

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Zaire (1732)

Francois Marie Arouet (Voltaire) 1694-1778

Overview. With *Zaire* (1732) Voltaire steps into what in his day was commonly called the *Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns*, a long running dispute between conservative literary critics and theorists and those who were looking for new structures and tones to center their most ambitious works of literary criticism. The quarrel brought into conflict the position of those for whom ancient Greek and Roman tragedies were permanent models, following the old Aristotelian rules for deep thinking and noble imagination, and those for whom great drama, in an age of scientific advancement—Newton, Kepler, Galileo—followed new rules and perspectives—needed to respond to contemporary culture. As in the two previous centuries—sixteenth and seventeenth—the ‘moderns’ favored discarding dependence on Greek drama on the grounds that it too simply revolved around the notion of a tragic flaw, a unique cause for the main figure’s downfall. Voltaire, like his 17th century French predecessors—Corneille, Racine, Moliere—chose to create in what they viewed as a modern tradition that attributed the downfall of the tragic hero to misplaced passion, group folly, or ‘society.’ One can see in *Zaire*, Voltaire’s most successful tragedy, that jealousy and social zealots--the mass feelings of the Christian zealots-- lead into the tragedy of Zaire herself. The ‘social’ relevance of the tragic, in this perspective, gave the ‘modern view’ a fresh relevance.

Author Voltaire was a prolific writer—more than fifty plays-- from his origins a poet, dramatist, philosopher historian, letter writer; in the course of his lifetime, which was endlessly full of the political turmoil of Revolution, as well as of the high political jockeying into which he—like such a contemporary as Mme. de Stael-- was continually immersed. In between bouts of love making, black coffee consumption—fifty cups a day—Voltaire appears to have been a dynamo of creativity.

Text and Issues. Pathos, feeling, plot form a natural ramp up toward the Romantic perspective we highlight here, as the driving force of *Zaire*. In *Zaire* the period of the Crusades serves as a stereotypical backdrop for a drama highlighting the clash between Islam and Christianity. (Certain characters lived as the present descendants of figures active in the first Crusades, but for the most part the drama is pure fiction. It is to be assumed that the average Parisian theatre goer lived the present drama as just that kind of fiction, as an avid reader might today gravitate to a Tolkien or C.S.Lewis tale.) The central character, Zaire, is a Christian enslaved—along with her girl friend—during a Muslim Crusader sack, and delivered into the custody of the Sultan, Orosmane. There she remains, with her sister, until, inevitably, she finds out—the hard way—she discovers that the Sultan has fallen in love with her, and wants her for his bride. See below for the terrible consequences of this passion, which provides the play’s pathos, and thus shows the degree to how simply innocent Zaire is a victim of the tragedy impending upon her.

Plot. In the preceding we have clarified the sense in which the plot of *Zaire* does not depend on any fault—Aristotelian *hamartia* or *tragic flaw*; she is, in fact, extraordinarily free of weaknesses of any kind, is clearly swept along by destiny: she is a Christian slave, in the first place, a role in which she has played no part, and she is a passive victim of the love of the Sultan. The Sultan’s passion for her, which turns into a moment of murderous jealousy leads to her own death, her ultimate passivity. The hysteria of her fellow Christian zealots is the final nail in her coffin. In short, where the ancient Greek tragedian would have looked for a tragic flaw, around which to construct a dramatic fall—e. g. Oedipus, Medea, Ajax—the creator of French classical drama is driven toward the pathos of individual downfall, in which an emotion filled bolus of events swamps the central figure.

Characters

Zaire The central character in the drama is arguably Zaire herself, although, as we have seen, she is a character driven by fate rather than being a shaper of her own destiny. Her dilemma is intense. She is torn between her fidelity to her newly re-discovered Christianity, and the Christian-ransoming mission on which her brother Nerestan has gone, and on the other hand to her growing feeling for the Sultan, and

her fidelity to him. We have here the very essence of that pathos on which Voltaire (and his audiences) wished to found their modern drama. Zaire bears no responsibility for her destiny.

Orosmane The powerful Sultan of Jerusalem, who falls hopelessly in love with Zaire, but in the end tragically doubts her fidelity to him, mistakenly confuses her brother for her lover, and kills himself in the folly of jealousy.

Lusignan Father of Zaire, and staunch leader of the Christian Crusaders.

Nerestan Brother of Zaire, and successful gatherer of funds to buy freedom for the Christian captives in Jerusalem. Mistaken by Sultan as Zaire's lover.

Themes

Jealousy Jealousy is often cited as a driving force for the present drama, but in truth the Sultan's fateful jealousy, which results in the deaths of Zaire and himself, is swiftly and simply dispatched by the play itself, and hardly constitutes a point for discussion. There is no discussion of the morality of suicide or of the growing desperation of the Sultan himself, as he feels Zaire drifting away from him. The parallel of Zaire with Shakespeare's Othello is misleading. Othello is long invaded with the worm of jealousy, while the Sultan's fatal jealousy explodes in him violently, as he mistakes Zaire's brother for her lover.

Religious Conflict The play, *Zaire*, moves along lines dictated by the course of cultural evolution in the early modern European centuries. Constant reference is made to the outlines of Christianity and Islam and the world views of the two religions shape the action and intentions of the major players. Voltaire, a free liberal when it came to matters of religious orthodoxy, is active in showing, through the relationship of the Sultan to Zaire, that interfaith reflection and romance were perfectly compatible.

Love versus Duty. Zaire herself embodies the tension between these two forces. Assuming she is Muslim by birth—she is not—she assumes she owes her whole duty to the Sultan, who adopted her as a slave when she was an infant. Both through duty and through her own growth time, Zaire falls in love with the Sultan—who has long before this fallen for her. Love and duty blend in the mindsets of these two principals, whose uneven balance together is only held until the demon of jealousy drives the sultan into a destructive act.

Discussion questions

What do you think about the alleged parallels between *Zaire* and Shakespeare's *Othello*? Do they endure the same kinds of jealousy? Does the Sultan seem to you to have been afflicted by jealousy long before the tragic climax of the play? Or did a fit of jealousy attack him at the instant when he mistook Nerestan for Zaire's lover? In short, is *Zaire* a tragedy of jealousy or of tragic misunderstanding? Could we say that the figure of Iago is the vast difference between the two plays, because through this figure Shakespeare is able to cook, simmer and brew the substance of jealousy in *Othello*? Is not the misleading of *Othello* into jealousy the powerful and dirty process of Shakespeare's play?

Ancient tragic drama, that of the Greeks, frequently derived power from the depiction of the downfall of a powerful man from a position of strength to one of weakness and defeat. This formula was found to touch the sense of awe and vulnerability in the theater goer, who would feel that 'this could happen to me.' It is frequently said that the 'Moderns' the partisans of French classical drama for instance, substitute 'pathos'—feeling, the sweep of emotion, crowd emotions—for the downfall of the single mighty individual—Oedipus, Agamemnon, Ajax, Prometheus. Does this view of the 'modernist' position seem to you to apply to the creative practice of Voltaire in *Zaire*? Is the Sultan richly enough portrayed, to qualify as a tragic character? Or is the ultimate decline of the reputation of Voltaire as dramatist due to some ultimate lack of fullness of realization in his major characters?