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The Heroiuc Panthalia

Thomas P. Haviland

THE HEROIC *PANTHALIA*

By DR. THOMAS P. HAVILAND

“The romances of Calprenède and Scudéry,” says Walter Scott, “those ponderous and unmerciful folios now consigned to utter oblivion were not only universally read and admired [in the reign of Charles II], but supposed to furnish the most perfect models of gallantry . . .” Although we do not commonly judge our literature by its weight, *avoirdupois*, we find these “Long Winded Romances” (for such is a literal translation of their proper designation in French) immediately impressive in their formidable bulk; *The Grand Cyrus*, “the longest novel in the world,” offering exactly eight pounds, two ounces of polite entertainment. Originating among the *Précieuses*, they seem to have arrived in England in the baggage of Henrietta Maria, whose bookish husband spent the long hours previous to his execution in reading *Cassandra*; they survived the Puritan ascendancy, and grew in favor during the reign of Charles II. In fact, as Scott points out, while Addison was amusing the world with his wit and Pope by his poetry, the ladies were revelling in the interminable *récits*, the “characters,” the playings at platonic love offered them in English translations. The fashion did not decay until the reign of George I. How greatly they were once esteemed is indicated by the fact that, as English estates are broken up and their libraries sold, these fine old folios, often sumptuously bound, are coming to light, bearing evidence of the number of their readers in pages thumbed and torn, and with annotations and painstaking corrections of the not infrequent typographical errors. At their best they are still good entertainment—though hardly for an idle afternoon.

The Godfrey Singer collection is blessed with a number of these interesting tomes, and with several of their scarce English imitations. The most recent acquisition in the latter class is the rare and interesting *Panthalia: or the Royal Romance. A Discourse stored with infinite variety in relation to State-Government And Passages of matchless affection gracefully interveined, And presented on a Theatre of Tragical and Comical State, in a successive continuation to these Times. Faithfully and ingenuously rendred* (London, 1659).

A search of library catalogues has confirmed our suspicion that this octavo volume by Richard Brathwait is not merely difficult to come by but, in this country, our copy is probably unique. Published in the heyday of the French romances, it is but natural that this book, basically history so thinly concealed and so openly hostile to Cromwell and the Commonwealth that it could not be published for some time after its composition, should avail itself of some of the elegances of the French productions.

Particularly is this so of the interpolated history of "Panthalia the Pretty Pedler," which presents us with a maiden who, seemingly forgotten by Acolasto, the object of her affections, off to the wars, writes him a despairing letter phrased in the best romantic tradition to say that she is becoming an anchoress, eliciting one no less ardent from her lover who can do naught but die at once, bidding her "Be pleased then to entertaine these funerall enterbreaths with a pious pity, though your estranged thoughts dart upon their unfortunate Author a regardless scorne." However, as we had hoped, he arrives with romantic inevitability when "Scarce had the Orient Sun diffused his radiant Spangles on the Earth: or extracted his pearled Dews from the Diapred Meads," and carries her off. And fortunate it is, for she has not needed two days to decide that "these religious Anachorites. . . partake too much of the nature of the *Ostridge* to be suitable Friends, or amicable Companions."

The main concern of the book, however, is the history of England (Candy), from the time of Elizabeth (Belligeria) and Essex (Clarentio) who, incidentally, is capable of the grand manner, even in death, when he exclaims to the executioner's blade, "This is a cure for all diseases; a receipt against all maladies." We are carried through the reigns of James (Basilius) and Charles I (Rosicles), the Commonwealth under "Climenes" and the "Plebeans," with much intimate detail and some capital characterizations, to the general rejoicing at the accession of "Charicles" and the return of kings.

As a history of a troublous time, its manners and its mores, as well as an excellent example of a literary genre, this romance in the heroic manner is truly a valuable accession.