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Davenant Before the Duke's Company

Contrary to the stories and rumours that he helped to put in circulation, Sir William Davenant was almost certainly *not* Shakespeare's son. But part of him longed to be. In his *Brief Lives*, the gossipy Restoration biographer John Aubrey recalled a conversation between Davenant and the poet Samuel Butler:

Mr. William Shakespeare was wont to go into Warwickshire once a yeare, and did commonly in his journey lie at this house [the Crown] in Oxon: where he was exceedingly respected . . . Now Sir William would sometimes, when he was pleasant over a glasse of wine with his most intimate friends e.g. Sam: Butler (author of Hudibras) etc: say that it seemed to him that he writt with the very spirit that Shakespeare, and was seemed contentended [*sic*] enough to be thought his Son: he would tell them the story as above, (in which way his mother had a very light report, whereby she was called a whore).¹

Whether or not Davenant shared DNA with the Bard, he took up the mantle of Shakespeare, revering the author of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* even as he adapted those and other Shakespeare plays to suit the growing audience interest in music and spectacle, interests cultivated in the elaborate

masques that flourished at the Jacobean and Caroline courts. This chapter will consider how Davenant's artistic proclivities drew upon the legacy of Shakespeare and other pre-Civil War playwrights, even as he pushed forward into new terrain, bringing the aesthetics of the court masque and opera into the public theatres. These earliest theatrical experiments anticipate the approaches that Davenant later deployed in his adaptations of Shakespeare for the Duke's Company.

Early life

Davenant was the son of John, a wine merchant and owner of a tavern near Oxford, and Jane, praised by Aubrey as a woman 'of a very good witt'.² Shakespeare stayed at John Davenant's tavern when he visited Stratford-upon-Avon, but there is no evidence that he embarked on an affair with Jane, although Shakespeare must have been a friend of the family. Wine taverns, unlike inns, did not rent rooms and the playwright apparently stayed there as a family guest. Contemporary accounts indicate that Shakespeare served as Davenant's godfather when he was baptized at St. Martin's, Carfax on 3 March 1606.³

Davenant's education was somewhat irregular. Unlike his more academically inclined brothers, he did not attend the Merchant Taylor school in London; instead, he was educated nearer to home by the Oxford-based schoolmaster Edward Sylvester and later by Daniel Hough, a fellow of Lincoln College.⁴ Upon his father's death in 1622, Davenant was sent to London to be apprenticed to a merchant, but there is no evidence he took up the post. Instead, flush with cash, Davenant sought out a tailor, John Urswick (to whom he was constantly indebted), and purchased an expensive wardrobe. Davenant understood that in order to be successful, he needed to look the part.

Upon his arrival in London, the adolescent but ambitious Davenant began a rigorous campaign of social climbing. He started as a page in the household of Frances Howard, Duchess of Richmond. A few years later he joined the household of

Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, a statesman and patron of poets. It was through Greville that Davenant met Endymion Porter, a well-connected courtier and patron of the arts, who became a friend and financial supporter. Through proximity to wealth, Davenant began moving in exalted circles, eventually, after Greville's death, lodging at the Middle Temple at the Inns of Court, although he was not formally admitted there. Davenant's ability to ingratiate himself with rich and powerful patrons would be an asset in a theatrical career that coincided with political upheaval and civil war.

Davenant's playwriting career began in the last years of the 1620s and he quickly established himself with the King's Men, the company in which Shakespeare had been sharer, playwright, and actor. His first play, the bloody tragedy *The Cruel Brother* (1627), bears the influence of Webster, Shakespeare, and particularly Fletcher's *The Bloody Brother*. In these derivative early plays, Davenant learned his craft through the age-old practice of *imitatio* – copying and embroidering upon a model.

Although Davenant had been savvy in his choice of dedicatees and his commendatory poems were by well-connected people, his next play, *Albovine* (1629), is a bit tone deaf, for it makes explicit reference to Charles I's transfer of affection to his wife, Queen Henrietta Maria, after the assassination of his favourite, the Duke of Buckingham. Davenant also chose a questionable dedicatee: James I's disgraced favourite Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset.⁵ Perhaps because of the topical allusions, the play was published in quarto but never was performed. Despite the minor setback, the King's Men performed two other plays by Davenant in 1629: *The Colonel* and *The Just Italian*, showing that his miscalculation with *Albovine* did not have any lasting effects.

In 1630, Davenant's burgeoning theatrical career was derailed by syphilis, a disease that would deform his nose and seriously compromise his health. The queen's physician, Dr Thomas Cademan, apparently cured the playwright, and the physician's widow, Anne, later became Davenant's second wife. Davenant's second wife died in 1655, and later that same year

he brought his third and final wife back from France, Henrietta Maria du Tremblay (later Lady Davenant). She would prove to be an able business partner to her husband after the Restoration.⁶

Davenant alluded to his travails with the pox in the comedy *The Wits* (1634), also performed by the King's Men. More importantly, *The Wits* is a substantial improvement over Davenant's previous efforts, as he drew upon the liveliness of contemporary city comedies, a popular early modern dramatic genre. He also used an older play as a model, in this case Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *Wit at Several Weapons* (c. 1613). While neither *The Wits* nor *The Cruel Brother* is an adaptation in the formal sense, these early works nonetheless demonstrate Davenant's interest in using pre-existing materials to stoke the fires of his dramatic imagination.

FIGURE 1 Sir William Davenant (1606–1668) by William Faithorne, after John Greenhill, published 1672. NPG D30156 © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Davenant and the Caroline court masque

These early plays also bear the marks of another influence that would shape his later Shakespeare adaptations: court culture. After the misstep of *Albovine*, Davenant shrewdly cultivated courtly patronage, more strategically choosing powerful dedicatees and including commendatory verses by cavalier poets in his printed quartos. In the 1630s, Davenant's deeper involvement with court culture was becoming increasingly evident. The King's Men performed his romantic comedy *Love and Honour* (1634), but it actually found greater favour at court with Queen Henrietta Maria, consort of Charles I.⁷ The preoccupations of the queen also shaped Davenant's *The Platonic Lovers* (1635), for it reflects her Neoplatonic interests.

Davenant's successful cultivation of patronage at court eventually gave him the opportunity to write court masques, a genre that blended spectacle, dance, singing, and spoken text. Playwright Ben Jonson and designer Inigo Jones had developed the genre at the court of James I, but by the 1630s their collaboration had reached its end, as each man struggled with the other for artistic primacy. After the dissolution of their partnership in 1631, several different poets were tried: Aurelian Townshend, James Shirley, and Davenant's friend Thomas Carew. But in 1635 the queen invited Davenant to write his first court masque, *The Temple of Love*. Apparently, he worked well with Jones, for he wrote all subsequent Caroline court masques, including *Salmacida Spolia* (1640), the final masque performed before the Civil War.

Davenant's work on court masques taught him valuable skills that informed his adaptations of Shakespeare in the 1660s. First, Davenant needed to align his aesthetic with the tastes of his elite audience, a skill that would serve him well in the 1660s, when the two public theatres were frequented by the king and his retinue.⁸ Second, the masque genre required him to consider the ways in which dialogue, spectacle, music, and dance worked

together to create meaning, a dramaturgical mode to which he would repeatedly return. Third, on a practical level, the creation of court masques was a collaborative enterprise: Davenant had to work well with others. He was a junior collaborator to the designer Jones – Davenant's job was to pen the lyrics and prose descriptions, while Jones was responsible for choosing the subject matter and the visual elements of the masque. Indeed, the young poet seems to have been stimulated by his work with Jones and the various composers and choreographers who contributed to the court masque, for he sought out similar collaborations for the rest of his life.⁹

In short, the court masque served as a training ground for Davenant, teaching him skills he would put to greater use in the 1660s. *Luminalia* (1638) is an excellent case study for exploring how the young Davenant honed his craft, for it combines visual splendour, music, and dance to great effect. The desire to marry the arts in a happy synthesis is set out in the preface, and it is this aesthetic that later influenced many of Davenant's Shakespeare adaptations:

[T]he Queene commanded *Inigo Iones* Surveyor of her Majesties works to make a new subject of a Masque for her selfe, that with high and hearty invention, might give occasion for variety in Scenes, strange aparitions, Songs, Musick and dancing of several kinds; from whence doth result the true pleasure peculiar to our English Masques, which by strangers and travellers of judgement, are held to be as noble and ingenious, as those of any other nations.¹⁰

Davenant may have worked on *Luminalia* with Nicholas Lanier, Master of the King's Musick and a composer known for his experiments with recitative, a style imported from Italian opera that sought to imitate speech in song.¹¹ No music from the production survives, but it is tempting to speculate that Davenant's later interest in opera was sparked during this period. Indeed, *Luminalia* bears some resemblance to Davenant's later operatic experiments, including his

Shakespearean ones. In addition to solo songs, the masque features musical dialogues between characters that culminate in choral singing, a structural feature found in Davenant's later works.

From his experience on *Luminalia*, Davenant may have also learned important lessons about how music enhances the power of spectacle. Instrumental music accompanied stunning lighting effects and covered the noise of wondrous machines as they ascended and descended. Most remarkably, dancers performed on machines:

the upper part of the heaven opened, and a bright and transparent cloud came forth farre into the Scene, upon which were many *Zephryi* . . . These to the Violins began a sprightly dance, first with single passages, and then joyning hands in rounds several ways. Which Apparition for the newnesse of the Invention, greatnesse of the Machine, and difficult of Engining, was much admir'd, being a thing not before attempted in the Aire.¹²

Davenant honed one final skill during his tenure writing court masques: diplomacy. His ability to negotiate politically fraught situations would serve him well in the 1650s and beyond. *Salmacida Spolia* (1640), the final masque presented before the outbreak of civil war, is a case in point. By 1640, Davenant was tightly bound to the court – he had been the primary writer of court masques for five years and in 1637 succeeded Ben Jonson as Poet Laureate.¹³ Davenant naturally was a supporter of the king, but even the most devoted sycophant must have acknowledged the deteriorating political situation. It is not surprising that Davenant found it impossible to please everyone in *Salmacida Spolia*, although he tried mightily. The masque simultaneously argues that the overflowing fractiousness of Caroline society could be controlled, even as it shores up the very thing that caused the problem: the king's claim that he possessed the divine right to rule absolutely.

Davenant's strategy worked with his royal employers – Charles and Henrietta Maria apparently were pleased with the masque – but a contemporary witness reported a less positive response among the audience.¹⁴ Perhaps some of the courtiers who attended had qualms about Davenant's critique of 'the peoples [*sic*] giddy fury' as well as the intimations that the king's patience in his subjects is growing thin.¹⁵ In other words, as Martin Butler aptly puts it, 'the appeasement on offer is everywhere subverted by the need to reassert the king's inviolable authority'.¹⁶ In later entertainments, *Macbeth* and the *Tempest* among them, Davenant threaded the political needle more carefully, as he clearly delineated the difference between a despot and a virtuous leader, shoring up the right of the *right* sort of king to rule.

Operatic experiments

Even before he penned *Salmacida Spolia*, pressing political matters thwarted Davenant's theatrical desires. In March 1639 he had obtained a patent from Charles I that authorized him to build a theatre in Fleet Street, 'to exercise Action, musically Presentments, Scenes, Dancing, and the like', but this plan for a dedicated space to pursue the mixed media spectacle of the court masque on the public stage did not come to fruition until after the Restoration.¹⁷ Soon after the license was granted, Davenant was drawn into the First Bishops' War. Along with other courtiers, he marched north to make a show of force against the Scottish bishops who resisted Charles I's religious authority.

Although he had returned to London by fall, Davenant's energies for the remainder of the 1640s and into the 1650s were primarily consumed by political and military duties.¹⁸ He undertook various roles. He attempted (unsuccessfully) to infiltrate the New Model Army to sway them to the king's side and pawned the queen's jewels in Amsterdam to raise funds for the royalist cause. After the outbreak of hostilities in England,

he served as Lieutenant General of the Ordinance until August 1643. In the same year he was knighted for his 'loyalty and poetry'.¹⁹ He continued to serve the Crown in other capacities, helping to raise funds for the military campaign and serving as a gun runner, conveying arms to royalist forces in the west.²⁰

After the defeat of the royalist forces at Naseby in mid-June 1645, things went from bad to worse for Davenant. Like many of his theatre colleagues he had dutifully supported the royalist cause, but, after the king's surrender in 1646, Davenant went into exile with the court of the queen and the Prince of Wales at St. Germain-en-Laye and later stayed with Lord Jermyn at the Louvre.²¹ According to the antiquary Anthony Wood, around the time of Charles I's execution in 1649 Davenant converted to Catholicism. The queen tried to help her loyal friend, arranging for Davenant a position in Virginia or Maryland. But his May 1650 trip to the New World was aborted when a parliamentary frigate intercepted his ship, and he was imprisoned, first on the Isle of Wight and then in the Tower of London. Although there was a talk of a trial for treason and possibly execution, he was eventually released on bail in 1652.²²

A free man in a land whose new rulers were hostile to theatrical entertainments, Davenant persevered and found innovative ways to practice his profession. In 1653 he published anonymously a manifesto, *A Proposition for Advancement of Morallitie*, which argues that theatrical entertainments combining music, scenery, and discourse might educate the populace in civic virtues.²³ Davenant wrote that

if the peoples [*sic*] senses were charm'd and entertain'd with things familiar to them, they would easily follow the voices of their shepherds; especially if there were set up some Entertainment, where their Eyes might be subdu'd with *Heroicall Pictures* and change of *Scenes*, their Eares civiliz'd with Musick and wholesome discourses, by some *Academie* where may be presented in a Theater several ingenious *Mechanicks*, as *Motion* and *Transposition of Lights*, to

make a more natural resemblance of the great and virtuous actions of such as are eminent in Story; without any scandalous disguising of men in womens habits, as have bin us'd in Playes.²⁴

His proposed style of entertainment combined the arts in a syncretic, intermedial fashion to placate and divert the people, an aesthetic that Davenant and others in the 1650s and 1660s would pursue. In 1653, the year that Davenant published his *Proposition*, James Shirley and the composers Christopher Gibbons and Matthew Locke wrote *Cupid and Death*, a masque overseen by the dancing master Luke Channell that gestures toward a new musical-dramatic aesthetic, even as it draws upon the court masques of the past. This masque does not aggrandize the ruler, for there was no longer a king or a court, but it does serve a ceremonial function as an entertainment for the Portuguese ambassador. The playwright Shirley had also written court masques before the outbreak of civil war, most notably *The Triumph of Peace* (1634), and thus was conversant with the form. Like the earlier Caroline masques, *Cupid and Death* combines spoken dialogue, songs, choruses, and dance, but is more dramatically dynamic than its courtly predecessors or Davenant's proposed 'discourses' because it possesses a clear directional plot, in this case drawn from Aesop's fable about the disastrous mix-up of Cupid's and Death's arrows. The masque points the way ahead in a further sense, for it incorporates recitative – modified to suit English – and anticipates a convention seen in later English operas, whereby some characters both speak and sing while other express themselves exclusively in song and dance.²⁵ Thus, although Shirley's *Cupid and Death* does not entirely bring Davenant's theories to life, it does provide a lively synthesis of music, dialogue, and dance, and perhaps even machine-based spectacle. One stage direction in *Cupid and Death* indicates that 'Mercury [is] seen descending upon a Cloud', while the printer's preface states that 'The Scaens wanted no elegance, or curiosity for the delight of the Spectator'.²⁶

A few years later Davenant had the opportunity to test his theories himself in *The First Days Entertainment at Rutland-House* (1656), an explicitly non-dramatic event carefully designed to avoid the wrath of the antitheatrical government. The work was comprised of 'declamations' with instrumental music and songs staged in the former residence of Cecily Manners, the Dowager Countess of Rutland, which Davenant had managed to acquire.²⁷ Women, not boys, performed the female singing roles, avoiding the 'scandalous disguising' of the past, and foreshadowing the introduction of actresses on the public stage four years later.²⁸ Various composers – Charles Coleman, Henry Cooke, Henry Lawes, and George Hudson – provided the vocal and instrumental music, an amalgamated model of creation that would be carried forward into Davenant's other operatic experiments, as he stitched components from multiple creators into a coherent whole. On a practical level, Davenant used *The First Days Entertainment* to further his ambitions, notably through a dialogue between Diogenes and Aristophanes in which the pros and cons of public entertainments, particularly opera, were debated.²⁹ Indeed, Davenant's entertainment attempted to address the reservations and concerns the government had about music and spectacle, smoothing the way for his next endeavour, the fully sung opera *The Siege of Rhodes*.

Regrettably, the music for *The Siege of Rhodes* has been lost. But by studying the sources that survive – in particular, Davenant's libretto and John Webb's scene designs – we can form a sense of Davenant's vision for musical-theatrical works, a vision that would soon influence his adaptations of Shakespeare. Like the court masque, *The Siege of Rhodes* featured entries in which music and scenic spectacle are combined. Notably, the work's visual and musical elements are explicitly twinned on the title page of the 1656 quarto, which proclaims that the historical event was 'Made a Representation by the Art of Prospective in Scenes, And the Story Sung in *Recitative Musick*'.³⁰ Yet unlike the court masque, it is based on an actual historical episode of Christian-Muslim conflict, the siege of Rhodes by Solyman the Magnificent in 1522.

Davenant drew on his previous experience writing songs for court masques as well as the expertise of the several musicians who composed the score for *The Siege of Rhodes*. We know the identities of Davenant's composers, for their names are listed in the printed libretto. Many of them had worked on *The First Days Entertainment*, with the notable addition of composer Matthew Locke, who would continue to set Davenant's words to music after the Restoration. We may also glean something of *The Siege of Rhodes*'s music from the libretto. *The Siege of Rhodes* contains songs and choruses, many of the strophic variety (i.e., each verse of poetry is set to the same music), but there are also extensive passages of recitative that drive the dramatic action.³¹

For the rest of the decade, Davenant pursued various theatrical projects that combined music and spectacle, even as he sought to ingratiate himself with the authorities.³² *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* (1658) and *The History of Sir Francis Drake* (1659) both address recent historical events, allowing Davenant to contrast the brutality of Spanish *conquistadors* with England's supposedly more humane approach. Such jingoism was designed to curry favour with the government, further evidence of Davenant's ability to adapt his art to current political realities. Writing in 1656 to John Thurloe, Cromwell's Secretary of State, to argue for the necessity of 'morale representations', Davenant mentioned that, 'the first Arguments [in *The Cruelty of the Spaniards*] may consist of the Spaniards' barbarous conquests in the West Indies and of their severall cruelties there exercised upon the subjects of this nation'.³³ The choice of subject was timely, for Cromwell had imperial ambitions; his 'Western Design' was intended to wrest control of the West Indies from the Spanish. Cromwell had mixed success. In April 1655 his troops had failed to take San Domingo in Hispaniola, although they managed to occupy Jamaica in May 1655. Their possession of that island was constantly threatened by Spain, although by 1658 the tide had begun to turn slightly in England's favour. As Janet Clare has argued, *The Cruelty of the Spaniards* enacts

'the objectives, but not the outcome, of [Cromwell's] Western campaign', with Davenant putting a flattering gloss on historical truth.³⁴ The entertainment ends with a comforting prophecy 'which foretells the subversion of the Spaniards by the English'.³⁵

Davenant must have had the support of the government in this 'propaganda war against Spain', for he was able to present *The Cruelty of the Spaniards* at the Cockpit in Drury Lane, where he could reach a broader public than had been possible with the private performances at Rutland House.³⁶ Like other public theatres, the Cockpit had been officially closed by the authorities. But in 1651 William Beeston had refitted it, with the result that it had better capacity for movable scenery and more space for musicians than the cramped quarters at Rutland House.³⁷ In short, it was an adequate space for Davenant to experiment with the combination of auditory and visual media. Like *The First Days Entertainment*, *The Cruelty of the Spaniards* uses scenery, speeches, dances, instrumental interludes (to accompany scene changes, reveals, and onstage action), and sung interludes (mostly strophic songs, some with choruses).³⁸

The following year, Davenant continued to combine music with drama in *The History of Sir Francis Drake* (1659), also performed at the Cockpit in Drury Lane. Oliver Cromwell had died in 1658, and his son Richard was now in charge, although his grasp on power was tenuous. Still, Davenant strove to flatter the government, as he recycled the propagandistic theme from the previous year's entertainment and even repurposed the scenic frontispiece. He explains that this reuse 'was convenient [. . .], our Argument being in the same Country' (i.e., Peru).³⁹ *Sir Francis Drake* also has a very similar form to *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*: instrumental and vocal music, dance, and scenic effect organized in entries. *Sir Francis Drake* may have had the added novelty of being fully sung, given that contemporary reports indicate that it incorporated recitative.⁴⁰

The lasting influence of Davenant's *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru* and *Sir Francis Drake*, both on Davenant's

later intermedial approach to Shakespearean adaptation and to the Restoration musical-dramatic aesthetic more generally, can be traced to Davenant's recycling of these entertainments in *The Playhouse to Be Let* (1663). As they set up these two interpolated entertainments, characters gently mock their musical elements, calling out the inherent artificiality of 'Stilo Recitativo': 'Suppose I should not ask, but sing, you now a question / And you should instantly sing me an answer; / Would you not think it strange?'⁴¹ Such queries acknowledge the Restoration preference for a performance style that combined spoken dialogue, scenic effect, dance, and instrumental and vocal music, a style later called 'dramatick opera' by Davenant's collaborator John Dryden. It was this distinctive approach that Davenant eventually adopted for his most famous Shakespeare adaptations.⁴²

Davenant's 'New World' operas also affected the approach to 'exotic' subject matter in later plays. Dryden's 'American' plays, *The Indian Queen* (1664), a collaboration with Robert Howard, and *The Indian Emperour* (1665) use similar dramaturgical strategies, incorporating substantial musical scenes and even engaging with similar themes, in particular the relationship between colonizer and colonized. In both plays, Dryden (like Davenant) treats the native people somewhat sympathetically. Furthermore, in Davenant's *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*, the sad downfall of the Indigenous population is predicted by the Priest of the Sun, while in Dryden's plays religious and magical figures provide similarly dire prophecies. *The Indian Emperour* seems particularly indebted to *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*, for Dryden includes a graphic scene in the final act in which Pizarro tortures Montezuma and his High Priest on a rack, a moment viscerally reminiscent of the torture scene in the fifth entry of Davenant's entertainment, where 'an *Indian Prince* . . . is roasted at an artificiall fire'.⁴³

The dance conventions of these entertainments also carry forward into the Restoration theatre. The saraband was associated with the Spanish in *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in*

Peru ('a Sarabrand is plai'd whilst two Spaniards enter . . . and, to express their triumph after the victory over the Natives, they solemnly uncloak and unarm themselves to the Tune, and afterwards dance with Castanietos').⁴⁴ The saraband is also associated with Spanish colonizers in *The Indian Emperour*, although in that play the dance distracts them.⁴⁵ In a similar way, character dances that originate in Davenant's entertainments from the 1650s also appear in Restoration performances. For example, the monkey dance in *The Fairy Queen* (1692–3), a Restoration version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (see Chapter 7), recalls the dance between two apes in *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*.⁴⁶

As we have argued in this chapter, Davenant's interest in intermedial forms – which he developed to varying degrees in his plays for the King's Men, his court masques, and his operatic experiments of the 1650s – broadly influenced his approach to Restoration performance and in particular his adaptations of Shakespeare. Davenant established conventions that were pursued in Restoration heroic drama and musical entertainments, his vestigial influence even stretching into the early eighteenth-century through Italian operas crafted for London audiences, such as Handel's *Rinaldo* (1711).⁴⁷ Davenant was politically adaptable and possessed a keen ability to predict what his audiences would like. These talents would continue to serve him well when the theatres reopened in 1660 and he was granted a patent to form the Duke's Company. Ever the entrepreneur, Davenant would capitalize mightily upon that opportunity.