HAMLET TO HAMILTON

Season Two, Episode Two:
Verse Drama Meets Opera
John Dryden's King Arthur, or The British Worthy
(1691)

EMILY. This is *Hamlet to Hamilton: Exploring Verse Drama*. I'm your host, Emily C. A. Snyder. You're listening to Season 2, Episode 2: "Arthur Through the Ages," taking a look at John Dryden's *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*, where opera meets verse drama.

[music]

HAMLET 1. To be…

HAMLET 2. To be…

HAMLET 1. … or not to be?

HAMLET 3. To be or not to be?

HAMLET 1. That is the question.

HAMLET 3. … or not?

[music out]

EMILY. Welcome, friends, to Episode 2 of Season 2 of *Hamlet to Hamilton*. In Season 1, we were looking at the basics of verse drama, and in Season 2, we're taking the tools from the tool boudoir of how verse drama works and we're applying it to the great body of work that exists of verse drama plays having to do with the King Arthur myth. Last episode, we began our adventure looking at Sir Thomas Hughes' play from 1587, and today we'll be looking at John Dryden's *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*, which was written and presented as an opera, although it's not an opera as we would think of it, which is to say it was not sung through.

Now, this season, we made a promise to ourselves that we would only look at Lancelot and Guinevere scenes with the exception of some of this early work, because these early plays either didn't have Lancelot/Guinevere as a plot, or in the case of quite a few of them, there is no Lancelot and there is no Guinevere. However, these early plays are significant enough in verse drama and its history that we wanted to give you a taste. I'm joined today by our own Colin Kovarik, who will be taking the role of Arthur while I'll be taking the role not of Guinevere but of a woman named Emmeline. More on that in a moment.

Now, the way that this season goes is where in the previous season you were encouraged to listen chronologically, to listen from the beginning, this season you can drop in wherever you like. However, we will be moving chronologically through the King Arthur plays. If you'd like to read along with us, you can take a look at hamlettohamilton.com, and you'll be able to access the texts there. We want to give a huge shout out thank you to the University of Rochester's Camelot Project, where quite a few of these plays are stored. They've done a great amount of work to really preserve not only plays but all sorts of scholarly articles and reviews of plays and poetry and bits of myth on that project. If you like King Arthur, definitely check out the University of Rochester's Camelot Project to see more. We also will have transcripts. That will be available on hamlettohamilton.com. It takes a little bit of time to get them up there, so we thank you so much for those of you who have been our patrons or who will be our future patrons over on patreon.com/hamlettohamilton to help us make sure that this work is accessible to everyone.

If you are interested in joining us over on Patreon, we also, for example, had a party to kick off Season 2 where we got together and we read scenes that we're not going to actually have on air, so super exclusive, super fun. We even had some of the living playwrights that we'll be hearing towards the end of the season. In fact, we will conclude this season with an interview with some of the living playwrights that we're featuring, so keep an ear out for that. We've got other interviews coming up this season as well, and we're very excited. We're very excited to continue this deep dive into more than Shakespeare. There has been so much verse drama, and we're excited to explore it.

[brief music]

Today, we are taking a look at John Dryden's *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*. Originally, I actually wasn't going to look at this piece whatsoever because, as mentioned, I was always under the impression that this was, in fact, an opera. That's how it had been described to me. I'd listened to the music by Purcell. I figured it was all sung through, and when I was looking at the script, there was no Guinevere or Lancelot, so originally I was going to give it a miss. But as I was doing a deeper dive, I realized that this piece is incredibly influential over its own century, and in fact will also have influence over the next piece that we look at in our next episode. It also, however, is a crucial key to understanding the development of verse drama in the English language. We're going to be starting today's episode with a bit of history. Then Colin and I will take a look at a brief scene. We'll give a little bit of our thoughts, and we'll conclude the episode and come back for the cliffhanger, for the second half of how John Dryden's work then influenced our next writer, who is Henry Fielding.

So a bit of historical context: there's this belief in verse drama, and it's even been on the Wikipedia page for a while, that verse drama kind of went underground,

that it fell out of favor, that people don't really do verse drama anymore. Well, one of the things that was most exciting to me as I was prepping for this season is that I kept finding verse drama play after verse drama play after verse drama play, many of which were produced, and (laughs) it's just to interesting, because we've got this myth that verse drama ceased to exist, and we have proof that, in fact, it didn't. But something did happen to verse drama that helped give rise to the myth that we'd gone the way of the Loch Ness Monster. What happened was Puritans. Yeah. We kind of have Puritans to blame for verse drama taking a few different routes.

Let me give some context. We know, as we've stated before on this podcast, that verse really was the way that more or less everything that was fiction was written. Verse was what you defaulted to, and so I'm not going to go too far back talking about mystery plays, miracle plays, things like that. Just be aware that everything was in verse. You may, for example, remember when we were talking about the tool boudoir and particularly about meter and scansion and compound meter, we talked a little bit about The Wakefield Master and *The Second Shepherd's Play*, which was in rhyming verse and which was in a highly complex meter that was The Wakefield Master's own invention. For modern English, however – since the mystery plays, the morality plays tended to be written in a slightly earlier form of English – so modern English, the first, I would say, play that had huge significance on how verse drama is still written today was good old *Gorboduc.* We've mentioned *Gorboduc* many times, and I'm positive we'll be taking a look at this play in some future season in a future episode. But that was written in 1561, written and performed in 1561, because, again, plays are generally written to be performed. Just put a pin in that. We're going to be coming back to that in a second.

Gorboduc was written in 1561, and it was not in rhyme, and it was in iambic pentameter rather than a sing-songy tetrameter. It didn't rhyme, and the lines were slightly longer, and also the lines were extremely regular. The audiences were really excited by this, and so from 1561 through to the plays that you're going to be hearing even from 2019, blank verse, iambic pentameter, is still considered the only verse to write in. We are going to be hearing differences. We are going to be hearing some slight variations, but not many. As you know (laughs) if you've been listening to this podcast for a while, I highly encourage you to go a little bit more Wakefield Master-esque and play with verse drama rather than just doing blank verse iambic pentameter. However, the other reason why *Gorboduc* is so important is because it was part of kicking off English Renaissance theatre, which, of course, eventually produced, about 30, 40 years later, Shakespeare. As we know, Shakespeare has since dominated what we think of as verse drama, even though in this series, as we're exploring verse drama, we're going to meet a lot of other playwrights.

Now, the English Renaissance theatre did a lot just for theatre. For example, it started introducing that crazy new thing known as prose into the work. It also

continued to incorporate music. While there weren't musicals or even opera yet, music in a verse drama was still very common. Again, if you think of Shakespeare, think of half of his comedies, such as *As You Like It*. Almost every other scene, maybe every third scene, has music in it. *Twelfth Night* has a ton of music in it. When you go see these shows, they feel a little bit like not-quite musicals. That's going to be important too.

Now, the English Renaissance theatre also moved plays indoors. Why is this important to verse drama? Well, because whether you're performing to an outdoor audience or an indoor audience is going to affect the type of verse that you write. If you're writing for an outdoor audience, it helps to have a lot of rhyme. It helps to have a very strong ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM type meter just to keep people's attention, just to get people's attention. Also, frankly, rhyme makes it easier to hear. You also might be not quite as subtle with your verse. You're going to land things harder. You're going to be a little bit broader. You're going to be a little bit more Commedia. Anyone who's done outdoor theatre – especially if it's not an outdoor theatre that's really just a theatre that doesn't have walls and a roof, but I'm talking outdoor theatre like you're in a park – you are vying for attention and dogs are running through your scene and that one guy that doesn't know you have a play going on just walks through. You know what I'm saying? If you're writing verse for that, you're going to be a little bit more broad. You're going to be using things to keep people's attention, whereas if you are indoors, you can be a little bit more subtle, a little bit more intimate. You can be a little bit more cerebral with your verse. You can be a little bit more experimental. You have the luxury of silence if you're indoors, whereas there's just a greater chance that someone will be playing carnival music down the road if you're outdoors. So it's going to affect the type of verse that you can write, and we see that in the shift to blank verse, that the plays start becoming more cerebral, both good, when it's good, and painful when it's bad. But then again, everything is just a tool in our tool boudoir, and there is neither good nor bad but, I guess, your acting and your writing makes it so.

Anyway, the important thing here, though, is that since you're moving indoors, since they're moving away from doing plays just on the Feast of Corpus Christi, so in a religious or quasi-religious setting, and they start, in the English Renaissance, doing plays on secular people and secular topics. Well, this is the time of a lot of religious struggles. Again, nothing like today. Pageant wagons, religious struggles, artists struggling to find their voice. Ah, how things change. Anyway… (laughs)

But essentially what happened was theatre became popular, really became popular again, increased in popularity. At the same time, we had the rise of Puritans, not merely Catholics or Christians, not Anglicans or Lutherans, Calvinists, but Puritans. Puritans bought right into something that we call the anti-theatrical tradition. The anti-theatrical tradition is basically people that object to live performance because all art is probably wicked, essentially. (laughs) This

goes way back. Versions of the anti-theatrical tradition have been around since forever. It's kind of the original cancel culture. For example, if you were to look at Greek theatre, you have Plato, who is a Greek philosopher who, when he wrote his ideal version of society, which he put in his book *The Republic*, went and said, "No, we do not want artists, thank you very much." His feeling was that actors and playwrights told lies about the gods, because, you know, they sometimes had critiques, man. Well, fast forward a few hundred years. This is, what, 300 AD now, and you have St. Augustine, who is a Catholic church father, but he's right there with Plato and the anti-theatrical tradition. His objection to actors and playwrights putting on plays is that since it's about the Roman gods, therefore it's heresy, therefore they are evil, the people who put this on. So great. Then theatre kind of goes underground again. It comes back in pageant form, just like now, on those old pageant wagons. It comes back, this time, with the church, Catholic Church in this case, in the medieval times. It comes back with verse. It comes back with music. Just remember those two are frequently entwined. Then it's considered too Catholic. The Protestant Reformation happens. King Henry VIII happens. We are now in The Church of England in Elizabeth's time, which is the English Renaissance. So when the Puritans come around, they're like, "Uh, well, two things: one, the theater is definitely too Catholic. But it's also too sexy and wicked, and people go there and they're not religious enough."

So the anti-theatrical tradition went and closed the theatres of London in 1642. The Puritans got us. Prior to that, they would frequently use different plagues to shut down the theatres – again, not a bad idea. Wear a mask. Get your vaccination. Stay safe. But in 1642, they closed it down because – and I will quote from the bits that are pulled for the Wikipedia page here: the order cited that the current "times of humiliation and their incompatibility with public stage plays," which were representative of "lasciviousness, mirth, and levity," ergo they ought to be closed. In fact, the actors just one year later said, "Please open us up," because they'd been out of work for a year. So strange. I can't imagine what that'd be like. Anyway, the actors said, "Please let us open up. We have purged our stages of everything obscene and scurrilous." It did not happen, though. They did not get theatre back for almost twenty years. I'm just going to sit with that for a second. (laughs) The Puritans closed down theatre for twenty years. Oh my gosh. Can you imagine being out of work for twenty years?

Except they weren't, not quite out of work. This is where verse drama has a couple different interesting things happen to it. Again, *Gorboduc*, written in the 1560s, right at the beginning of the English Renaissance. Less than a hundred years later, eighty years later, 1642, the British Commonwealth under the Puritanical rule closes all theatres. Just to put that in context of Shakespeare's life, Shakespeare starts writing in a serious way in the 1590s. He ends around 1610. It's like twenty good years of just knocking out plays left and right. Then only about thirty years after Shakespeare retires, so only thirty years after Shakespeare retires… Right now, as I'm recording this in 2021, that would like

Shakespeare stopped in 1990 and if the Puritans closed everything down now, all right? So pretty short amount of time. The English Renaissance drama is going strong. Shakespeare. Ben Jonson. Marlowe. All sorts of different people. Loads of stuff, and then – pfoom – nothing.

What verse drama did was it pivoted to something called a closet drama. This was a workaround because the theatres were closed. It was kind of their way of going digital, the way that a lot of our theatres have gone digital. What it is, is you would write this drama and you would publish it and then people could just happen to read it in their own homes, kind of like if you got the scripts for *WandaVision* and then just read it in your own home because the Puritans had cancelled Disney this week or something like that. Closet dramas – again, some of them are in prose. A lot more of them are in verse, and, in fact, it looks like this helped give rise to stage direction in verse drama, because the playwright is trying to help the people who are sitting around in their parlor reading, help them imagine what it might look like on the stage, so kind of interesting.

The other thing that happened in this twenty years when theatre was closed down is actually – because remember I mentioned that verse drama and music were really intertwined, because, again, verse drama is kind of just like a spoken musical, so it's not that far a leap to just put music to some of the poetry that you're writing anyway. Well, in the world of music, opera had just been invented at the end of the 1500s in Italy and had become popular. But it was barred by, again, that same English Commonwealth from really coming into England, because England's Renaissance, all of it is always a little bit behind the rest of the continent, historically speaking. When it was just poised to hit the English world – and, I mean, they're theatre crazy, they're looking for the next new thing, "What's this opera stuff?" – the theatres are closed. What they started doing was, again, doing sneaky verse operas, is what I might call them. It was half a verse drama, but then it would have a composer. We're going to be seeing quite a few of these throughout this season. Arthurian drama, because it's so big, lends itself to having music, and there's going to be a significant number of these verse-opera hybrids that happen.

The first one that is generally considered the first English language opera was *The Siege of Rhodes* by William Davenant. It was performed in 1656, so just a handful of years before theatre returned. I mention this just to give you some context, because Davenant was a predecessor of today's playwright Dryden, and Davenant sort of bridges the gap between working with people that Shakespeare would have worked with and working with Dryden and mentoring Dryden a little bit. The curious thing is that *The Siege of Rhodes* required special permission from Oliver Cromwell in order to even be produced, and Davenant did something really rather clever. William Davenant, what he did was he wrote it out as a verse drama, but since you couldn't produce theatre but you could produce music – because the idea was that music was, I don't know, holy in some way, perhaps. So what he did was he got permission to put on his verse drama play by setting

most of it to music. Most of it, he called the production recitative music. If you are a musical theatre person or an opera person, then you know that recitative is essentially, it's a little bit like Gregorian chant, where you'll just stay on a note. It's not really about having a melody so much as it is like (chants):

> To be or not to be, that is the question.
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

But it's not quite the same as if you were singing (sings):

> On my own, pretending he's beside me

where the melody is key. But he got away with it, is the thing. He wrote a verse drama, got five of his buddies to compose music to it, created this verse semi-opera type thing, and that became the second way that verse drama continued. In fact, as we are looking through some of the Arthurian plays, I'll point out whenever it's a verse drama with large sections in music or with compositions, of which there are several significant ones, including one that toured several different continents. But we won't get to that quite yet.

There is one more thing that we inherited in terms of how we think about verse drama from Oliver Cromwell shutting down the theatres for almost twenty years. Let's talk about that and let's take a look at *The British Worthy* after this break.

[music]

CHA. Hey there. I'm Cha Ramos, and I will be teaching the "Boundaries and Needs" class in partnership with Turn to Flesh Productions. This course is a six-part series designed to help you get into better communication with your own boundaries and needs in the privacy and comfort of your home. So often nowadays, we're being asked in rehearsal rooms and on film sets and in contract negotiations about our boundaries and needs so that we can do our best work, and that's really exciting. But so few of us have actually had the opportunity to figure those things out by ourselves and for ourselves and with ourselves so that we can know how to answer those questions. This class will give you some concrete tools. We'll do some movement exercises, some guided meditations, and have some discussions about how you can begin to discover those things and examine them and practice them regularly for yourself. We will meet once a month on Saturdays on Zoom, often with our cameras off for some of these exercises, and you're welcome to join for one class here and there or for the whole six-part series. The idea is to better equip you to bring your whole self to your art and to your workspaces, no matter how you identify as an artist. If you want some more information about the class or about me, there's a lot to read on the Turn to Flesh website, on social media, and of course you are welcome to reach out with questions at any time. I'm really excited to do this work with all of you in community, and I hope to see you in class. Until then, take care.

[music out]

EMILY. Welcome back. We've mentioned thus far that verse drama, all verse drama, was forced to go underground. In the case of verse drama, two different types of forms emerged. The first was closet drama, which means, "Whoops, I've published a play, and oh no, you read it privately in your house and maybe you stood up and walked across the room and did some acting. Oh no. What can we do?" And the second form was this hybrid verse play that you put to music and you call it an opera and you say, "No, no, we're not doing theatre. We are just singing. We're having a good old sing-song. No theatre happening here."

But we do know that verse drama as it was performed in Shakespeare's time did reemerge. How did that happen? Well, that's where we need to talk about the third part of how the Puritan commonwealth had an affect on how we approach verse drama now. In fact, I just want to put a pin in, when we look at future episodes, we can absolutely look at the closer overlap, and I'm sure that we will look at the closer overlap of musicals, of operas, and verse drama and how exciting that really is. But unfortunately, it's a little bit beyond today's scope.

But let's take a look one more time at Davenant's *Siege of Rhodes*, because this is going to have an affect, again, on his mentee, John Dryden, who wrote *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*. Now, *The Siege of Rhodes*, by Davenant, was written and performed in 1656. That's four years before The Restoration, before Charles II was crowned king and the Puritan government was overthrown. In order to perform this – and again, it was performed in a small, private theatre constructed in Davenant's home, called Rutland House. Davenant had to get special permission from Oliver Cromwell, and he was saying that it was going to be recitative music, and he has a very long title of it. It's called *The Siege of Rhodes, made a representation by the art of perspective in scenes and the story, song, and recitative musick* – musick with a k – *at the back part of Rutland House in the upper end of Aldersgate Street, London*. It was reprinted a few years later, right before The Restoration. Kind of pretty cool thing is that this production that he got permission to do in 1656 had England's first professional actress, Mrs. Colman. It had a woman, officially, in a woman role. Ooooh, naughty. So, very important. We could do an entire episode just about that.

But one of the reasons why it was allowed to be put on, besides just saying, "Oh, we're going to do it in a private theatre in our house. We're going to do it with music so it's not really theatre." But what they also said was, "This is a worthy or noble subject for us to be covering. This is not going to be full of things like sex the way that *Romeo and Juliet* is full of sex. No, no, this is a very patriotic and a very sensible and a very sort of England First and a very respectable play on a respectable and xenophobic and jingoistic topic. Therefore it is worthy to be allowed and given special permission to produce."

Why is that important? Well, if you think about what the actors asked in that first year of being shut down twenty years prior, is they had said, "Hey, will you please open us up again? We promise we've reformed all of our scripts. We're not going to have naughty jokes for Mercutio anymore." The interesting thing is, if you know anything about Restoration theatre, which is largely in prose – not in verse, but in prose – is that Restoration theatre under Bonny King Charles II is known for being very sexy. Everyone is everyone else's lover. Adultery is rife. It's everywhere. Again, those are prose plays. Kind of interesting. What happened as we came into The Restoration was that these people who were writing verse dramas, whether the verse drama also had music, which it frequently did, or not, is the playwrights, Davenant and then Dryden, as we're going to see, promised that their plays were of an elevated and noble quality, that these were plays that would pass the Oliver Cromwell test. These were not plays that were meant to be appreciated by the public. This is higher. This is holier. This has gatekeeping. This is elitist. This is sanitized.

Does any of this sound familiar? Does any of this sound familiar, about what we still think of verse drama today? Why do we teach Shakespeare in schools? Because we think it's somehow elevated. I remember someone contacted me and asked if it would be appropriate for her middle school daughter to come and see my version of *Juliet and Her Romeo*. I was like, "Well, if you feel that *Romeo and Juliet*, which includes underage sex and marriage, which includes homophobia, which includes a lot of death, which includes domestic abuse from Capulet to Juliet, which includes double suicide by minors, if you think that is appropriate for your middle school daughter, then yes, she should be fine seeing my version of the play." (laughs) But we've got this idea that if it's verse drama, it's somehow sanitized, and that if we're writing verse drama, it needs to stay cerebral. It needs to still be indoor theatre. It needs to have gatekeeping. We treat it kind of like we treat opera in that it's something other and it's very white and it's very rich and it's very elite, and it's not in the least bit… It's never transgressive. It never confronts problems of the day. It has nothing to do with the here and now. It's sanitized. This was put onto verse drama.

Let's take a look at John Dryden and what he wrote in the preface to his *King Arthur*, which has the subtitle *The British Worthy*. Kind of interesting. So who's John Dryden? John Dryden is a poet and a verse playwright. He studied with Davenant, and he coined the term "heroic drama." He wasn't calling it verse drama because they really didn't make distinction – unfortunately rather like now – between prose as distinguished from verse. But he termed heroic drama and said that he wrote heroic drama. So what is heroic drama? Dryden invented the term "heroic drama" to describe his play *The Conquest of Grenada*, which was written in 1670. That's about fifteen years after *The Siege of Rhodes* play. This is ten years after the theatres were reopened. Heroic drama, he said, should be in iambic pentameter, because, again, there's a sense, not actually so much from Shakespeare, who by this point was somewhat forgotten and was somewhat looked down upon because, in fact, he was poor, because he was not a

nobleman, because he was an upstart, because he wrote bawdy things. So not so much about Shakespeare as, again, because of *Gorboduc*, that had become the norm for a hundred years by this point.

So he said, "Okay, we're going to use iambic pentameter, but heroic drama will also be written in closed couplets," so he moved it away from blank verse and changed it back into rhyming couplets. To our ears, it would sound very much like Moliere or Corneille in translation, where it's in rhyming couplets in an extreme repeated meter. And he said secondly the play must focus on a subject that pertains to national foundations, to mythological events, or important and grand matters. Third, the hero of the heroic drama must be powerful, decisive, must dominate even when they're wrong. In other words, he was basically trying to create the French Academy, but for verse drama. Everyone had to be true, good, and pure.

It's interesting, then, when Dryden wrote… he wrote the libretto for *King Arthur* twice. The first version is lost to time. Apparently he wrote it, nothing ever really came of it, and he just sort of abandoned it. The second one, which we're going to be looking at today and which is from 1691, Dryden wrote this three-page explanation in front of his libretto explaining why his verse was not heroic, why he broke his own rules. He says that he rewrote it slightly in order to adapt to the changing political climate, because by this point Charles II was gone. The Catholic James II was in place. Apparently when he rewrote it, he wanted to make sure that the nobles and the royalty were no going to be upset at anything that he wrote. So he says:

> But not to offend the present times nor a government which hitherto protected me, I have been obliged so much to alter the first design…

Meaning the first libretto.

> … and take away so many beauties from the writing that it is now no more what it was formerly.

Then he basically blames the composer Purcell for why Dryden's verse is going to… Essentially, what it does is it just uses a little bit more free verse. It uses a lot of iambic pentameter, but it also uses a lot of free verse. To excuse that, he says:

> The numbers of poetry and vocal musick are sometimes so contrary that in many places I have been obliged to cramp my verses and to make them rugged to the reader, that they may be harmonious to the hearer, of which I have no reason to repent me, because these sorts of entertainments are principally designed for the ear and the eye, and therefore in reason of my art on this occasion, ought to be subservient to his.

And I do think that's important, that basically he was not writing a closet drama. He was writing something that Purcell, it sounds like, kept influencing him to be more natural, perhaps, with his language. Kind of interesting.

Now, Colin and I are about to read a scene. Things that you should know: there is no Guinevere in this play, and in fact a lot of the King Arthur myth does not look like what we would expect. There's no Mordred. Merlin only shows up to have a speech at the end. Instead, King Arthur is fighting this other dude who's kind of a Mordred figure, and he is wooing this maiden, Emmeline, who is blind. We'll be doing the first meeting between the two of them. It's the closest we could get to something that felt like a Lancelot/Guinevere scene.

Not to spoil it, but I found it really quite playable, which is loads of fun. I also, though, want to point out one more thing, which is that this opera, this verse play with music, this hybrid form did so well that, first of all, it has been performed up through the present day. It's still extremely popular. And, two, it was so popular that David Garrick, who is an actor impresario in the British tradition… Garrick lived in the 1700s. He did a lot to help theatre. He's the one who re-popularized Shakespeare. He's the one who started us towards naturalistic rather than bombastic acting. There's a lot of good that he did. But taking a cue from Davenant, from Dryden, from Oliver Cromwell, David Garrick would go and take Shakespeare plays, or in this case he also took *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*, took out all the music, just took the verse, and he cut it down. He would go and he would cut down previously existing verse plays, and what he would invariably take out was any mention of sex. It was just gone. You can imagine what his *Romeo and Juliet* is like, and we'll talk more about that in a second.

We're going to read – and we will have the text available on hamlettohamilton.com – we're going to read the whole scene as Dryden wrote it, which still has a little bit of sex – not much, but a little. Then we will note what lines were even still too sexy for Garrick, that he even further sanitized. The thing that I want you, dear listener, to be thinking about is we talked about, way back when, that verse drama frequently does do well with big, epic, heroic themes, with larger-than-life characters, with history, with mythology. All these things fit very naturally into verse drama, but that doesn't mean it has to be sanitized. I do find it curious that all these sanitized verse drama plays are not the ones that are still playing in our theatres. It's the stuff that's a bit more rough and ready, stuff that's both high and low, which Shakespeare has. But we absolutely have inherited the burden of trying to look perfect and sanitized while also writing about the messiness of humanity.

So without further ado, let's take a listen in to a session that Colin and I had previously. Some of the information you'll hear repeated, but you're also going to get to hear a little bit of John Dryden's *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*.

[brief music]

All right, here we are reading *King Arthur, or The British Worthy* by John Dryden. We're going to be reading the whole text, and then we'll go back and we'll note what parts David Garrick edited out later on, because the original text is from 1691, John Dryden, and then David Garrick did a famous edit about 80 years later in 1770. I will be reading Emmeline, not Guinevere. There is no Guinevere. I'll be reading Emmeline. (laughs) This is the first meeting with King Arthur, and Colin Kovarik will be reading King Arthur in his first meeting with Emmeline. The thing that you should know is that Emmeline, in this play, is blind. Are you ready?

COLIN. Yes.

EMILY. Okay.

COLIN. I'm lukewarm on the text.

EMILY. Once again, this is lukewarm text so that whether it works for us or not, there's no place for the playwright to hide.

COLIN. Right, yeah. (laughs)

EMILY. We have not done his work for him (laughs) of studying the text. You'll just be able to hear it as is. All right, so Emmeline enters.

> **EMMELINE.**
> O father, father, I am sure you're here;
> Because I see your voice.
>
> **ARTHUR.**
> No, thou mistak'st thy hearing for thy sight:
> He's gone, my Emmeline;
> And I but stay to gaze on those air eyes,
> Which cannot view the conquest they have made.
> Oh star-like night, dark only to thyself,
> But full of glory, as those lamps of heaven
> That see not, when they shine.
>
> **EMMELINE.**
> What is this heav'n, and stars, and night, and day,
> To which you thus compare my eyes and me?
> I understand you when you say you love:
> For, when my father clasps my hand in his,
> That's cold, and I can feel it hard and wrinkled;
> But when you grasp it, then I sign, and pant,
> And something smarts and tickles to my heart.

ARTHUR.
Oh, artless love! Where the soul moves the tongue.
And only nature speaks what nature thinks!
Had she but eyes!

EMMELINE.
Just now you said I had.
I see 'hem, I have two.

ARTHUR.
But neither see.

EMMELINE.
I'm sure they hear you then:
What can your eyes do more?

ARTHUR.
They view your beauties.

EMMELINE.
Do not I see? You have a face, like mine.
Two hands, and two round, pretty rising breasts,
That heave like mine.

ARTHUR.
But you describe a woman.
Nor is it sight, but touching with your hands.

EMMELINE.
Then 'tis my hand that sees, and that's all one:
For is not seeing, touching with your eyes?

ARTHUR.
No, for I see at distance, where I touch not.

EMMELINE.
If you can see so far, and yet not touch,
I fear you see my naked legs and feet
Quite through my clothes; pray do not see so well.

ARTHUR.
Fear not, sweet innocence;
I view the lovely features of your face;
Your lips' carnation, your dark shaded eyebrows,
Black eyes and snow-white forehead: all the colours
That make your beauty and produce my love.

EMMELINE.
Nay, then, you do not love on equal terms.
I love you dearly without these helps.
I cannot see your lips' carnation,
Your shaded eyebrows, nor your milk-white eyes.

ARTHUR.
You still mistake.

EMMELINE.
Indeed, I thought you had a nose and eyes,
And such a face as mine; have not men faces?

ARTHUR.
Oh, none like yours, so excellently fair.

EMMELINE.
Then would I had no face; for I would be
Just such a one as you.

ARTHUR.
Alas, 'tis vain to instruct your innocence,
You have no notion of light or colours.

EMILY. And then a trumpet comes and she runs off and the play continues. All right, now, just for the listener to hear, David Garrick, in 1770, did his cut of the show as a two act rather than a five act, and I believe he did it as a straight play rather than, really, a verse play with music. Because if you look at *The British Worthy*, the music is… It's not a book musical. In fact, it's much more like *As You Like It*, where the supernatural creatures, like Venus and Cupid and various sprites and things will come in and will sing a song, and then the lead characters don't have to sing at all, and they're just doing a verse play. Book and lyrics are not integrated, so it should be fairly easy for David Garrick to edit out music, to turn this into a two act straight play. It's interesting because Garrick is well known for, for example, having recut *Romeo and Juliet* so that Juliet does not talk or even seem to know what sex is.

COLIN. What?

EMILY. Yeah, which is actually pretty impressive. You've got to cut a lot out. (laughs)

COLIN. (laughs)

EMILY. So no, she's not saying, "O come, dark night." No, gone, gone, gone. No more… Yeah, I was going to make the naughty joke, but I won't. Anyway…

COLIN. Uh-huh. (laughs)

EMILY. Yeah, it's not mine, it's the Reduced Shakespeare Company does that joke. He also lets Juliet and Romeo live at the end.

COLIN. Ugh.

EMILY. I believe he also gave a happy ending to *Lear*.

COLIN. What the hell?

EMILY. And also made Edgar and Cordelia have a romance. (laughs)

COLIN. Okay, I don't know who David Garrick is, and maybe that's my ignorance, but he sounds like a court censor.

EMILY. He kind of is. David Garrick is working in the late 1700s, and we have him to thank, actually, for quite a lot insofar as he revived Shakespeare. Shakespeare had fallen by the wayside.

COLIN. Oh.

EMILY. And Garrick was in love with Shakespeare, with his additions, and so he revived…

COLIN. As so many are. (laughs)

EMILY. Right, exactly. He basically put on his versions of the Shakespeare plays as well as other verse dramas, such as *King Arthur, or The British Worthy*. I believe, although I have to double check, that David Garrick was also one of the ones to start saying, "Hey, let's do costumes with some historical accuracy."

COLIN. Oh, wow.

EMILY. Yeah, so we have a lot to thank him for, but – because he's working after the Commonwealth, right, and he's also working right around the time of the American Revolution, just a few decades before the French Revolution, so the time of wigs and panniers and high heels for all genders, and I wonder if there's a bit of Cromwell's Commonwealth still seems to be in him.

COLIN. Yes.

EMILY. Because the bit that David Garrick takes out is talking about King Arthur's rising, pretty breasts and some of the gender stuff, like "Oh, but you're a woman." And then later where she's saying, "Don't men have faces" and whatnot. Arthur ends up being a little bit more… He goes straight to, "Oh, you're innocent. Oh, you're this. Oh, you're that." There's a little bit more patronizing in Garrick's cut.

COLIN. Definitely.

EMILY. Certainly a ton, anything sex, straight out. David Garrick has no space for it at all. (laughs)

COLIN. (laughs)

EMILY. But let's take a look at the verse, such as it is. I say that only because even immediately, you can see that it's irregular. Like the very first line:

> No, thóu misták'st thy héaring fór thy síght:

That's pentameter, a line in iambs.

> He's góne, my Émmelíne;

is trimeter. Then there are multiple places, too, later Emmeline says:

> I'm súre they héar you thén:
> What cán your éyes do móre?

Again, that's trimeter, but then it's a shared line with Arthur.

> **EMMELINEMILY.**
> What cán your éyes do móre?
>
> **ARTHUR.**
> They víew your béauties.

which turns it into pentameter. The meter is actually all over the place, and Dryden wrote a three-page letter at the beginning, sort of an excuse explaining how this play came to be and why the meter is irregular.

COLIN. Oh.

EMILY. He said it was irregular because, essentially, Purcell kept pushing him to be more helpful for the music bits.

COLIN. Oh.

EMILY. Yes, and for him that seemed to pull the meter out of whack. For Dryden, he felt that the meter was out of whack, but Purcell kept going, "But this is more playable." (laughs)

COLIN. Okay, interesting.

EMILY. "This is essentially better for music." So Dryden makes a point of that, which is kind of interesting.

COLIN. Yeah.

EMILY. So what did you think? What did you feel? Because you were worried. As you said, it was lukewarm.

COLIN. Right, if that.

EMILY. Yeah. (laughs) It was freezing cold.

COLIN. Pretty much. Yeah, I don't know. I think the irregularity did… I have a hunch that if I had been more familiar with it, the irregularity actually might have helped with expressiveness, but because it was irregular, I made a very embarrassing mistake that I'll be thinking about for the rest of the day when I said "próduce" instead of "prodúce." (laughs)

EMILY. Where is it? Because actually that's kind of awesome.

COLIN.

> Black eyes and snow-white forehead: all the colours
> That make your beauty and produce my love.

And I said "próduce," thinking…

EMILY. That máke your béauty ánd prodúce – right, right.

COLIN. And I was thinking in terms of all these plant metaphors, and I was like, "oh, próduce." Whatever. (laughs) And we're rolling on.

EMILY. No, but I love that, actually, because

> That máke your béauty ánd prodúce my lóve.

It's in perfect, regular iambic pentameter.

COLIN. Yeah, that one is.

EMILY. But as you're saying, yeah, there has been all this talk about nature and things, so this is why you would use scansion. This is exactly the work that you would do on a second round.

COLIN. Yeah. I think what tripped me up was the line right before it is not perfect iambic.

> Black éyes and snów-white fórehead: áll the cólours

There's an extra foot.

EMILY. Yeah. Yeah.

COLIN. And so I was not…

EMILY. Well, and even "Bláck éyes," while it could be "Black éyes," "Black eyes" to me sounds like a spondee. BUM-BUM.

COLIN. Ah.

EMILY. Because they're both long vowels, which…

COLIN. Yes.

EMILY. Yeah, it's not "Your eyes," because "You" is kind of a schwa sound, so it counts for us as an unstressed or short vowel.

COLIN. Oh yeah, because it's kind of elided.

EMILY. Exactly, but "black" takes a long time to say that "a," and then "eyes," it's the same sound. So immediately you're going, "Oh wait, are we in spondees? Are we in trochees? What's going on here?" You feel a rhythm change.

COLIN. Oh yeah. I had not thought in those terms before. That's a really good analytical tool to look at the actual, whether there's a long vowel there.

EMILY. We don't give enough credence to that, and I even wasn't until… I'm working, honestly, on a new way to look at scansion that takes vowel length more into consideration. You're laughing at me. (laughs)

COLIN. Of course you are. I love it. (laughs)

EMILY. Well, because we don't do that, and so we just presume stressed-unstressed, but again, we're accentual syllabic. It's not just about whether it falls in a stressed or an unstressed place. That vowel length does make a difference in the English language, and we don't talk about it as much in terms of our

poetry. That's why “fear not”, the beginning of your entire speech, feels like a spondee. “Fear not.” “Fear” takes a while to say. “Not” is actually shorter.

COLIN. Yeah.

EMILY. But it could be long.

COLIN. Yeah, and I’m glad you’re doing that, too, because thinking back to, it would have been probably my Acting II class when we really got into Shakespeare in my community college days.

EMILY. Woo-hoo!

COLIN. The two verse tools that I was starting with were iambs and trochees.

EMILY. Yep.

COLIN. So I scanned everything just that way, not… Was it a spondee, you said?

EMILY. Spondee is two…

COLIN. Yeah, two stresses?

EMILY. Two stresses, but also, again, the stress is balanced by the length of the vowel.

COLIN. Right, and that wasn’t in my vocabulary, so how I was able to interpret this was limited. There were certain lines that just became a mystery to me. Even as I learned the pieces and auditioned with them and performed some of them in actual productions, there was some of the text I just wasn’t… As a musician, you know, you figure it out.

EMILY. Right, right.

COLIN. But I wasn’t able to consciously grasp it. There was more guesswork I had to do, not having all the tools at my disposal.

EMILY. Mm-hmm. Well, that's why, if you think especially of rap, you can hear more that long and short vowel, and that’s where you can get three, four, five-syllable feet, so “practical tactical,” for example.

COLIN. Oh yeah.

EMILY. Pra- is slightly longer than -ctical. (laughs) Ta- -ctical. And that's where it does trip off the tongue nicely. Actually, what I’m seeing here is that while

technically it all scans, what I'm seeing in this text that we just looked at by Dryden, while a lot of it scans into iambs, does it, though? Because he's not worrying… He might put a word in the stressed position, but the previous word might have a longer vowel than he thought of. I'm seeing another one where Arthur has, again, just big sounds.

> Oh, artless love!

-less is a short vowel, but you've got "Oh, a-, -ove." Actually, this is a good tool to do. You may have learned it in a Shakespeare intensive, is you go through and you just enunciate all the vowels in a piece, not the consonants. You'd be able to hear, then, just what you're asking the actor's tongue to do, how you're asking it to move around. But the other thing that I think we could use it for scansion is how many long vowels, or again what I'm going to call a slant vowel. A slant vowel is, which way does this vowel go? Is it a schwa? Is it a diphthong? Is it something that elongates it slightly but you could also do it really fast? Again, like the word "your," because you could do "your," but you could also do "yer."

COLIN. Ah, yes.

EMILY. Right? And it's "your," so it's technically a diphthong. That's where I think some of the emotive formatting could be helpful for modern playwrights, because if I italicize "your" or I capitalize "your," that tells you immediately that no matter how you think this may be scanning, you're probably going to slant that vowel towards the elongation rather than away from the elongation. I do like that this is pretty plain speak. I like that I was able to follow this as a character, that it's fun. It's flirty. I like that it's got a bit of poetry, but the poetry is even somewhat laughed at. There's kind of just a fun to it. I do like that there are shared lines.

COLIN. Yes, that's true. Have we seen that much in this period?

EMILY. No, not as much. I mean, we obviously saw it in Shakespeare, but if you think about Sir Thomas Hughes before that, *Gorboduc* before that, or even if you look at the stuff, 1607 is *Lord Hay's Masque*, and that's just a chunk of text. *The Birth of Merlin* is 1622, squeaking in just twenty years before they shut down the theatres. That's by William Rowley, who is someone that worked with Fielding and the others that were trained under Shakespeare. That, too, is a lot of chunks of text, some shared lines. Then we don't get another Arthurian play until this one. So yeah, I think it's pretty commendable that he's moved away from chunks of text and towards something that feels like dialogue even when we have three or four lines in total that aren't shared.

COLIN. Yeah. Let me see if there's… Just scrolling through the scene. No, this only happens one time, at least in the cutting of the scene we're looking at. It's something that Garrick took out. In the section we read, there is a single hanging line, which feels modern to me.

EMILY. The “You still mistake?”

COLIN. Yes. Arthur’s “You still mistake,” and that's allowed to hang in the air, given the white space that follows it.

EMILY. Right. Well, there are a couple places, actually, because Emmeline has “just such a one as you,” and then Arthur comes in with a full line, so there’s white space there that, I feel this actually happens a bit throughout this. The first line I have:

> O father, father, I am sure you’re here;
> Because I see your voice.

White space.

COLIN. Oh, yes.

EMILY. Yeah, and I think that's what Dryden was feeling kind of bad about, that it wasn’t perfect. In fact, let me just double check something real quick.

COLIN. That's interesting, though, because he’s apologizing for the imperfection, but that's something we do intentionally now, and it’s something that Shakespeare did intentionally routinely.

EMILY. But it’s not something that Dryden did routinely.

[brief music]

So that's all for today, but when we come back next time, we’re going to be taking a look at Henry Fielding’s *Tom Thumb the Great*. “Tom Thumb? That has nothing to do with King Arthur.” Oh, but it does, and it even has something to do with John Dryden’s *The British Worthy*, and it even has something to do with puncturing the idea that verse drama must be taken very seriously. We’ll see you next time, friends, for *Hamlet to Hamilton* Season 2, “Arthur Through the Ages.”

[music]

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Thank you for joining us, dear friends, for all things true, good, beautiful, and frequently in verse.