

Restoration Comedy/Restoration ‘Comedy of Manners’

[BA (Hons.), Part-1]

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With the restoration of Charles II to the throne, drama too officially returned to England after its official silence for long twenty years. But the spontaneity of the Elizabethan theatre seemed to have passed away and drama became to some extent pompous, artificial and too stagy. The main interest of the Restoration theatre is found in ‘comedies of manners.’ It is called so because it presents the habits, manners, conventions and follies of a particular section of society—the gay, elegant and carefree aristocracy. It is primarily concerned with amorous intrigues, clandestine love affairs, character-assassination, scandal-mongering, senseless prattles etc. It is a ‘class-drama’ which represents the way of life cultivated by the upper class society of the time. But the class-picture is not accompanied with any moral intention like Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies. It found inspiration primarily from two sources—firstly there was the influence of the comedies of Ben Jonson and secondly, there was the influence of continental writers, especially Moliere and Spaniard Calderon.

There are many distinctive features of the ‘comedies of manners.’ Firstly, the social environment represented in this type of comedy is wholly aristocratic, but definitively superficial; and the characters belong to the real life of the 18th century. Secondly, these comedies deal with intellect and has a little of emotion or impulsiveness. There is no attempt in it to depict men and women in general in their essential and emotional sides. Thirdly, the

scenes are confined to London, and in London only to courtly and fashionable circles. Fourthly, it is satiric in spirit but the note of satire is not curative and clinical, but sardonic and cynical. Fifthly, these comedies have a certain amount of immorality and vulgarity which has been subject to fierce Puritanical attacks like Jeremy Collier's objection in his book, titled *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698). But all this is found to be the inevitable effect of the close relation between comedy and society. The most notable writers of the 'comedy of manners' are –Etherege, Congreve, Wycherley, Vanbrugh and Farquhar.

George Etherege may be taken as the true innovator for the 'comedy of manners'. The social representation with the flash of wit, the sense of humour and well invented dramatic situations is found adequately in his dramas. His three plays are-*The Comical Revenge*, *She Wou'd if She Cou'd* and *The Man of Mode*. If Etherege is the pioneer of 'comedy of manners', Congreve is the master artist to give it strength and fineness. In his plays we can see the perfect synthesis of Ben Jonson's diverting humour, Sheridan's brilliant wit and Shaw's sharply entertaining satire. The interest of Congreve's comedy is wholly in dialogue which reveals the finer shade of character and distinguishes one character from another. His Comedies include *The Old Bachelor*, *The Double Dealer*, *Love for Love* and *The Way of the World*.

Wycherley is both a social chronicler and a moralist. Though he reveals a good deal of fun and farce on the stage, his drama has a deep moral tone at heart. While he loves cynically, he lashes at follies and vices. The four plays written by him are *Love in a Wood*, *The Gentleman*, *Dancing Master*, *The Country Wife* and *The Plain Dealer*.

Lastly, Vanbrugh and Farquhar are the minor dramatists in this group who kept alive the Congrevian comedy. The Plays written by them include *The Relapse*, *The Provoked Wife*, *The Confederacy* and *The Recruiting Officer*, *The Beaux' Stratagem* respectively.

Although Restoration comedies are sometimes condemned on the ground that there is an air of immorality and vulgarity in these comedies, one can't forget the fact that it also presents the true picture of the 18th century society.