



STUDY MATERIAL

VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE THAKURPUKUR

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ENGLISH

(HONOURS)

Restoration Comedy of Manners

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Restoration Comedy of Manners

More than any other form of literature, the Restoration theatre reflected the limitations of the period. It aimed almost wholly at amusement for the corrupt court and for pleasure-seekers. The middle-class citizens, especially if they were of puritanical leanings, continued their traditional hostility to the theatre and in the comedies of the time were held up to ridicule. There was extreme licentiousness in the dramatic works of the Restoration, not because the times were coarser than those of Marston, Middleton and Massinger, but because there reigned a fundamental cynicism which regarded the virtues as ridiculous and associated the vices with the qualities of open-heartedness and plain-speaking. The Restoration Age was highly self-conscious, particularly about those social practices which distinguished it from Pre-Commonwealth England, and Restoration comedy provided the main literary expression for this self-consciousness.

A new form of Comedy- later called the 'Comedy of Manners' – was evolved in response to new habits and values. Its purpose was to portray, in a brilliantly witty way, the fashionable upper-class society of the time with all its profligacy, frivolous gaiety and superficial elegance. The most common setting for these comedies was London, and the action was generally seen through the eyes of the Metropolitan wit, who was the hero. Their pedigree can be traced back to Beaumont and Fletcher, and especially to Ben Jonson, in whom the age found much to admire. The Restoration comedy writers also frequently borrowed characters and incidents from Contemporary French drama, but the fine art and essential spirit of Corneille, Racine and Moliere were beyond them.

Important Playwrights of the Restoration Comedy of Manners:

(1) William Congreve (1670-1729) :-

Restoration Comedies of manners, notably those by Etherege, Wycherley and Congreve, are among the outstanding comic works in the repertory of the English theatre. The greatest writer in this tradition was William Congreve.

His plays :

- i) The Otd Bachelor published in 1693
 - ii) The Double Dealer in 1693, greeted by Dryden with a verse epistle.
 - iii) Love for Love in 1695
 - iv) The way of the world in 1700
 - v) His one tragedy, The Mourning Bride, published in 1697, enjoyed high esteem throughout the 18th century.
- The way of the world, produced at the end of the Period (1700), is the culmination of the 'Comedy of manners' genre as well as its acknowledged masterpiece. Like the plays of Etherege and Wycherley, it was written for, and about, an aristocratic audience to whom gallantry and social grace were serious measures of character and worth. Mirabell and Millamant, the hero and the heroine of The way of the world, thread their way through a tangle of social demands as intricate and devious as the plot of the play itself. They survive and flourish because they compromise neither their wit nor their sexual integrity to the malice and pretension that, at its worst, their society encourages. Their achievement is most clearly demonstrated in their courtship, especially in the So-called "Proviso" scene in Act IV, in which they state the conditions on which they will marry one another. Their terms are witty, but the purpose of their agreement is serious, for what Mirabell and Millamant are seeking is a marriage that will not be falsified by the way of the world in which they live.

Congreve was a clear thinker and had command of a most lucid prose marked by aptness of words, natural elegance of phrases, neat conciseness of sentences and balance and symmetry.

(2) **George Etherege (1634-91) :-**

George Etherege wrote only three comedies-

- i) The comical Revenge, or Love in a Tub performed in 1664.
 - ii) She wou'd if she cou'd in 1668
 - iii) The Man of Mode, or Sir Fopling Flutter in 1676
- The Man of Mode is perhaps the clearest expression of the Restoration Comic Spirit, which directed laughter not at moral faults, but at aberrations of taste. It is a comedy free from all obligations to portray a moral world. In it Etherege gives a witty portrayal of the elegant life of the times. Sir Fopling Flutter, with his Parisian haberdashery and affectedly dainty manners, is one of the society of rakes.

(3) **William Wycherley (1640-1716) :-**

Etherege's Contemporary, William Wycherley wrote four plays –

- i) Love in a wood published in 1671
 - ii) The Gentleman Dancing –Master in 1672
 - iii) The Country wife in 1674
 - iv) The Plain Dealer in 1676
- In The Plain Dealer, the hero is significantly named Mr. Manly, whose downright 'plain dealing', quite different from the urbane candour of Moliere's Le Misanthrope, was brutal and malignant. As the age had a fondness for the acrid, it enjoyed even this satire on itself, and admiringly referred to its author as "manly wycherley". This bitterness marks him off from the other manner comedians of the age.

(3) **Sir John Vanbrugh (1664-1726) :-**

Vanbrugh's three comedies are –

- i) The Relapse published in 1696
 - ii) The Provoked wife in 1697
 - iii) The Confederacy in 1705
- Vanbrugh excels in caricature and shares with Wycherley truculent humour. He lacks Congreve's elegance and refinement but his comic verve is remarkable. Moral preoccupations do not bother him. He builds his plays solidly, without seeming to be troubled by artistic scruples.

(5) **George Farquhar (1678 - 1707):-**

Farquhar wrote seven plays-

- i) Love and a Bottle published in 1698
 - ii) The constant couple in 1700
 - iii) Sir Harry wildair in 1701
 - iv) The inconstant, or the way to win Him in 1702
 - v) The twin Rivals in 1702
 - vi) The recruiting officer in 1706
 - vii) The Beaux' stratagem in 1707, his last and best play.
- George Farquhar introduced into Restoration comedy some of the moral and humanitarian spirit of the age of Addison and Steele. His reputation rests chiefly on his last two comedies – The Recruiting Officer and The Beaux' Stratagem.
 - The Beaux' Stratagem is representative of his mixture of new elements with the older tradition of the court wits . of the two heroes of the play , archer and Aimwell, the latter belongs to the genus of the good man of later Sentimental drama . In his vigorous comic sense Farquhar had much in common with his Restoration predecessors ; but his rich humour and ready human sympathy ally him with Goldsmith.