

Topic: Restoration Period

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Lecture Three

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THE RESTORATION DRAMA

I'm sending you a written handout below that provides detailed information about the emergence, characteristics, and major playwrights of the Restoration Drama.

THE RESTORATION DRAMA

When the theatres were closed in 1642, the succession of great Jacobean dramatists had nearly come to an end, Shirley alone being alive. However, the drama retained its hold on the masses; even under Cromwell, the playwright Davenant obtained permission to give a play with a musical accompaniment, *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656). To this opera Dryden attributed the beginning of the dominant fashion of the time in tragedy, the heroic play, to which type many of Dryden's own dramas belong. To the most famous of them, *The Conquest of Granada*, he prefixed the essay, "Of Heroic Plays," in which he cites also the example of Ariosto, with his stories of love and valor, as contributing to his conception. The heroic play, though by no means an imitation of French tragedy, owed something to the example of Corneille, especially its heightening of characters to heroic proportions, and probably also its use of rhyme. Dryden defended the use of rhyme, in the dedication to one of his early plays, on the ground that "it bounds and circumscribes the fancy. For imagination in a poet is a faculty so wild and lawless, that like an high ranging spaniel it must have clogs tied to it lest it outrun the judgment." This philosophy, so typical of the time, did not prevent Dryden from pushing his characters into unnatural extravagance of passion; a fault which, as it appears in *The Indian Queen* (1664), *The Indian Emperor* (1665), and *The Conquest of Granada* (1670), was caricatured in *The Rehearsal* (1671), a famous mock heroic drama by the Duke of Buckingham and others.

In the last of his heroic plays, *Aurengzebe* (1675), Dryden confesses in the prologue that he "grows weary of his long-loved mistress, Rhyme." Accordingly his next play, *All for Love* (1678),

a rehandling of the story of Antony and Cleopatra, he wrote in blank verse. This play is commonly regarded as his dramatic masterpiece. In addition to his tragedies, Dryden wrote a number of comedies in prose and tragicomedies in a mixture of prose and verse, most of which are too broad for modern reading.

A writer who on two occasions surpassed Dryden, Thomas Otway (1651-1685), was an unsuccessful actor who turned to writing plays. His *Don Carlos* (1675), written in rhymed couplets, won for him his first success. When Dryden abandoned rhyme, the world of playwrights changed with him; and Otway's second important play, *The Orphan* (1680), was in blank verse. The situation, turning upon the love of two brothers for Monimia, the orphan ward of their father, is one which Ford might have created. In working it out, Otway is relentless; he has evolved from it one of the cruelest of English tragedies. In his power of deepening the horror by a lighter, simpler touch, pitiful as a strain of music, he reminds us again of the later Elizabethans, especially of Webster. Even more successful than *The Orphan* was *Venice Preserved* (1682), in which, as in *The Orphan*, Otway caught something of the greatness of handling characteristic of an earlier time. His plays have the genuine passion which Dryden lacked, and they are not marred by the distortions of human life and character that abound both in Dryden and in the Jacobean dramatists.

Except for the plays mentioned, the tragedy of the Restoration has, in the main, only a literary interest, as a survival of the great dramatic period, and as an illustration of foreign influences. The Restoration comedy, however, is a genuine reflection of the temper, if not of the actual life, of the upper classes of the nation; and as such it has a sociological as well as a literary interest. As practised by Shakespeare, English comedy had been romantic in spirit. However seriously it had been concerned with the essentials of human nature, it had had comparatively little to do with the circumstances of actual human life. In Ben Jonson and Middleton, and especially in the latest of the Jacobean, *Shirley*, we find more realistic treatment of the setting, the social surroundings, of the play. Following their lead, and stimulated by the example of Molière, the comedians of the Restoration devoted themselves specifically to picturing the external details of life, the fashions of the time, its manners, its speech, its interests. For scene they turned to the most interesting places they knew, the drawing-rooms, the coffee-houses, the streets and gardens of London. Their characters were chiefly people of fashion, and their plots, for the most part, were love intrigues, often borrowed from the French, both developed with clever dialogue. In tendency these plays are, almost without exception, immoral. They represent the reaction of the playgoing public against Puritanism. They are antisocial, in that they represent social institutions, particularly marriage, in an obnoxious or ridiculous light; but they are not romantic or revolutionary. There is in them never an honest protest against institutions, never a genuine note of revolt. Conventions are accepted to be played with and attacked, merely by

way of giving opportunity for clever, corrupt talk, or point to an intrigue.

The first of this school of comedians was Sir George Etherege (1635-1691), an Englishman who had been educated at Paris, and who there had seen the comedies of Molière. Etherege was followed by _William Wycherley_ (1640-1715), whose best plays are *The Country Wife* (1673) and *The Plain Dealer* (1674). Both are borrowed in outline from Molière, but their moral atmosphere is that of the corrupt court of Charles II, where Wycherley was a favorite. William Congreve (1670-1729) was a far more brilliant playwright. His masterpieces, *Love for Love* (1695) and *The Way of the World* (1700), carry the interest of dialogue, of the verbal fence between character and character, to its extreme development.

It has been pointed out that one effect of the age that succeeded the Restoration was to organize society, to restrain the license of the individual. The antisocial influence of the plays of the time was clearly perceived, and protest was not lacking. It took time for the protest to gather force, in face of the spirit of wild reaction against all that savored of Puritanism; but in 1698 a clergyman, Jeremy Collier, published his *Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*, and Dryden, who was one of the dramatists particularly attacked, admitted the justice of the rebuke. Its immediate effect was not sufficient to do away with the coarseness of Restoration comedy, which appears to the full in Sir John Vanbrugh (1666-1726); but an improvement is noticeable in the works of George Farquhar (1678-1707), the last of the school; and in Steele's plays the drama is in full alliance with the forces which were making for morality and decent living.

Characteristics

- Theatres were closed during the Puritan Age. During the Restoration Age, they reopened with new types of plays and performances which were different than the before.
- The theatres which were indoor were much smaller than the Elizabethan theatres. They didn't have a platform, but there was a picture frame stage with different sceneries. The lighting was artificial and the actors would enter from the side.
- The audience was of the middle class and upper-class people. Most of the features of Restoration Drama are seen even today.
- The success of the plays of the Restoration period was dependent upon the strange staging devices, weird plots, and dramatized language.
- Attention was increased to the commercial rather than the artistic aspect of making theatre.
- Earlier Elizabethan texts like King Lear were given a happy ending.
- Horse-shoe shape was given to the theatres with an inclined stage; thus allowing more people to enjoy drama.

There were mainly two main development in Restoration Drama

Restoration Tragedy

If the age of Restoration (1660-1700) A.D. is one of the most splendid periods in the records of English Drama, it is on the account of Comedy of Manners. The so-called **Heroic Tragedy** which had a brief run concurrently with the Comedy of Manners had also a little of popularity, but was too unnatural and artificial and merely a type of French soil.

Heroic Tragedy was also called "**Heroic Drama**", but Dryden, the main supporter of Tragedy, called it "Heroic Drama". These plays were written in the Classical model of the rhymed heroic couplet and later in blank verse tragedy.

This tragedy was only near tragedy. The theme of the heroic plays was based on the struggle between love and honor, the hero and heroine were cast on the grand scale and their dialogues consisted of elaborate speeches, in rhymed 10-syllabled couplets, full of emotional and bombastic of such kind that its parallel would not be found.

The heroes and heroines would show great nobility. This would create admiration for the audience. The play would make people wonder and also excite the imaginations.

There was a hero, a heroine, and a villain. The villain was a dominating character. From 1660 onwards, the plays were male-dominated, but in the 1670s and 1680s, the focus shifted from hero to heroine.

The heroic play flourished for some 20 years and then died a natural death, exhausted by its own excess. Dryden is the major writer of dramatic tragedy.

The Conquest of Granada is one of the better heroic tragedies, but Dryden's most successful achievement is *All for Love*. Other heroic dramatists were Nathaniel Lee and Thomas Otway.

Comedy of Manners

Introduction

This genre refers to English Comedies written and performed in the Restoration Period from 1660 A.D. to 1710 A.D. It is an entertainment form which satirizes the manners and affections of social class or of multiple classes. A **manner** is a method in which everyday duties are performed.

As compared to the tragedy of the Restoration Age, this genre achieved greater distinction and shame. It was the most characteristic product of Restoration Literature & reflects the spirit of the age more comprehensively than its prose and poetry.

Dryden was the first to write Comedy of Manners with his *Wild Gallant*, which was a failure. He wrote several other Comedies of Manners also which were more successful.

Comedy of Manners Characteristics

- It depends upon 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 the Comedy of Manners
- Both hero and heroine are well dressed, self-possessed and witty.
- Whereas throughout its long career, English Tragedy has always accepted foreign influences, English Comedy has been less influenced by them. But Restoration Comedy of Manners took a good deal of continental spirit.
- The manners which the Comedy of Manners shows were not the manners of all the classes of Restoration Society; they were rather the manners of the upper class only.
- This genre is characterized by realism (art), social analysis and satire. These comedies held a mirror to the finer society of their age. These comedies are thus true pictures of the noble society of the age.
- One feature of the Restoration comedy which has been often criticised and almost as often defended is its immorality.
- This genre held a mirror to the high society of the Restoration Age. The society was immortal and so was its image represented by the comedy.
- Most comedy writers liked the presentation of scenes and acts of sexual rudeness.
- The introduction of the actresses for the first time on the stage lowered the morality level. These actresses were mostly women of easy virtue.
- The writers of the Comedy of Manners gave much more importance to the wit and polish of their dialogues than to their plot-construction; which, in the views of Aristotle, "is the soul of a tragedy and a comedy too."
- The dialogue of the Comedy of Manners is witty, polished and crisp.
- *The Way of the World* by William Congreve is an example of Comedy of Manners

Types of Restoration Drama

During the time of the Restoration, 18th century drama was very critical. Much of the Elizabethan Play writers blended tragedy and comedy, whereas the Restoration dramatists chose to separate the two (Nettleton). The drama of this period can be broken into two categories, comedies and tragedies. Restoration tragedy is classified as heroic tragedy. Heroic tragedy is very extraordinary and usually encompasses some extremely good deed done by a very willful, admirable character. Restoration tragedy refers to neoclassical rules making it very imitative. Usually these tragedies are reworkings of Shakespearean plays. There are three types of comedies that were popular during the Restoration. These three types are: Humour,

Manners, and Intrigue. Comedies of Humour were made popular by the Renaissance playwright and poet Ben Jonson earlier in the century. These plays centralized around a specific character who had an overshadowing trait. Comedy of Manners were the most popular form of Restoration Drama. These plays would typically mock the upper-class and would usually include vulgar and sexually suggestive language. The third and final form of comedy during the Restoration is the comedy of Intrigue. This type of comedy has a somewhat complicated plot, and usually evolves around romance and adventure (“English Restoration: Theatre Movements”).

Some Restoration Playwrights

William Congreve, often recognized for his excellence and skill in writing comedy, was born in 1670 in Bardsey, West Yorkshire. Congreve stepped into the theater spotlight with his breakout success *The Old Bachelor* in 1692. Specializing in a more raucous form of promiscuous comedy, he would go on to produce a wide range of successful plays during the final decade of the seventeenth century. His 1697 production, *The Mourning Bride*, was a change from the otherwise comedic nature of his works. The only tragedy that he would produce during his career, *The Mourning Bride* met with good reception and would go on to coin several famous phrases, including “Hell hath no fury like a woman’s scorn (“William Congreve”).” Congreve’s career would be short-lived, however, as audience preferences began to shift away from the “comedy of manners” style towards the end of the Restoration. His final play, *The Way of the World*, was composed in 1700 in response to a particularly vehement critique of his former works. With this comedy, Congreve returned to the early style of the Restoration comedies in an attempt to justify his own prowess, and in the process created one of the best comedies to emerge during the Restoration era (Young).

George Farquhar was another late arrival to the Restoration scene. Born in 1677, Farquhar began writing for the theater in 1698 where he finished his first play, *Love and a Bottle*, at age 20. His most notable works were *The Recruiting Officer* and *The Beaux’ Stratagem*, composed in 1706 and 1707, respectively. The latter was written during the final months of his life at the behest of a close friend, and would go on to become his most renowned play. Farquhar is best known for his roguish humour and rakish characters, as well as his witty dialogue and light atmosphere (NNDB).

William Wycherley was born in 1640 and created plays during the height of the Restoration. His works were best known for their wit and high spirits, as well as lewd undertones and fast plots that audiences of the time desired most. *The Country Wife*, written in 1675, is a piece that in many ways represents the vast majority of the comedies produced during the Restoration. The play features an overtly sexual pun in its very title, as well as robust language and devious character motives that, while popular at the time, have often prevented it from being performed in a more modern setting (Wycherley).

The Decline

Even though the English broke away from Puritan strictness of the Commonwealth practices, many Protestants still urged society to see the inappropriate and vulgar references in theatre. Different opposers displayed their indignation towards theatre, but one attack truly played a role in the decline of Restoration theatre. Jeremy Collier, a Protestant minister, possessed particularly strong feelings about Restoration theatre. With his belief that theatre should be eradicated, Collier wrote ***A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*** in 1698 (“Western Theatre History”). In this pamphlet, Collier argued three points: the distasteful and bawdy material, the recurrent references to the Bible or biblical characters, and the slander and insults directed towards the clergy. James II issued a formal declaration to attempt to correct issues with Restoration theatre such as immorality and profaneness. Some writers were persecuted and popular actors and actresses were fined. Many dramatists strove to improve the theatre, but little was achieved. The controversy between religious conservatives and dramatists transpired for years. Writers did not seek to reform their works. Instead they approached the laughter, satire, and ridicule as ways to attack their enemies (Bellinger).
