

Restoration Comedy of Manners: Defining and Expanding

Introduction: During the Restoration period the chief dramatic mode was comedy. In spite of the prohibition of play acting during the commonwealth, comedy had still been performed from time to time, chiefly in the form of droll. Immediately after the Restoration, there was an eager recurrence to the Johnsonian tradition which is evident in 'The Cheats' by Wilson. The comedy of intrigue did not win popularity until the 18th century. Many of Restoration comedies contain the element of intrigue.

The Comedy of Manners: The comedy of manners has made the restoration rich in drama. The skeleton of this type was however, produced much earlier but it found a rich flowering in the hand of **Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh and Farquhar**. 'Manners' means a quality acquired by a person from free social intercourse with cultivated men and women. The Comedy of Manner always seeks to give a real picture of one section of contemporary life, high in social stature with all its sophistication, conversation and an emphasis on careless gaiety. The purpose of this comedy is to give a criticism of social life with skilful satiric touches. The successes of comedy of manners depend on the dramatists' capacity to present the unemotional treatment of sex. It is rich with wit and satire and gives the image of the time. The heroine is more important and interesting than the hero in a comedy of manners. The hero of this type of comedy is well born, well dressed and capable of contest of wit. The heroine too, is a paradox of virtues and affectations, and is as self-possessed and witty as her male opponent. They are surrounded by a set of tops, wits, half-wits, who carelessly laugh at social and moral codes. The Restoration comedy of manners aimed at presenting the life of the age. But in doing this, it overstepped the bounds of decency.

Sir George Etherege (1635-91): The first comedian of manners is Sir George Etherege. He has left three comedies- 'Love in a Tub', 'She would if She could' and 'The Man & mode' which represents the first true comedy of manners. It deals with a particular type of people who seem to live upon the surface of life. The poet is slight. The dialogue is full of speaking wit. Etherege was concerned with moral and not with manner. His plays carry none of the social criticism implicit in the comedy of

molere. He is important historically as having helped to set the mode of Restoration comedy.

William Wycherley (1640-1715): Wycherley remoulds the comedy of intrigue and the comedy of manner into a refreshing original type. His fame depends on his four comedies, 'Love in a wood', 'The Gentlemen Dancing Master', 'the country wife' and 'The plain Dealer'. These plays are extremely witty with all their coarseness. Wycherley impresses the reader by sheer Vehemence of language and the energy of characterization. He has the first satirical power of Johnson. The atmosphere of 'The plain Dealer' is that of the puritan rather than the Restoration comedy of manners.

William Congreve (1670-1729): Congreve once took the comedy of manner to its proper channel. He wrote five comedies '**The old Bachelor**', '**The way of the world**' etc. Of these, '**The way of the world**' is considered the flower of Restoration comedy. The plot of the comedy is developed skillfully and love scenes between Mirabelle and Millamant have been treated with tenderness and sensitivity. The construction and grasp of characters he steadily improve with each play. But from the very first he showed his capacity for height and witty dialogue. In 'The way of the world', Congreve deals with a serious theme of sexual relationship through a variety of characters and situations. He shows the affections and conspiracies and sexual hypocrisies of the age, but there is true love between Millamant and Mirabelle. The proviso scene shows his wife and rational attitude to love and marriage. Here also we find the strength of newly developed English prose.

Sir John Vanbrugh (1661-1726): Vanbrugh and Farquhar kept of sparkling alive something of the spirit Restoration comedy of manners after Congreve. Vanbrugh wrote mainly three comedies – '**the Relapse**', '**The Provoked wife**' and '**The Confederacy**'. Vanbrugh's plays lack the art and elegance of Congreve's but they are full of energy and genial humour. In construction, characterization and dialogue his plays are admirable and he has a sheer genius for farcical situations.

George Farquhar (1678-1707): Farquhar wrote seven plays which bear upon them the imprint of his good humoured, happy-go-lucky personality. His best work is contained in his last two plays, '**The Recruiting officer**', '**The Beaux**

Stratagem'. The last play spiritually is unflagging is its human and there an open air atmosphere about his work that give it a distinctive place in the Restoration drama.

Conclusion: It has however to be admitted that the society that the Restoration comedies mirrored was itself dilettantes. If we condemn the society of the Restoration court, we cannot condemn the dramatists of the period. There are is an air of abandon and immorality in these comedies which overstep the bounds of decency and good taste. But these plays possess the gift of lengthen and that gift was particularly refreshing in the face of rising sentimental and moral movement. The brilliant wit, the bright dialogue and hilarious languets it produced are of enduring interest of all lovers of literature. More over Restoration comedies have to be studied not in the light of present day theories blights but in the spirit of the age in which they were written. The Restoration comedies give a true picture of their society their portraits of gallants and belles are true to life.