

## **Restoring Restoration: An Assessment of English Stage from 1660 To 1700**

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### **Abstract**

Restoration marks an important transition in England not only in the political front, but on the cultural front as well. In the cultural front people wanted an implantation of open and liberal environment, freed from the Puritan totalitarianism, Charles II was also accompanied by Cavaliers and hedonistic court-wits, all of whom were highly induced with French manners and sensual delights. As a consequence, the whole 'elite' group was charged with anti-Puritan, libertine attitude. This was reflected in the theatre of the day. Sceptical, of conventional beliefs, religion and morality, drama became frank and open, free spoken, salacious and often indelicate. Comedies of sex-attraction and sex-antagonism flourished, reputed as "Comedy of Manners".

**KEYWORDS:** Restoration, Comedy of Manners, Charles II, Restoration Comedy, Immorality

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"When Charles II was restored to his throne in 1660 the Church of England was restored with him. . . When the public theatres reopened in 1660, after eighteen years of official displeasure, a tradition needed to be reestablished which was both responsive to the recent past and a reflection of new tastes and fashions. Two well connected impresarios, both with roots in the courtly and theatrical past, effectively nursed the London stage into robust health."

- Andrew Sanders, The Short Oxford History of English Literature

In the year 1660, Charles II was "restored" to monarchy amidst popular approval, and England was politically "restored" from the rigid yet disappointing shackles of the commonwealth. This historic incident was renowned as Restoration in European historiography. In the cultural front people wanted an implantation of open and liberal environment, freed from the Puritan totalitarianism, Charles II was also accompanied by Cavaliers and hedonistic court-wits, all of whom were highly induced with French manners and sensual delights. As a consequence, the whole 'elite' group was charged with anti-Puritan, libertine attitude. This was reflected in the theatre of the day. Sceptical, of conventional beliefs, religion and morality, drama became frank and open, free spoken, salacious and often indelicate. Comedies of sex-attraction and sex-antagonism flourished, reputed as "Comedy of Manners".

These comedies are criticized by later scholars as vigorously bawdy, lewd, erotic and not infrequently pornographic. After 1660, the romantic comedies of Shakespeare became

relatively neglected, and had little effect on the new drama. On the other hand, Beaumont and Fletcher were frequently revived. The hedonistic temperament of urbane, elite society embraced the “Comedy of Manners”. Some of the leading titles of the contemporary comedies would show the ‘type’ of comic spirit that took the driver’s seat: The Parson Wedding, Love in a Tub, She Would if She Could, The Man of Mode, The Mulberry Garden, Love in a Wood, The Gentleman Dancing Master, The Country Wife, The Careless-Lovers, The Forced Marriage, The Double Dealer.

In a libertine atmosphere, “Comedy of Manners” became ‘amoral’. It was full of sexual encounters, sexual undertone of speech, and lewd gestures performed on the stage. In Dryden’s *Wild Gallant*, which was the least in the line of immorality, the heroine Constance stuffed a pillow under her abdominal clothes to pretend that she was pregnant. ‘Body’ became bawdily evident in “Comedy of Manners”. Undoubtedly ‘laughter-and-entertainment’ was the motif of the comedians of the Restoration period, and not moral improvement. The manners of the Court were highly corrupt and amoral, and the comedy that the court patronized was unblushing, hard, cynical, and immoral. No French play was adapted into English without an increment of grossness. The elements of idealism and romanticism were replaced by a cynical and explicit denial and disregard of healthy values. Freudian psychologists would point out that obscenity is a comic mechanism and this was very true to Restoration “Comedy of Manners”.

The most notable among the Restoration comedians who wrote in the tradition of “Comedy of Manners” were Sedley, Killigrew, Congreve, Wycherley, Etherege, Vanbrugh, Ravenscroft and Mrs. Aphra Behn. Behn was, as it is extremely clear to modern critical practice, an assertive and intelligent Feminist voice who made us laugh at patriarchal and androcratic values and their hollowness – but she was unfortunately marginalized in male dominated circle of literary historians. Some of the leading playwrights in Restoration Theatre were themselves practitioners of an amoral lifestyle including heavy drinking and lechery, and they were least ashamed to bring out the private activities into the public. Elizabethan comedy had been an imaginative representation of men living, Restoration Comedy is rather autonomy of life.

The characters in Restoration Comedy of Manners are flat, two dimensional characters. The specialized in type or function: the inelegant country squire, the rake as the hero or the Playboy, the male lewd, the furious rejected mistress, gallants, fop, sexually charged widows busy in man-hunting, dissatisfied wives who are nymphomaniacs, and frustrated conservative middle aged men constituted the world of Restoration Comedy. The parson in *The Parson’s Wedding* is an example of the coarse brute. Sir Frederick Frolic is a prototype of the Playboy-hero who is himself not moral and can anytime pull open the mask of morality worn by the ‘gentle’ society. But the best in the lot are lively, attractive young heroines who are witty and intelligent: like Harriet, Constance or Helena. They can play with male heart as an expert angler plays with his fish. Miss Loveit is an example of the deserted mistress while Lady Loveall is “an old stallion hunting widow”. Significantly, the names of the characters are indices of their nature, and the long list points at the vulgarity and libertine hedonism: Sir Frolic, Loveit, Lady Cockwood, Lady Loveall, Courtall, Freeman, Gayman, Wildish, Pinchwife.

The plot of Restoration “Comedy of Manners” was a plot of cuckolding, flirting, intrigues and two-timings. Often there are different levels of love as different sub-plots. Etherege’s *The Comical Revenge* has four plots: the noble, sentimental love-plot is written in rhyme, a ‘genteel’ plot concerning Frolic’s wooing of the widow, a low comedy of gulling of a knight and a farcical servant-plot. The Restoration dramatist was highly aware of hierarchies and class-differences. Already we have seen that the Shakespearean comic spirit of ardent, idealistic romantic love has departed from the “Comedy of Manners”. Instead we have the fashionable, Patrician society, whose concern with outlandish ‘manners’ and interests in sexuality arouse laughter. Love has made a shift from idealism and romanticism to possession, sex and jealousy. ‘Love-duel’ has become a verbal marker of a combination of sex-attraction and sex-antagonism. The witty pseudo-quarrels between Loveby and Constance, between Harriet and Dorrinant and between Olivia and Wildish have become immortal in the history of English literature. Another recurrent feature has been the Proviso-scene, for example in *Wild Gallant* where Isabella lays down the conditions of her marriage to Sir Timorous. Love in Restoration “Comedy of Manners” has resided more in the domain of physicality than in mentality or materiality. Attraction is not based on idealism but on physical need and pleasure, and in the show of manners. Courtall suggests that whatever women say, they like a man who is wildly, gay and playboish because they want to possess a man of youth and high metal.

‘Marriage’ in the Restoration “Comedy of Manners” has become a comic defeat of the free-bind. But even in his capitulation to the widow, Sir Frederick accepts matrimony just as another adventure which can give pleasure. Marriage seems to have no sanctity, no permanent happiness, and no responsibility. Sparkish is invited by Pinchwife in *The Country Wife*, with a reward of five hundred pounds, for “sleeping with” Athelia, Pinchwife’s sister. Pinchwife himself treats his wife objectively and with suspicion. A character by Aphra Behn, Willmore suggests that marriage is as much a bane to love as lending money is to friendship. However, Willmore assures the Bride that he is willing to take the ‘Pleasure of working the great Miracle of making a maid a Mother’, i.e. he is interested in the Coital, sexual aspect of conjugal life.

Two elements are harshly laughed at in Restoration “Comedy of Manners”:

- The conservative attitude that hides the private behind the façade of the public decorum and
- The country in binary opposition to the city, the rural, rustic simpletons in contrast with the urban intelligence.

The tension between outward respectability and secret promiscuity has been constantly laughed at in *Comedy of manners* by portraying how the gimmick of a hollow ‘Manner’ tends to conceal the fact that it is all devoid of matter.

### Works Cited

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