
We do not know very much about either *The Rebellion* or its author Thomas Rawlins (c. 1620–1670). With few exceptions, the play has been relegated to obscurity. The neglect of the play is a particularly curious oversight among those critics interested in the ‘blackface group’ of plays because it is the only play in the early modern period to portray a married black couple in a European context, and to give both partners strong speaking parts. It is also the only play to focus solely on a rationalisation behind the banishment of the Moors from Spain – their aid to the enemies of Spain.

The earliest extant version of *The Rebellion* dates from 1640. Thomas Rawlins was a young man when he wrote the play and according to his own dedicatory preface it was written in part as fulfilment of an agreement with his patron Robert Ducie. Rawlins belonged to the Brome Circle, which included the playwrights Thomas Nabbes and Robert Chamberlain as well as the satirist Humphrey Mill. The inclusion of Rawlins in this literary group is usually merely assumed, but it is confirmed by Chamberlain’s open praise of *The Rebellion*. Chamberlain’s lines suggest his friendship with the young dramatist and are part of eleven introductory verses that together indicate that Rawlins was well-known and respected, but also suggest that playwriting was a new endeavour for Rawlins. By profession he was an engraver, and during his lifetime he only published one other extant play and an octavo volume of poems, *Calanthe*, in 1648. The pastoral comedy *Extravagant Shepherd* (1654; Wing C6323) was not an original work. It is a translation from the French original by Thomas Corneille. Two other original plays are, however, attributed to him. They are both comedies and were printed after his death in 1670: *Tom Essence: or the Modish Wife*, which was licensed in 1676 (Wing R366), and *Tun-bridge-Wells: or A Day’s Courtship*, printed in London in 1678 (Wing R368).

From the dedication to the reader, we know that Rawlins puts forth his youth and his ‘ignorance of the Stage’ as an excuse if the play should not find favour (sig. A2r). The title-page of *The Rebellion* states that it is a tragedy and that ‘t was acted nine daies together, and divers times since with good applause, by his Majesties Company of Revels’. We know that it was entered in the Stationers’ Register on 20 November 1639. If the dating of his birth by G.K. Hunter (c. 1617) is correct, Rawlins would have been about twenty-three years of age at that time. If Sharp is correct and he was born in 1620, he would have been twenty-six. In any case, he was relatively young.

The editors of *The Revels History* refer to the troupe interchangeably as the Salisbury Court players, and include *The Rebellion* as part of their repertoire. This would, however, necessitate that Rawlins wrote his play prior to the outbreak of the plague in 1636, because, as Bentley and Edwards write: ‘In the winter season of 1635–1635/6 the Salisbury Court players performed three times at Hampton Court and at St. James, but this is the last known record of them. They did not survive the long plague closing of May 1636 to November 1637.’

As a drama, *The Rebellion* follows a common early modern rather than a Classical conception – i.e. it lacks dramatic unity or rather a singularity in its dramatic action. Instead, two plots, one romantic and one political, are very loosely interwoven. The political plot is pseudo-historical and begins with the
imminent invasion of Spain by the French. The French are led by a Moor, General Raymond, who is ambitious for military glory and has an equally ambitious black wife, Philippa. Contributing to this plot is the ambition of the white Spanish Count Machiavel, who is envious of the young lord Antonio's popularity with the people and seeks revenge for this social slight as well as political advancement. Antonio is a young soldier, who is so rash in his desire to defend his honour that he kills a governor, thereby supplying Machiavel with an opportunity for advancement. Machiavel elicits Raymond’s aid to gain the throne. Neither the white nor the black couple intend to share glory, but instead use each other for political ends. Both couples are betrayed to the Spanish King. In a sub-plot, Sebastiano, the son of a local governor, is lovesick for the young noblewoman Evadne, and dresses up as a tailor with the alias Giovanno to be near her. He also has a sexually charged relationship with an older woman – Evadne’s nurse, who is his social inferior as Sebastiano – but not as Giovanno. This sub-plot is the one that has received the most (albeit still very slight) critical attention.

To give a brief review of the play’s critical history necessarily begins with its editions. The Rebellion was reprinted once in 1744 by Sir Robert Dodsley. Sir Walter Scott published a smaller selection of the plays chosen by Dodsley and reissued them as Ancient British Drama in 1810. Carew Hazlitt also reworked and revised some of the plays from Dodsley’s original collection. Unlike Scott, he chose to make The Rebellion part of A Select Collection of Old English Plays in 1875. Since then, however, The Rebellion has largely suffered neglect and no new editions have been printed.

It has received a few listings and brief remarks by scholars. Gerald E. Bentley’s The Jacobean and Caroline Stage notes its existence, and G.K. Hunter includes a footnoted reference to the play in English Drama, 1586–1642. Fredson Bowers is the first to do more than mention the play, yet even his discussion in Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy is quite brief and has a natural enough focus on its place among revenge tragedies. Unfortunately Bowers’s emphasis is skewed. He recognises only the white characters, and consequently, he fails to make any mention of even the banishment of the Moors at the end of the play. The result is an unbalanced analysis, given the space allotted to the black characters in the political or revenge plot and in the actual text of the drama.

In the few more recent mentions of The Rebellion, it is treated in a similarly dismissive fashion. Khalid Bekkaoui includes it in a Sheffield Hallam working paper entitled ‘The Moorish Figure and Figures of Resistance’, but aside from listing it as containing Moroccan figures, Bekkaoui does not discuss or comment on the drama itself. The Cambridge History of English and American Literature (2000) has a one-line reference to The Rebellion and its connection with Spain: ‘The last two volumes of Dodsley’s Old Plays contain several dramas of the Restoration which are Spanish in theme. Of these, The Rebellion by Thomas Rawlins seems wholly fanciful with its hero disguised as a tailor and its crowded and improbable incident.’

Though marginally based on the defeat and subsequent expulsion of the Moors from Spain, The Rebellion lacks both historical and religious accuracy. The play glosses over the duration and the bloodshed of the uprising of the Moors in Spain, and the systematic expulsion of Muslim Arabs and Moriscos by Philip III in 1609–1614. It blends elements of late fifteenth/early sixteenth-century coastal raiding with the eponymous rebellion by the Moriscos in 1568–1571, a rebellion that was put down by Philip II. In The Rebellion, the coastal raiding of Barbary Moors and Turks is changed to a French siege led by General Raymond, a black Moor, thus combining the two threats: French Protestant and Muslim. The historical aid given by Spanish Moors to Ottoman Turks, who raided the coasts of the Iberian peninsula in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is changed to aid given to Protestant French soldiers. The latter is explicable within the contemporary historical context of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), which was both a religious war between Catholics and Protestants, and a fight for political and military superiority. The actual war was rearranging the power structure in Europe, and Spain was losing ground to France. By the end of the war, part of Catalonia would be ceded to the French — a historical point that does not coincide with the geographical location of the play, Seville in the south (though this is closer to Granada, the site of the last actual uprising of the Moors).

Even though the account is highly fictionalised and has little claim to historical accuracy, the internal or domestic contextualisation is itself of interest. The Moors in the play are not fighting for themselves but for Europeans — or rather with those allies of the English, the French Protestants, against the Spanish Catholics. The portrait of the Moor, however, is not virtuous. General Raymond and the white Spanish Machiavel are painted with the same unflattering brush, and are very similar in type to Shakespeare’s most famous Jew, Shylock. This underscores the contribution of the play to the formation of an ethnically narrow English identity, as opposed to a Catholic identity or a black identity, but does not affirm either a general approbation of whiteness or of Christianity vis-à-vis Islam.
This is exemplified in the play as the white Catholic Machiavel and the black Muslim Raymond are figuratively bonded together as ‘twins of treason’ and in a relationship with the devil. Where Raymond is ‘the Devills cozen german, for he weares the same complexion’, Count Machiavel is ‘a right Devill’. The proverbial reference to the inability to wash the Ethiop white is rendered ambiguous in The Rebellion, where it is the white Count who stabs the equally white Antonio, and says: ‘So weepes the Ægyptian monster when it kills, / Wash’t in a floud of teares; could’st ever thinke / Machviles repentance could come from his heart?’ His self-comparison to an Egyptian, and the reference to the inability of any amount of tears to result in a change, both allude to blackness, yet he is white. It is also Machiavel who is the ‘tainted Sheepe’ and ‘tainted beast’ of Spain that mars its flock. The character of Machiavel contradicts any theory of racial colour as determining character, then, even while the presentation of Raymond (and his wife Philippa) confirms it (because there is an absence of other black characters in the play).

What separates blackness from whiteness in The Rebellion is neither ambition nor villainy; it is about what happens after the socially inappropriate act is committed. The white characters suffer attacks of conscience. The black characters do not. Machiavel is remorseful: ‘forgive me […] Farewell ambition catching at a Crowne, / Death tript me up, and head-long threw me downe.’ Raymond makes no pretense of remorse. He dies unrepentant – and still ambitious, even for revenge in the afterlife. In his final speech, he asks the whites surrounding him:

[...] have you not strength
To beare a curse, whose breath may taint the aire,
That this Globe may feele an universall plague[?]
No, yet beare up, till with a vengeful eye
I out-stare day, and from the dogged sky
Pluckle my impartial Star.

Despite its derogative attitude to blackness, and the explicit connection of the black man with an infectious social taint, the last reference to an ‘impartiall Star’ is evocative in a play that has dealt so much with human nature in general and ambition. It is an invocation to those who lack prejudice to judge the life and fate of this black character, and it is an explicit challenge that is unmatched in Renaissance drama.

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