

## 5. RESTORATION COMEDY or THE COMEDY OF MANNERS

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The term comedy of manners refers to the dramas written after the Restoration of Charles II. The Restoration Period was not only the Restoration of Charles II but also of drama and theatre in England. Theatres were burnt and closed in England during 1642 to 1660. No writers wrote any drama nor any actor played during this period. So after 1660 when the restoration occurred in England it brought the happiness to England equal to that of a sterile mother who feels overjoyed after being blessed by a child. Theatres opened all around and playwrights began writing dramas for the common choice of the audience. The comedies of the Restoration Period are basically known as the comedy of manners because the playwrights had grown social evaluators under the previous impressions of the Puritan Age. They tried to reflect the manners of the people of their time in their dramas. It began as a reaction against the realistic comedy of humours. 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 conditions with skilful satiric touches. The successes of comedy of manners depended 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. The main features of the comedy of manners are:

**The setting:** The comedy of manners is a peculiar product of the Restoration era, and it reflects the very spirit of the age. It depicts faithfully the life and manners of the general society of the day. It depicts a small world which has a distinct territory of its own - the fashionable parks and coffee houses of the London of the Restoration period. Parks, clubs and Tavern, drawing rooms of the aristocratic people are its general settings. The comedy is related to a highly sophisticated world which follows well-refined rules and conventions. It is a fashionable world of young ladies and beaux. Wit, refined and polished conversation and good manners are its highest values. Wit is the main faculty of the people and pleasure is their main occupation. So the comedy of manners is a true reflection and representation of the country life of the Restoration period. It reflects the refinement in the courtship, raillery and conversation. It also exposes the foibles and follies of the refined gentlemen and women, everything coarse and vulgar is eschewed<sup>1</sup>.

**The dialogues:** The dialogues in the comedy of manners are based on the witty and polished conversation of the fashionable society of the day. Wit and repartee<sup>2</sup>, polish and grace, refinement and sophistication are the remarkable features of the dialogues of these comedies. Men of pleasure and wit and women of quality, equally witty in their turn, meet the clash.

**Characterization:** Characterisation is weak in the comedy of manners due to dominance of wit. The jealous husbands were the most mocked at person in the restoration comedy. Perhaps all the villains in the comedy are jealous husbands who turn green at the sight of their wives amorously entangled with some gallant. For a reasonable man of that time the best he could do was to accept the fact, take it in his stride and try to seduce somebody else's wife and, if his revenge has to be sweeter, he should direct his attention to that very gallant's wife who would necessarily be carrying on with someone else. This new mode of love-making ensured the independence of women. She was her own mistress and was free to choose or reject her lover. So the free, frank and fearless women, the women of beauty, wit and intellect are drawn as against those who accepted subordinate to men.

**Plot-construction and theme:** The main theme of Restoration comedy is love and sex. The comedies do not depend on a single plot. The multiplicity of plots adds to the diversity of attention and a sense of enjoyment. Plots are well related to each other. There are a number of under-plots which give a thrill to the intrigue-loving theatre goers. For instance, Etherege's *Comical Revenge* has no fewer than

four plots. Love is primarily treated as a physical appetite and marriage is dreaded as a miserable bondage. The comedy touches upon only a limited range of experience. Spiritual things are unknown to it.

Major writers of the Comedy of Manners are as follows:

**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 of the Mode*' or "*Sir Fopling Flutter*' which represent the first true comedy of manners. His comedies deal with a particular type of people who seem to live upon the surf act of life. 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 Moliere<sup>3</sup>. 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 readers 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 at once took the Comedy of Manners 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 improves 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.

**Sir John Vanbrugh (1661-1726):** Vanbrugh and Farquhar kept of sparkling alive something of the spirit of the 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*', and '*The Beaux Stratagem*'. The last play spiritually is unflagging in its human treatment and there is an open air atmosphere about his work that gives 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 dilettante<sup>4</sup>. If we condemn the society of the Restoration court, we cannot condemn the dramatists of the period. There is an air of abandonment and immorality in these comedies which overstep the bounds of decency and good taste. The brilliant wit, the bright dialogues and hilarious language it produced are of enduring interest for all the lovers of literature. Moreover Restoration comedies have to be studied not in the light of present day theories of blight<sup>5</sup> 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.

\*^\* (2016)

1. deliberately avoid using; abstain from,
2. conversation or speech characterized by quick, witty comments or replies
3. Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known by his stage name Molière, was a French playwright and actor who is considered to be one of the greatest masters of comedy in Western literature.
4. Amateur, dabbler

5. Affliction, disease