classicism. The play deals with the moral and political crisis that the central character, the Roman emperor, Augustus, is obliged to undergo. Augustus is the all-powerful Emperor, and among his closest proteges are Emilie, who is intent on avenging her father's death; and Cinna, who is secretly in love with the heroine and is forced to join in the conspiracy against the emperor. Corneille reveals with consciousness and precision, these characters in their relations to the emperor. Particularly effective is Augustus's soliloquy in the Fourth Act. Corneille's Roman emperor actually gives voice to a conception of royal disenchantment which is wholly compatible with the characteristic themes and outlook of contemporary Baroque writers in other parts of Europe.

Polyeucte (1642), takes us into a different world, for here Corneille moved from pagan character to Christian. Polyeucte is a descendant of an Armenian princess. He is married to Pauline, the daughter of the Governor, who in turn has been forced to renounce his earlier love for a Roman, Severe. Religious and emotional tensions lie beneath the calm of the play's exposition, disturbed only by a dream that has been troubling Pauline's sleep. The tensions mount leading to the inevitable double showdown. While Polyeucte is reflecting on making up his mind once and for all to embrace his new found faith, Severe, makes an appearance. He is successful, attractive and still in love. The play is full of idealism, glamour, loyalty and tenderness. The characters are extremely

high-minded and their intensions are admirable. Yet their tragedy is inevitable. Suddenly an action off the stage brings all their fair words and civilized exchanges to a crisis. When we first see Polyeucte, his Christian friend Nearque is urging him to be baptized, and Polyeucte is anticipating all the practical problems - his baptism would, for example, alienate his beloved wife Pauline. When we next see Polyeucte and Nearque, the former has already received the impact of grace off-stage, and he has been transported to the status of a martyr: he woos death, by destroying the pagan temple. The tables are turned and it is Nearque who calls his attention to the demands of martyrdom. In the last part of the play Corneille endeavours to contrast the Roman Severe with the Christian Polyeucte. By degrees Polyeucte is raised to the status of a saint. He is depicted as the Christian hero moving towards martyrdom to demonstrate his personal faith. Consequently the polite world of moderation is upset; there is no place in it for such holy folly. In the Third Act Polyeucte expresses himself in a dialogue with Pauline which clearly touches on familiar Baroque themes :

“Worldly greatness will perish ; I want immortality  
 To be sure of happiness boundless and endless,  
 Far above envy, far above fate.  
 To procure it is surely worth a sad life  
 Which any day, suddenly, may be snatched from me,  
 Which can only offer a fleeting moment of happiness,  
 And cannot guarantee that another will follow ?”

(Polyeucte Act III)

The issues here are typical and the argument is persuasive. Polyeucte is an unblemished hero : a hero who possessed not only the classical pagan virtues of fortitude and self-discipline, but also Christian virtues which ultimately lead to his martyrdom. The exaltation of martyrdom was thus to become a central concern of the Baroque world.

The qualities exhibited in these dramas are reiterated in the succeeding tragedies of Corneille - Pompee (1642), Nicomede (1650-51), Oedipe (1659), Sertorius (1662) and Sophonisbe (1663). All use classical themes. In their highly

ornamental language they presented a perfect vehicle for the Baroque figures which frequent Corneille's stage rather like the characters that stalk the stage opera in the works of Monteverdi.

However, the times were rapidly changing and Corneille was becoming outdated. His stage characters no longer fitted into the pattern of the polite and delicate gallantries of the age. His characters were bold in proportion, massive and roughly hewn. What the ladies and gentlemen of the French court required was something subtler and more refined. There is a rugged masculinity about Corneille. More appropriate to the age were Racine's heroines.<sup>14</sup>

Jean Racine was born in 1639; by 1664 he had produced his first play and before his death in 1669 he had established himself as the master of the French stage. Unlike Corneille he was willing to cater to the taste of the age—basically his own desires were in perfect harmony with the desires of the Parisian society in which he found himself. To the theatre of his time, Racine brought certain qualities which distinguish him from his companions. His lines are perfectly adjusted to the general speech character of his age. His epigrams are precise while Corneille's are heavy and cumbersome. The single line in Racine may carry a meaning that only a paragraph of Corneille could counterbalance. The poetic simplicity of Hermione's cry in Andromaque:

"Where am I? What have I done? What ought I do now? What fury sways me? What anguish devours my heart? All aimlessly hither and thither through the palace I have rushed. Alas! Is there no way I can know if I love or hate?"

(Andromaque Act II)

- has a quality beyond its ordinary meaning. To this simplicity of language Racine adds simplicity of action. No improbabilities mar his scenes. There are no digressions.

Racine's greatest achievement was the evolving of a pattern suited to the conventions of his age. Corneille had aimed at arousing heroic admiration

for his characters and although the theme of love plays a large part in his dramas he asserted that in tragedy love should be subordinated to other issues. But the age in which he lived was one of gallantry, where the theme of love was of paramount importance. Racine realized that if a tragic drama was to be truly successful, the passion of love must form the centre or at least the defining element of the play.

In Racine's dramas inner conflict became compulsory and he knew how to weave a tissue of conflicting passions in such a way as to arouse a feeling of almost unbearable tension. He began to experiment with the domain of the subconscious and this in effect evolved a modern type of "psychological" drama.

He made a further change by focusing attention on his heroines. In this he differed radically from Corneille. His heroines are more feminine and tender in their structure. His style, too, deviates fundamentally from the classical masculine style of Aeschylus and the romantic, masculine style of Corneille. His conception is essentially feminine.

In 1667, Racine produced his first feminine tragedy, the Andromaque. Here the unities were preserved and the story was divested of any extraneous matter. There are four important characters in the play - Oreste, who is in love with Hermione, Hermione, in love with Pyrrhus, Pyrrhus in love with Andromaque, and Andromaque herself who is still faithful to her dead Hector. Although they have Greek names, they are in fact idealized portraits of ordinary human types. The five acts analyse the torments of these four love-lorn characters. All, with the exception of Andromaque, are tortured souls, each trapped by its own passion. Andromaque alone commands our sincere admiration.

In 1669, Racine turned his rapidly maturing mastery of the tragic form to the sudden death of Nero's first victim, his brother-in-law, Britannicus. The figures of Nero and his mistress Poppaea were immensely popular with the Baroque audiences. Poppaea's rise to political influence through her erotic wiles and sexual charms, dominated Seneca's tragic play Octavia. It made an ideal theme

for Monteverdi's great opera L'Incoronazione di Poppea in 1642. Above and beyond the general affinity which Baroque Europe felt for imperial Rome, Poppaea and Nero represent an increasingly compelling fascination for the close relationship between political and erotic passion, and exhibit the effects of both on a ruler who is still inexperienced in the arts of ruling. Nero is like an actor who has the histrionic desire to play the lead role on the stage of life. As such, he is a character that called out for operatic and dramatic treatment in the Baroque period.

In Racine's play, Nero's glorious exploits are extolled, but in ironic terms :

"His one ambition and his only merit  
Is to excel at driving racing chariots;  
He aspires to prizes quite unworthy of him,  
Displays himself before the Roman public,  
And shows his voice off in the theatre, hoping  
The audiences will idolize him. Meanwhile soldiers  
Are busy goading them to more applause."

(Britannicus Act I)

The ruler as performer before a captive and fawning audience, as a virtuoso in the area of social entertainment as well as in his real domain of kingship, was a prospect which exerted a very strong temptation in an age that set so much store by art and spectacle. Racine's audacity here is truly amazing, and the drama shares in common with its Baroque counterparts that obsessive concern with the interplay of erotic and political motives which had been associated with the figure of the tyrannical Nero.

The action of the play takes place in a room in Nero's palace, an antechamber leading to Nero's personal apartments. In this almost nightmarish setting of corridors and antechamber, motives are obscure and ambiguous. Agrippa Nero's mother, is waiting for her son to give an explanation for the abduction of Junie, the protegee she had planned to marry to her step-son Britannicus. She and the audience get no answers to her questions - By whom?

On whose orders? Why? Nero is then seen confiding to his fawning adviser. The passionate manner of this confession then gives way to a passage that is unequalled for its graphic richness and its psychological insight. Nero describes his experience. He reveals his feelings. He has been transformed into a lustful and loathsome tyrant.

“Excited by a curious desire, I watched her as she arrived here tonight, sad, and raising to the sky above her, eyes brimming with tears which sparkled among the torches and the weapons; lovely, unadorned, in the simple apparel of a beautiful woman just roused from sleep. Can you blame me? Her disarray, the shadows, the torchlight, the shouting and the silence, and the fierce look of her proud ravishers, all enhanced the timid sweetness of her eyes ... Ravished by the sight of her, I tried to speak, but my voice failed me. Motionless, seized by my astonishment, I let her pass... “

(Britannicus Act IV)

It is a magnificent word - painting worthy of the finest Baroque painter. The action is evoked entirely by the words which describe not just the event that has taken place but also the psychological effect on the watching Nero. The heightened language has visual and sensual connotations. Never was Racine more brilliantly Baroque than here.

Berenice is the play which displays Racine's full mastery of the tragic style. Love is the main theme of the play. The catastrophe centers on the separation of Antiochus and Berenice, whom he loves and of Berenice and Titus who are in love with each other. Berenice does not have the complicated intrigue and the off-stage action that characterize the dramas of Corneille. Hence, it has been called a tragedy of reason - a term which has sometimes been used to describe the Baroque theatre. The action of Berenice is to demonstrate the tragic life of the soul as rational in the situation of the three monarchs. It is this demonstration which the audience is invited to see, which Racine makes, first in his rational plot, then in his reasonable presentation of characters (kings and queens as they logically would be by conventional agreement) and above all in the logical and musical order of his language.

Of Racine and Corneille it has been frequently remarked that they discarded the traditional element of drama - action to concentrate on the more complex areas of motivation. They did so in accordance with the growing taste of the sophisticated and cultivated circles throughout Europe for the analyses of human emotions. However, artificial these interests may be they did reflect the current realities. It was an age which attached great importance to etiquette and manners and enjoyed the refinements of endless debates about the rival claims of different emotions and passions both in the pastoral world of swains and shepherdesses and in the courts and palaces. In spite of all its efforts at universality, Baroque drama is rooted in the actual life of a particular time and place, and is nourished by the writer's direct sense of life. Hence, the Baroque theatre was an expression of the Baroque taste; and it was a public institution, with stage actors, audience and general support and comprehension. It was a mirror of human life and action, formed at a particular time and place and enjoying a merely mortal life like that of any other times and places. It still remains only Baroque years after all life left its beautiful forms.

## CHAPTER-IV

### NOTES

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