

The Various Aspects of Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved; or, A Plot Discovered*

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Thomas Otway is one of the major Restoration playwrights. He was educated at Oxford but failed to get a degree. He tried to be an actor but did not succeed. He fell in love but his love was not requited. He tried to enjoy himself but spent most of his life in poverty. He died young at the age of thirty-three. He wrote tragedies and comedies but he is famous for three tragedies: *Don Carlos* (1676), *The Orphan* (1680) and *Venice Preserved; or, A Plot Discovered* (1682), henceforth *Venice Preserved*.

Restoration drama is mostly known for the comedies of manners and heroic tragedies, but *Venice Preserved* is a blank verse tragedy featuring at the time another type of plays among which is John Dryden's *All for Love* (1678). It is no wonder why *Venice Preserved* smacks of heroic features marking such heroic tragedies of the period as John Dryden and Sir Robert Howard's *The Indian Queen* (1664) and John Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* (1670) and *Aureng-Zebe* (1675).

The heroic action in *Venice Preserved* is introduced when Jaffeir takes pride in having rescued Belvidera and her father, Priuli, from the Adriatic waves as he tells Priuli:

'Tis to me you owe her,
Childless you had been else, and in the grave,
Your name extinct, nor no more Priuli heard of.
You may remember, scarce five years are past,
Since in your brigandine you sailed to see
The Adriatic wedded by our Duke,

And I was with you: your unskilful pilot
Dashed up upon a rock; when to your boat
You made for safety; entered first yourself;
The affrighted Belvidera following next,
As she stood trembling on the vessel side,
Was by a wave off into the deep,
When instantly I plunged into the sea,
And buffeting the billows to her rescue,
Redeemed her life with half the loss of mine:
Like a rich conquest in one hand I bore her,
And with the other dashed the saucy waves,
That thronged and pressed to rob me of my prize:
I brought her, gave her to your despairing arms:
Indeed you thanked me; but a nobler gratitude
Rose in her soul: for from that hour she loved me,
Till for her life she paid me with herself.¹

The last two lines in the foregoing quotation show another feature of heroic tragedies used in this blank verse tragedy, namely, the romantic love between the hero and the heroine. Here love has nothing to do with materialism and business as Jaffeir tells his angry father-in-law: "The world might see, I loved her for herself, / Not as the heiress of the great Priuli" (l.i.,p.245).

No matter how poor Jaffeir is rendered after marriage, his love is still strong, especially when the beloved is now his wife. He explains these emotions in a soliloquy:

I have now not fifty ducats in the world,
Yet still I am in love, and pleased with ruin.
O Belvidera! Oh, she is my wife—
And we will bear our wayward fate together.

(l.i.,p.245)

The couple's love is confirmed after Jaffeir's first meeting with Pierre. Belvidera felt lonely during that meeting. Thus when

she met her husband afterwards, they addressed each other with
charming words:

Belvidera. Lend me, lead me, my virgins!
To that kind voice. My lord, my love, my refuge!
Happy my eyes, when they behold thy face:
My heavy heart will leave its doleful beating
At sight of thee, and bound with sprightly joys.
O smile, as when our loves were in their spring,
And cheer my fainting soul.

Jaffair. As when our loves
Were in their spring? Has then my fortune changed?
Art thou not Belvidera, still the same,
Kind, good, and tender, as my arms first found thee?
If thou art altered, where shall I have harbour?
Where ease my loaded heart? Oh! Where
complain?

Belvidera. . . . I joy more in thee,
Than did thy mother when she hugged thee first,
And blessed the gods for all her travail past.
(l.i.,p.250)

Their passionate speech reaches its climax when she promises
that her love for him will never change whatever happens to them:

Oh, I will love thee, even in madness love thee.
Though my distracted senses should forsake me,
I'd find some intervals, when my poor heart
Should 'suage itself and be let loose to thine.
Though the bare earth be all our resting-place,
Its roots our food, some cliff our habitation,
I'll make this arm a pillow for thy head;
As thou sighing liest, and swelled with sorrow,
Creep to thy bosom, pour the balm of love
Into thy soul, and kiss thee to thy rest;
Then praise our God, and watch thee till the morning.
(l.i.,p.251)

The play also shows some topical matters which were influential during the Restoration. Priuli is pictured here as a typical father who tries to find a rich husband for his daughter in order to increase his wealth and power. This is the conceived idea of the marriage of convenience, or rather, the arranged marriage by parents. The parental power allows no disobedience, and thus Priuli gets infuriated when Belvidera secretly marries Jaffeir. We are now back again with a plot whose incidents are like those in Shakespeare's *Othello* where Desdemona elopes with the Moor against her father's wishes. As usual with disobeyed parents, Priuli decides to disinherit his daughter and make her life with her husband unbearable. Thus when Jaffeir goes for help from Priuli, the latter rejects the former's request with a snub:

Home and be humble, study to retrench;
Discharge the lazy vermin of thy hall,
Those pageants of thy folly,
Reduce the glittering trappings of thy wife
To humble weeds, fit for thy little state;
Then to some suburb cottage both retire;
Drudge, to feed loathsome life: get brats, and starve—
Home, home, I say.

(I.i.,p.245)

Moreover, Priuli signed a warrant to confiscate all Jaffeir and Belvidera's property and personal effects, as Pierre tells Jaffeir:

I passed this very moment effects, as Pierre tells Jaffeir:
And found them guarded by a troop of villains;
The sons of public rapine were destroying:
They told me, by the sentence of the law
They had commission to seize all thy fortune,
Nay more, Priuli's cruel hand hath signed.

(I.i.,p.248)

No matter how cruel Priuli is against his daughter and her husband, he is not totally condemned by the society as we can tell from his following statement to Jaffeir, which is rather convincing to many men since parental authority was still regarded with respect and reverence:

You stole her from me, like a thief you stole her,
At dead of night; that cursed hour you chose
To rifle me of all my heart held dear.

(I.i.,p.244)

Otway gives a similar situation where Antonio steals Pierre's beloved, Aquilina. Thus Pierre tells Jaffeir of this situation:

I, who believed no ill could e'er come near me,
Found in the embraces of my Aquilina
A wretched old but itching senator;
A wealthy fool, that had bought out my title,
A rogue, that uses beauty like a lambskin,
Barely to keep him warm: that filthy cuckoo too
Was in my absense crept into my nest,
And spoiling all my brood of noble pleasure.

(I.i.,p.247)

Out of the ill-treatment of Priuli to his son-in-law and Antonio's possession of Piurle's beloved, the playwright weaves the network of the plot against the state in Venice, especially when both Priuli and Antonio are senators. The play now takes a new direction as several conflicts have been set to work. These conflicts are concerned with the codes of patriotism, love, friendship, honour, filial and parental affection.

Otway concentrates on the theme of the conflict between love and friendship, which is usually treated extensively in the heroic tragedies of the period. Thus David R. Hauser tells us:

Otway does not entirely abandon the heroic code; *Venice Preserv'd* is constructed upon a central conflict of love and honour, is deeply saturated in the Platonic conventions of friendship which were characteristics of heroic drama, and above all, depends heavily on the heroic concept of personal honour.²

The code of personal honour is emphasized in several cases in the play. Jaffeir's honour is wounded when his wife was evicted from her house and her property was sold, and also when Renault tried to rape her. Pierre, on the other hand, feels his code of honour asks him to revenge because Antonio robbed him of his mistress. Belvidera's code of personal honour asks her to revenge on Renault who wanted to seduce her, and on the conspirators in general because they vowed to kill her father and they tried to get her husband involved in that murder.

As for the theme of friendship versus love, each plays its role in the play. In order to win the conspirators' consent, Jaffeir sacrifices his love for his wife for the sake of friendship when he hands over Belvidera as a hostage with a dagger as a pledge for his good faith:

To you, sirs, and your honours, I bequeath her,
And with her this, when I prove unworthy—
You know the rest:--then strike it to her heart;
And tell her, he, who three whole happy years
Lay in her arms, and each kind night repeated
The passionate vows of still-increasing love,
Sent that reward for all her truth and sufferings.

(II.iii.,pp.261-262)

Of course his wife is bewildered since she knows nothing about the conspiracy yet, and soon she is taken off stage. Here her husband's friendship for Pierre triumphs over his love for her.

But when Jaffeir goes back to his pawned wife she complains to him of Renault's advances, and also knows from him about the conspiracy against the senate. She succeeds in persuading him to break from the conspirators. Here the situation is reversed and love triumphs over friendship when Jaffeir succumbs to his wife's requests. Moreover, Jaffeir decides to inform against the conspirators. On the other hand here Belvidera is torn between her love for her husband and her filial feelings towards her father whom she wants to save. She is more influenced by the filial duty than by love. To her the father's image is very strong and she does not want to see this figure destroyed and "With smiles of vengeance, butchered in his age" (III.ii.,p.269), because he is "The sacred fountain of my life" (III.ii.,p.269).

Yet still the code of honour has sometimes been violated as many oaths of honour have been broken. First Jaffeir vows to revenge Belvidera when she was evicted and her property was confiscated and sold out by swearing: "By sea and air ! by earth, by heaven and hell, / I will revenge my Belvidera's tears" (I.i.,p.249)! But conversely he does nothing except handing her over to the conspirators as a pledge for his loyalty to them. Moreover, he instructs them to stab her to death with the dagger he supplied them with her if he ever proves disloyal and goes back on his word of honour with them, as we have already seen. It sounds very strange when a husband trusts a group of conspirators and confirms this trust by endangering his own honour and his wife's honour and life without even telling her about the situation he got himself involve in. it is no wonder why she gets annoyed when he asks her to go with the strange man as a pledge. She starts reproaching her husband:

Have I deserved this from you?
Look on me, tell me, speak, thou dear deceiver,
Why am I separated from thy love?
If I am false, accuse me; but if true,
Don't, prithee, don't in poverty forsake me,
But pity the sad heart, that's torn with parting.
Yet hear me ! yet recall me.

(II.iii.,p.262)

And again she sadly remarks after Renault made advances to her:
"I'm sacrificed! I am sold! betry'd to shame" (III.ii.,p.266)! She
wonders why her husband did all that:

He that should guard my virtue, has betrayed it;
Left me! Undone me! O that I could hate him!
Where shall I go! O whither whither wander?

(II.ii.,p.266)

Paradoxically, the conspirators did not kill Belvidera even
when Jaffeir betrayed them, which means they did not carry out
what they committed themselves to do and failed to meet the
obligations of their duty.

Belvidera promises her husband she will keep all secrets if
he tells her why she has been taken hostage. He is suspicious
and asks: "Then I swear" (III.ii.,p.268)? But when she hears that
her father is on the list of those to be murdered by the
conspirators, she thinks she is not any more under any obligation
to keep any secret and succeeds in persuading her husband to
reveal the secret which she promised to keep. Thus Jaffeir goes
back on his word of honour to support the plotters and keep the
conspiracy secret. He decides to break from them as they are not
trustworthy. He changes his mind about them as they are no
longer considered honourable friends but only "cursed friends."

Here is his comment on these men in a soliloquy while he is sitting with them:

Hevean! Where am I? Beset with cursed fiends,
That wait to damn me: what a devil's man,
When he forgets his nature—hush, my heart.

(III.ii.,p.273)

Man's inconstancy is extensively demonstrated in this play and Otway tells us more about it: "Yes, clocks will go as they are set. But Man. / Irregular Man's ne'er constant, never certain" (II.iii.,p.257).

Even the senate backs out and decides to have the plotters executed after it gave assurance to Jaffeir that they would be pardoned. Pierre also vows not to trust Jaffeir anymore after having betrayed the conspirators and revealed their plot:

Never from this curs'd hour to hold communion,
Friendship or interest with thee, though our years
Were to exceed those limited the world.

(IV.ii.,p.286)

Yet at the execution scaffold and before his death, Pierre gets reconciled with Jaffeir saying:

Dear to my arms, though thou'st undone my fame,
I cannot forget to love thee; prithee, Jaffeir,
Forgive that filthy blow my passion dealt thee;
I'm now preparing for the land of peace,
And fain would have the charitable wishes
Of all good men, like thee, to bless my journey.

(V.ii.,p.301)

Honour is, on the other hand, saved to a certain degree when Jaffeir saves Pierre's honour from a shameful end by giving

him a fatal stab, which is also a kind of mercy killing, instead of letting him be relentlessly tortured to death by his enemies. Jaffeir's honour is, as it sounds, saved here when he decided to commit suicide instead of living with shame after causing Pierre's death. Thus both his suicide and the mercy killing of Pierre helped partially to regain his lost honour after he betrayed his friend and broke his oath. Anyhow, Jaffeir always harps on the name of honour whether he is working with or against the plotters, living with them or dying with them, joining them or breaking from them. Accordingly we must not take his words for granted when Pierre first asked him to join the conspirators and he thought that such participation was directed by honour:

I dare believe
Thou wouldst not use me in a little cause,
For I am fit for honour's toughest task.
(II.ii.,p.255)

As for the motivations of the plot instigated against the state, they seem either personal like Jaffeir's and Pierre's, or mysterious and suspicious like those of Renault's and the other schemers'. However, it seems that Otway is unsympathetic with the conspiracy woven against Venice. Patriotism is shifted from the conspirators, who are considered traitors, to those who stand against the instigators or are cheated by them, Jaffeir promises to meet Pierre, a distinguished conspirator, at midnight, but while he is waiting for him he tells us in a soliloquy that he allied himself with the devil, and consequently his act is considered hellish:

I am here, and thus, the shades of night around me,
I look as if all hell were in my heart,

And I in hell. May, surely 'tis so with me;--
For every step I tread, methinks some fiend
Knocks at my breast, and bids it not be quiet:
I've heard, how desperate wretches, like myself,
Have wandered out at this dead time of night
To meet the foe of mankind in his walk:
Sure I'm so curst, that, tho' of Heaven forsaken,
No minister of darkness cares to tempt me.
Hell! Hell! Why sleepest thou?

(II.ii.,pp.253-254)

Later on he says in an aside while Pierre is going to take him to the oath-taking meeting held by the plotters:

I but half wished
To see the Devil, and he's here already.
Well!
What must this buy, rebellion, murder, treason?
Tell me which way I must be damned for this.

(II.ii.,p.254)

Jaffair again in a soliloquy sees his alliance with the conspirators as devilish, especially after Belvidera has informed him of Renault's advances to her:

What, be a devil! take a damning oath
For shedding native blood! can there be a sin
In merciful repentance? O this villain!

(II.ii.,p.272)

To Belvidera the leader of the plotters, Renault, is a villain surrounded by devils. Thus she warns Jaffair of them:

Yes! to a villain! Why at such an hour
Meets that assembly all made up of wretches
That look as hell had drawn 'em into league?

(III.ii.,p.268)

She does not want to be associated with the conspirators and be considered a traitor like her husband while still working with them: "Nay, be a traitor too, and sell thy country" (III.ii.,269)? Priuli, on the other hand, weeps for joy when the conspiracy is uncovered and he and Venice are saved:

Could words express the story I have to tell you,
Fathers, these tears were useless, these sad tears
That fall from my old eyes; but there is cause
We all should weep; tear off these purple robes,
And wrap ourselves in sackcloth, sitting down
On the sad earth, and cry aloud to Heaven.
Heaven knows if yet there be an hour to come
Ere Venice be no more.

(IV.ii.,p.280)

We can conclude from all the foregoing facts that the conspiracy stems from personal and political motivations rather than from patriotic causes. Jaffeir hates his father-in-law and by revolting against the senate he is only revolting against Priuli. Pierre is not, on the other hand, revolting against the senate in general, but in particular against Antonio who robbed him of his beloved Aquilina. Thus it is true when Aline Mackenzie Taylor says that Pieere is not patriotically motivated in his revolt against the authority: "He joins the conspiracy to avenge a personal injury, not an injustice meted out to him by the senate which has blighted his career as a soldier, but something far from heroic. A senator has stolen Pierre's mistress, Aquilina."³

Otway does not attract the spectators' sympathy towards Pierre but, instead, he hardens their feelings against him. Thus when Pierre hears of Renault's attempts to rape Belvidera, he feels no big harm was done. Moreover, he is ungodly and refuses

the attendance of a priest at his execution. He is against praying as when he meets Jaffeir at midnight, he tells him: "No praying, it spoils business" (II.ii.,p.254).

At the same time the playwright finds fault with Renault, the leader of the conspirators. He is not a trustworthy man and is ready to betray his friend Jaffeir by trying to seduce Belvidera, Jaffeir's wife.

One other aspect of *Venice Preserved* is its inclusion of sentimental scenes, which are the example of the eighteenth-century drama. This means that cruel people might behave kindly and show sympathetic feelings towards those whom they have already antagonized and maltreated. Priuli is a merciless father who hates his daughter and her husband at the beginning of the play as we have seen, but at the end he weeps and feels sad and takes it upon himself to help his daughter and to free Pierre, her husband's friend. Thus he addresses her: "O my heart's comfort!" (V.i.,p.293), and :

Canst thou forgive me all my follies past,
I'll henceforth be indeed a father; never,
Never more thus expose, but cherish thee,
Dear as the vital warmth that feeds my life,
Dear as these eyes that weep in fondness o'er thee.
Peace to thy heart. Farewell.

(V.i.,pp.293-294)

Accordingly he goes to secure pardon for Pierre, but it is too late.

Also we have tender feelings from Belvidera towards her cruel father when she hears that there is a plot against his life. She asks Jaffeir to kill her first before attempting to kill her father

who is, as she says, "the sacred fountain of my life" (III.ii.,p.296).
Thus she addresses him reproachingly:

I know it, thou wilt kill me.
Do, strike thy sword into this bosom: lay me
Dead on the earth, and then thou wilt be safe:
Murder my father! tho' his cruel nature
Has persecuted me to my undoing,
Driven me to basest wants, can I behold him,
With smiles of vengeance, butchered in his age?
(III.ii.,p.269)

Another sentimental scene takes place when Jaffeir is filled with grief and asking for forgiveness for being the cause of Pierre's imminent death:

Hold: eyes, be dry!
Heart, strengthen me to bear
The hideous sight, and humble me, to take
The last forgiveness of a dying friend,
Betray'd by my vile falsehood, to his ruin.
O Pierre!
(V.ii.,pp.300-301)

Pierre replies that he is forgiving Jaffeir and addresses him with words full of love and emotions, as we have already seen.

Thus sentimentalism is an outstanding feature in **Venice Preserved**; and to this effect Bonamy Dobree remarks: "Otway, indeed, was so much a sentimentalist that sentimentalism almost becomes an admirable quality in his work."⁴ He goes on commenting on this issue by saying:

One cannot but feel that in this play Otway was concerned, not with a tragic vision, nor with the delineation of character, but with the emotions as such. He was exploring not man's

courage so much as his capacity for feeling, even for self-torture. Jaffeir's remorse and self-abasement are terrible to listen to; Otway seems to be indulging in a debauch of his own pains. The dignity of the play resides almost wholly in Pierre, about whom there really is something fine, but even he is too intent upon his feelings.⁵

Moreover, Cecil V. Deane confirms that Otway's works abound in pathos: "Otway, in *The Orphan* (1680) and *Venice Preserv'd* (1681-2), established the school of pathos, which persisted into the eighteenth century."⁶

In conclusion *Venice Preserved* is one of the greatest Restoration tragedies, and it seems worthwhile to quote John Harold Wilson stressing this point: "Yet, careless plotter he was, leaving loose ends flying in all directions, Otway wrote what was held to be in its own time and for generations thereafter the most moving tragedy of the seventeenth century, *Venice Preserved* (February, 1682)."⁷

NOTES

¹Thomas Otway, *Venice Preserved; or A Plot Discovered*, in *Restoration Plays* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1962), I.i., pp.243-244. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in my text. This edition has not given the name of the editor.

²David R. Hauser, "Otway Preserved: Theme and Form in *Venice Preserv'd*," in Earl Miner, ed., *Restoration Dramatists: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p.141.

³Aline Mackenzie Taylor, "*Venice Preserv'd*," in John Loftis, ed., *Restoration Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.205.

⁴Bonamy Dobree, *Restoration Tragedy: 1660-1720* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1966), p.43.

⁵*Ibid.*, p.145.

⁶Cecil V. Deane, *Dramatic Theory and the Rhymed Heroic Play* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p.159.

⁷John Harold Wilson, *A Preface to Restoration Drama* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p.95.

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