

**VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE  
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**NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE**



**Topic: Features of Restoration Comedy**

**Course Title: 18th Century British Literature**

**Paper: CC8**

**Semester: IV**

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## Restoration Comedy: Introduction

Restoration Comedy proper includes the plays of Wycherley, Etherege and Congreve (Congreve's plays excluding ~~the~~ The Mourning Bride) and the comedies of Dryden. Congreve (1670-1729) is the greatest of them all. His first play The Old Batchelour was produced in 1693 and it won instant acclaim.

This was followed by The Double Dealer in the same year, and Love for Love (1695). Congreve experimented with tragedy in The Mourning Bride in 1697 and at the turn of the century came The Way of the World (1700), Congreve's

last play and masterpiece and the finest flower of Restoration

Comedy. Two other dramatists may be mentioned — Sir John Vanbrugh and George Farquhar.

When we read the plays of Wycherley, Etherege and Congreve, our first impression is that we have left ordinary people behind us and entered the closed and charmed world of the fashionable beau-monde. The setting is always London; elegant ladies and handsome gentlemen live a life of languid luxury and pass the day making witty conversation with each other. The ladies sometimes go for walks in the fashionable St. James's Park, and sooner or later they are joined by their male admirers. The men, when they are not accompanying the ladies, sit in chocolate-houses and drink and play cards. In this world of infinite leisure there are two major preoccupations — sex and marriage. Men are always ready to have affairs, and ladies, married or otherwise are equally ready to give them indulgence. Marriage becomes a subject for consideration when both partners are unattached, and

only when, perhaps even more important,  
this legal union is sufficiently  
strengthened by the wealth that  
is inherited in the process. Husbands  
and wives usually lead independent  
lives, and their indifference towards  
each other is a by-word in  
conversation.

~~(Rural England, what little of  
it is seen does not present a  
very impressive picture. Sir Willfull  
in The Way of the World shocks  
everyone by starting to take his  
boots off in Lady Wishfort's  
parlour and by getting revolting  
drunk soon after.)~~ Whatever one's  
private emotions are, the social  
game insists that a perfect  
facade must be maintained.  
Husbands and wives may hate  
each other, but in company Fainall  
greet Mrs. Fainall with 'My Dear'

and she replies 'My Soul'. Women may eye each other with suspicion and distrust, but in public they always affect a friendship that they do not feel. Love affairs abound, but they are always discreetly hidden, and Margery Pinchwife soon ~~learns~~ learns that she will have to 'tell more lies'.

It is easy to understand why Restoration comedy came to be described as 'Artificial Comedy'. People had forgotten to be natural and the only norm they followed was that of 'Manners', or the observance of social proprieties. The aristocratic court society of the seventeenth century, of course, delighted in these plays.