

Restoration Comedy

The greatest literary activity during the Restoration Period is to be found in the sphere of the drama. During the Puritan Interregnum, the theatre houses were closed in 1642 and any kind of performance on stage was banned. The theatres came back to vigour after the revocation of the ban in 1660. A Reading of historical context of the time is essential for understanding the development of this genre. English audiences who were starved of entertainment during the Puritan Regime demanded a new style of drama, which was free of sexual restraints and moral seriousness. Also the flippant lifestyle of Charles II and his court influenced this style of comedy.

A closer analysis of the Restoration Comedy would distinguish, beside the Comedy of Manners, the Comedy of Humours derived from Ben Jonson, the comedy of plot which got its influence from Spain in which farce is the dominant element, and the comedy in which there is a foretaste of sentimental seriousness. The most popular sub-genre of the Restoration Comedy is, however, the Comedy of Manners.

Comedy of Manners : The Comedy of Manners was Restoration Comedy's most popular sub-genre . As the title suggests, this type of dramas scrutinise and ridicule the manners and behaviours of the Upper class or the Aristocratic society. Comedy of Manners is a style of dramatic comedy that reflects the life, ideals and manners of upper class society. It depicts the relations and intrigues of men and women belonging to polished section of society. Main characteristics of Restoration Comedy of Manners include a flamboyant display of witty, blunt sexual dialogue, boudoir intrigues, sensual innuendos and rakish behaviour. The tone of the plays is cynical and satirical, while the language and actions are sexually explicit. Characters are driven by lust, greed and revenge, and their goals are limited: courtship, gulling, cuckoldry. The intricate plots add much to the atmosphere of deceit and moral confusion. Dramatists who practised this form of comedy are William Congreve, George Etherege, William Wycherley and Aphra Behn.

The Jeremy Collier Controversy : In 1698-99, a priest called Jeremy Collier published his ***Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage***. He singled out Congreve and Vanbrugh as specially gross dramatists, mentioning in particular ***The Provoked Wife*** by Vanbrugh and Congreve's tragedy ***The Mourning Bride***. Collier's attack was direct, full and authorised. The church was raising protests against the theatre, to defend not only morality, but also religion and the clergy which comedy had often depicted in an unfavourable light. There was no doubt that Collier went too far in his attack. He was not content with attacking the real evils of the Restoration stage, the gross indecencies and the subtle belittling of all virtues, but he objected strongly to the presentation of wicked characters on the stage, or to any Biblical references in comedy.