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Essentiality of Bravery to *The Indian Princess*’s Characters

In James Nelson Barker’s drama entitled *The Indian Princess*, the colonists exhibit several prominent qualities. They are well-spoken, curious, loving, and strong, but most importantly, they are brave. The white European colonists embarked upon a voyage to settle in the New World knowing very little about what to expect. What they do know, however, is that upon their arrival in the New World, their only choices are to succeed or to fail. They know that through all their adventures they must be brave and valiant, or they will have no chance at survival. Barker uses literary devices such as imagery, characterization, and symbolism to make potent the theme that bravery and valor are essential to success and survival.

In *The Indian Princess*, the necessity of bravery is emphasized through imagery in scene descriptions as well as in characters’ lines. Exemplarily, the first scene of the first act of the play is described as the “Powhatan River, wild and picturesque” (Barker 118). The description of the river as “wild” immediately suggests indirectly that the location at which the characters have arrived is not for the faint of heart. They will have to be brave and courageous in order to overcome all the “wild” obstacles that will stand in their way. In the first spoken lines of the play, the chorus anthropomorphizes an evidently terrible storm they encountered on their way to the New World. The chorus’s lines are, “…For the tempest’s roar is heard no more, / And gaily we tread the wish’d-for shore: / Then raise the glee merrily, / Chorus it cheerily, / For past are the perils of the blust’ring sea” (Barker 118). The chorus’s lines express to the audience from the very beginning that the men arriving on the shore of this “wild” river are certainly brave enough to survive the Virginian wilderness. After all, they had already survived a frightening, “roaring” storm on a rickety ship which they appear to feel was a more arduous hurdle to clear than any other they will face in the New World.

Another way that the reverence the Europeans have for bravery and valor is emphasized is through the characterizations of the colonists. One rather harsh example can be found in the second scene of the second act of the play; when Larry hears that Robin does not want to continue onward in their exploratory search for Smith, Larry exclaims, “Och! you hen-hearted cock robin!” (Barker 135). Walter then asks Robin why he even came along with the group, which results in Robin’s following assertion: “…you were always railing out on me for chicken-heartedness. I came to shew ye I had valour” (Barker 135). The scene continues with Robin singing a song in order to make himself feel more courageous and then with Larry asking, “Are you sure, now, you won’t be after fancying every deer that skips by you a divil, and every bush a bear?” (Barker 136). Larry and Walter both are clearly irritated by Robin’s lack of courage. They are quick to tease him and have very little patience for his timid, jumpy behavior. The characterizations of Larry and Walter as quick-tempered in the presence of the cowardly Robin accentuate the high esteem the colonists place on the concept of valor.

Another way the importance of bravery is highlighted in the drama is through the direct characterization of the women by the men and of the white men by the red men. For example, Delawar’s high opinion of a courageous young woman is expressed in the final act of the play. When Delawar discovers that the “male” page with whom he has been speaking is actually his niece, who has made her way to the colony from Europe, he exclaims, “My niece! O, brazenface!” (Barker 164). Delawar never would have believed that a young lady would be able to endure such a long, difficult voyage across the ocean, and his exclamation shows how impressed he is by her valor. His respect for her likely increases exponentially in light of her brave journey.

In the second scene of the third act, Powhatan directly characterizes the dignified white men as valiant when he expresses how guilty he feels about almost murdering them. Powhatan says, “The white man is brave as Aresqui; and can the brave be treacherous?” (Barker 152). The reason Smith’s and the rest of the colonists’ lives were spared by the Native Americans was due to their bravery. The white men are so valiant that they are seen as venerable and therefore trustworthy through the eyes of the Native Americans. The Native Americans respected their gallantry to such a great extent, in fact, that they repeatedly referred to the white men as their brothers.

Yet another way the respect the characters have for valor is exemplified in the drama is through the inclusion of Greek and Roman mythological symbols. For example, in the fifth scene of the first act, Rolfe asks Alice if she will “again lose Walter for a time” so that Walter may help with the search party (Barker 129). Alice agrees to give up her husband and goes so far as to say she would help with the efforts herself if only she were male. Rolfe, in response, exclaims that Alice is “[a]n Amazon!” (Barker 129). Rolfe evidently is so impressed by Alice’s comment that he feels compelled to compare her to a venerated, ancient Greek warrior-woman.

Another mythological reference is found in the conversation between Walter and the disguised Geraldine. When Geraldine comments that her dear Percy is brave, Walter agrees that he is as brave “[a]s Julius Caesar, sir, or Hercules” (Barker 157). Walter’s admiration of Percy is highlighted by his comparison of Percy to the brave Hercules, a Roman hero and adventurer. Mars, the esteemed Roman god of war, and Venus, the Roman goddess of love, are also referenced in the same conversation. Walter says, “Be but a Mars, and you shall have your Venus” (Barker 159). Walter is trying to be encouraging to the disguised Geraldine; he wants to instill in Geraldine while “he” is still a “boy” the importance of being brave once “father Time writes man upon [“his”] chin” (Barker 159). Although the Europeans are Christians, it is clear that they still have a lofty admiration for the bravery displayed by ancient Greek and Roman mythological figures. The high regard to which the respected and gallant characters in the play are held is emphasized by the comparisons that are made between them and the mythological figures.

Bravery and valor truly are vital to the survival and success of the European colonists in *The Indian Princess*. Barker’s imagery, characterization, and use of symbolism elevate the importance of the gallantry of his characters. After all, had the European colonists been timid, cowardly, and weak, the world as it is now known in the twenty-first century would likely not exist. The bravery the characters in Barker’s drama exude serves as an inspiration to audience members and readers alike.

Work Cited

Barker, James Nelson. *The Indian Princess (1808)*. *Early American Drama*. Ed. Jeffrey Richards. New York: Penguin, 1997. 109-165. Print.