RESTORATION COMEDY

Historical Context

The reign of Charles I (1625-1649) was dominated by a religious and constitutional crisis that eventually caused the English Civil War (1642). The victors, the Parliamentarians and Puritans, promptly closed all the theatres in London, supposedly to appease the wrath of God. For about eighteen years or so all actors were looked upon as being vagabonds and outcasts.

Two years after the death of Oliver Cromwell, the Stuart monarchy was re-established in Britain with the return of Charles II from forced exile in
France in 1660. The theatres formally reopened in November and by 1700 the English theatre had passed through its silver age (the Restoration)\(^1\).

We may safely call it the golden age of English drama that turned out a great many talented Elizabethan dramatists, from Shakespeare down. The most remarkable dramatists, the giants of English drama's silver age, are Etherege, Wycherley, and Congreve, whose plays are called Restoration comedy.

Restoration comedy writers dealt with a number of immoral themes, their comedies have been almost without exception damned or branded as "trivial, gross and dull," ever since the seventeenth century. That is why Restoration comedies had received little critical attention until the middle of twentieth century.

A witty young single hero is given to dissipation every day and longs for a Don Juan life-style; Public order and morals or moralistic virtues do not exist within such a life-style. It is a daily occurrence that the rake-hero has love affairs with several women and has another man's wife as his mistress.

Wit or witty spirit is the very quintessence of Restoration comedy. It goes without saying that a wit should be endowed with intellectual faculties so that he might judge accurately; it is worthy of a gentleman that he should act smartly and aloofly. Hence, kind of sophisticated comedy does not always appeal to audiences.

Restoration comedy is no mere work on the topic of the day, although it is difficult to understand it unless we are somewhat acquainted with the manners and customs of the period.

Throughout the long build-up to the Elizabethan period, popular theatre had appealed to all classes. After Charles II re-established the monarchy, the theatre became distinctly an upper-class diversion, and middle-class
groups, particularly Puritans and merchants, were kept from the theatres: for the King and the returning Royalists demanded the French genre and by so doing, made the comedy of manners fashionable.

Restoration comedy was an elite theatre: for it was written specifically to suit the taste of the limited members of the fashionable world. As mentioned later, the Restoration created an epoch in the history of English drama with the arrival of "actresses."

**INTRODUCTION**

- "Restoration comedy" is English comedy written and performed in the Restoration period from 1660 to 1710.

- Comedy of manners is used as a synonym of Restoration comedy.

- After public stage performances had been banned for 18 years by the Puritan regime, the re-opening of the theatres in 1660 signaled a renaissance of English drama.

- Charles II was an active and interested patron of the drama. Soon after his restoration, in 1660, he granted exclusive play-staging rights, to the King's Company and the Duke's Company, led by two middle-aged Caroline playwrights, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant.

- Sexually explicit language was encouraged by King Charles II (1660–1685) personally and by the rakish style of his court.

- Historian George Norman Clark argues:

  *The best-known fact about the Restoration drama is that it is immoral. The dramatists did not criticize the accepted morality about gambling, drink, love, and pleasure generally, or try, like the dramatists of our own time, to work out their own view of character and conduct. What they did was, according to their respective inclinations, to mock at all restraints. Some were gross, others*
delicately improper.... The dramatists did not merely say anything they liked: they also intended to glory in it and to shock those who did not like it.

CHARACTERISTICS

- Comedy of manners is a kind of comedy which portrays the ridiculous behaviour pattern of the individuals of an aristocratic society.

- It is concerned with the coarseness immorality, faithlessness, jealousy, intrigue etc. of an artificial society

- It always seeks to give a real picture of one section of contemporary life.

- It's purpose is to give a criticism of society with skilful satiric touches.

- It's success depends on the dramatist's capacity to present the unemotional treatment of sex.

- The comedy of manners is rich with wit and satire. It gives the image of the time.

- The heroine is more important and interesting than the hero in it.

- The hero of this type of comedy is well-born, well-dressed and capable of contest of wit.

- The heroine is also a paradox of virtues and affections. She is as self-possessed and witty as her male opponent.
• They are surrounded by a set of fops, wits, half-wits who carelessly laugh at all social and moral codes.
• However, "manners" means a quality acquired by a person from free social intercourse with cultivated men and women.

• The Restoration comedy is called Comedy of Manners as it presented the superficial habits and manners of only a section of the society – the elegant aristocracy with their vices, intrigues and outward glamour of polished behaviour.
• The manners displayed were the affections and the cultured veneer of the society.
• Amorous intrigue played a very crucial part in the action of the drama.
• As an artistic piece of literature, the Restoration comedy of manners mirrored the dilettante society of the day.

• The exquisite poetry of Elizabethan comedy gives place to prose in Restoration comedy, the poetry being reserved for the more rapturous moments.

• The main plot is very often accompanied by sub-plots, sometimes more than one, all revolving around the extra-marital affairs and sexual intrigue.

• In the comedy of manners, the passion and emotion are replaced by a rapier-sharp wit with a crystalline polish and hardness. Bonamy Dobree called this bonanza of wit ‘verbal pyrotechnics’.

• Dr. Johnson calls the characters ‘intellectual gladiators’. The scintillating dialogues with its quick repartees and discussions of marital relations reflect the contemporary social milieu.

• The characters of the Manner Comedy are mostly types with descriptive names. There are sexually frustrated widows, bawds,
country squires and fops with names like Sir Fopling Flutter, Colonel Bulley, Squire Sullen, Lady Bountiful and Sir John Brute.

- Restoration comedies dealt exclusively with the social elite and were town-based. Hazlitt commented about Restoration Comedy, ‘What a rustle of silks, and waving of plumes!’ They usually had London or some other fashionable resort like Bath as their locale.

**IMPORTANT PLAYWRIGHTS**

The playwrights who practiced the comedies of manners in the Restoration age were **William Congreve, George Etherege, William Wycherley, Thomas Shadwell, Sir John Vanbrugh, and Farquhar.**

- **William Congreve**
  William Congreve is the most successful playwright of the Restoration Period. He takes the comedy of manners to its greatest heights. He has composed five comedies - The Old Bachelor, The Double-Dealer, Love for Love, The Mourning Bride and The Way of the World. Of these The Way of the World considered to be the flower of restoration comedy. Its plot is developed skilfully. The love-scenes between Mirabell and Millamant have been treated with tenderness and sensitivity. In this play, Congreve deals with a serious theme of sexual relationship through a variety of characters and situations. He shows the affectations, conspiracies and hypocrisies of the age. But there is true love between Millamant and Mirabell. The proviso-scene shows his rational attitude to love and marriage. Here we also find the strength of newly developed English prose. Studying the social pressures on love and marriage with wit and subtlety Congreve shows himself the master of restoration comedy. His comedies are The Old Bachelor, The Double Dealer, Love for Love, The Way of the World. Congreve’s brilliance lies principally in depicting the cross-current of marital complications.
• **George Etherege**
  Sir George Etherege is the first and foremost writer of the comedy of manners. He has left three comedies. They are *Love in a Tub, She Would if She Could* and *The Man of Mode*. They represent the first true comedy of manners. But we should not forget that Etherege was concerned with morals and not with manners. His plays carry none of the social criticism implicit in the comedy of Moliere. He is important historically as having helped to the mode of Restoration comedy. George Etherege’s comedies blazed the track upon which Congreve ventured. The brilliance and the grace of Etherege’s dialogues conceal the weakness of his plot construction.

• **William Wycherley**
  These same features mark the comedies of Wycherley. Within five years he has produced five plays – *Love in a Wood, The Gentleman Dancing Master, The Country Wife, The Plain Dealer* etc. of which the last two are termed as ‘manly’ and ‘a gross exposure of human weakness’. Wycherley moulds the comedy of intrigue and the comedy of manners into a refreshing original type. His plays are extremely witty with all their coarseness. Wycherley impresses the readers by sheer vehemence of language and the energy of characterization. He has the first satirical power of Ben Jonson. The atmosphere of *The Plain Dealer* is that of the Puritan rather than the Restoration comedy of manners.

• **Sir John Vanbrugh**
  Vanbrugh was an architect, but as a dramatist he was extremely popular. His famous comedies are *The Relapse, The Provoked Wife, The Confederacy* etc. They lack the art and elegance of Congreve. But they are full of energy and genial humour. They are admirable in construction, characterization and dialogue. Actually, Vanbrugh has a sheer genius for farcical situations.
• **Thomas Shadwell**  
  Shadwell came from a good family and was an out and out Whig. He was a prolific author. His best-known plays are *The Sullen Lovers, Epsom Wells, Bury Fairs* etc.

• **George Farquhar**  
  Farquhar has composed seven plays. Farquhar’s comedies include *Love and a Bottle, The Constant Couple, The Beaux Stratagem* etc. These plays bear upon him the imprint of his good-humored and happy-go-lucky personality. *The Recruiting Officer and the Beaux Stratagem* are the best works of Farquhar. The play has enjoyed a distinctive place in the Restoration drama for its open-air atmosphere.

**CRITICISM**

• Many critics condemn the Restoration comedies as immoral. In 1698, Jeremy Collier wrote *A Short View of* immense effect on the literary critics. Charles Lamb in one of his essays, *The immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. The book had an says, "The Restoration comedies are a world of themselves almost as much as fairy land".

• Dobree who is an eminent critic says that the Restoration comedy is concerned with rationalizing sexual relationships.

• In respect of sexual relations, L.C. Knight says, The Restoration comedy is entirely dominated by a narrow set of conventions."

**CONCLUSION**

Thus, we see that the comedy of manners gives the picture of the society of Charles-II court. It has verbal repartee, an air of abandon
and immorality. Sometimes it oversteps the bounds of decency and good taste.

The brilliant wit, the bright dialogues and hilarious laughter are the most important and interesting elements in this comedy. They leave an enduring and lasting interest to all lovers of literature.

Moreover, the Restoration comedies have to be studied in the spirit of the age in which they were written. They have drawn a true picture of gallants and belles of the then society. In this respect, we can mention The Way of the World which is the Queen of the comedy of manners. According to Charles Lamb “Restoration comedies are a world of themselves almost as much as fairy land.”

Macaulay severely criticized him. Dobree argued that the distinguishing characteristics of the Restoration comedy down to Congreve is that it is concerned with an attempt to rationalize sexual relationship.

In spite of these criticism and condemnations it has to be admitted that the dramatists of the Restoration period reflected the manners and modes of the society courageously.

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By: Prof. Sunita Sinha
Head, Department of English
Women’s College Samastipur
L.N.M.U., Darbhanga
Email: drsunitasinha@gmail.com
Website: www.sunitasinha.com
Mob No: 9934917117