

Features of Restoration Comedy and Causes of Its Decline

Introduction:

Literature is the transcript of society. The Restoration comedy is a social study and imitation in a spirit of humour and satire of the fashionable artificial English society of the age, which dates from 1660, the year in which Charles II, the merry monarch of England, came back home and the theatres were allowed to open- the period which is better known as the Restoration period. In this period, there was a spirited war between joy and sobriety, wit and morality, and this is found in the comic drama, known as the Restoration Comedy of Manners.

The major practitioners of such comedies- George Etherege, William Wycherley, Sir John Vanbrugh, George Farquhar, and, of course, William Congreve gave to the theatre a profuse supply of drama full of high wit, intrigues, and rivalries in love-making, sparkling with fun and frivolity and at times grossly immoral.

Comedy of Manners/Critical Comedy/ Artificial Comedy:

The title of the “Comedy of Manners”, of course, is derived from manners, rather, the social manners, the social follies and foibles of the age. It means simply the mode or way of living of certain men and women in society. Restoration comedy primarily deals with the conventions, artificiality and manners of the city elite, lacking in country folk. Artificial aspects of polished personalities are highlighted by these comedies in order to laugh people out of their follies. Hence, they are sometimes termed as “Critical comedy” or “Artificial Comedy”.

Purpose:

As the prologue to William Congreve’s *The Way of the World* declares, “Who dares correct? To please, this time, has been his sole pretence.” In the first play of Congreve’s *The Old Bachelor*, Belmour said to Vainlove:

“Come, come, leave business to idlers, and wisdom to
fools: they need 'em: wit be my faculty, and
pleasure my occupation, and let father Time shake his glass.”

Immorality:

After a ban of 18 years by the Puritan regime, the re-opening of the theatres in 1660 signalled a renaissance of English drama. Sexually explicit language was encouraged by King Charles II 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....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”.

Characters:

Stereotypical characters in stock situations like cuckoldry or amorous pursuits abound in Restoration comedies like refined gallants, independent women, amorous old women, rapacious widows, jealous husband and so on. Refined gallants dress well and play intrigues, wooing and seduction to quench physical appetite. Independent women who are free to choose/reject know the art of conversation and flirtation in love. Amorous old women like Lady Wishfort are well-versed in wit and dialogue. Husbands are jealous at the sight of their wives seduced by a gallant.

Fops and Fools

Fops frequently pop up in such comedies. They are concerned with his clothes and appearance in an affected and excessive way. And the fools of Restoration Comedy of Manners are not philosopher-fools of Shakespearean comedies. They are more clownish, more inclined to “fool around” rather than interjecting philosophy.

War of the Sexes:

In the 1690s, during the second wave, the "softer" Restoration comedies of William Congreve and John Vanbrugh reflected mutating cultural perceptions and great social change. They appealed to more socially mixed audiences with a strong middle-class element, and to female spectators, for instance, by moving the war between the sexes from the arena of intrigue into that of marriage. The focus in comedy is less on young lovers outwitting the older generation, more on marital

relations after the wedding bells. Hence proviso scene where couples bargain over the conditions of marriage became a normative code in such comedies.

Aristocratic comedy

The unsentimental or "hard" comedies of John Dryden, William Wycherley, and George Etherege reflected the atmosphere at Court, and celebrated with frankness an aristocratic macho lifestyle of unremitting sexual intrigue and conquest. The Earl of Rochester, real-life Restoration rake, courtier and poet, is flatteringly portrayed in Etherege's *The Man of Mode* (1676) as a riotous, witty, intellectual, and sexually irresistible aristocrat, a template for posterity's idea of the glamorous Restoration rake.

There is always a great temptation to codify, clarify, and organise; our predilection for Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, and a few others has made us lump them together, both isolating them and ignoring their differences to an unhealthy degree. The "aesthetics of wit comedy" deduced by Fujimura, and the "drama of satire" postulated by McDonald are drastically partial views of a complicated whole. That two such well-argued constructs should be so contradictory should remind us to beware of all-inclusive statements about this drama. Spanish romance, intrigue, comedy of Aphra Behn's sort, the high comedy championed by Dryden, comedy variously emphasising wit, humour, and satire, all find ample warrant in Restoration critical theory. An awareness of the immense variety of options open to the writers of Restoration comedy should make us more sympathetic and sensitive to both their subtle differences and their drastic divergence.

Causes of Decline:

The tolerance for Restoration comedy, even in its modified form, was running out at the end of the 17th century, as public opinion turned to respectability and seriousness even faster than the playwrights did. Interconnected causes for this shift in taste were demographic change, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, William's and Mary's dislike of the theatre, and the lawsuits brought against playwrights by the Society for the Reformation of Manners (founded in 1692). When Jeremy Collier attacked Congreve and Vanbrugh in his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* in 1698, he was confirming a

shift in audience taste that had already taken place. At the much-anticipated all-star première in 1700 of *The Way of the World*, Congreve's first comedy for five years, the audience showed only moderate enthusiasm for that subtle and almost melancholy work. The comedy of sex and wit was about to be replaced by the drama of obvious sentiment and exemplary morality.

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