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Topic: Comedy of Manners.

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Comedy of Manners

In the Restoration Era, there flourished a type of comedy which is called the comedy of manners. It was closely related to the contemporary comedy of humour. It was realistic, often satirical, comedy of restoration period, as written by Congreve and others. The term is also used for the revival, in modified form, of this comedy a hundred years later by Goldsmith and Sheridan, as well as for a revival late in the nineteenth century. In addition, the realistic comedy of Elizabethan and Jacobian times is sometimes called comedy of manners.

In the stricter sense of the term, the type is concerned with the manners and conventions of an artificial, highly sophisticated society. The characters are more likely to be types than individualized personalities. Plot, though often involving a clever handling of situation and intrigue, is less important and atmosphere and satire. The prose dialogue is witty and polished.

One distinguishing characteristic of the comedy of manners is a coarseness and immortality, partly because of the satirical purpose of this form of drama. It reflects the culture of the upper classes in which manners are supreme. Professor Nicoll defines manners, "as something brilliant about the man or a woman, not a humour but a grace, or a habit of refined culture." It deals with the gallantries, intrigues and affectations of fashionable men and women and its primary aim is to reflect the distinctive feature of that culture, "its breeding; gallantry and wit", its brilliance, freedom excesses and eccentricities. It deals with the brilliant surface of Restoration high-ups. It avoids all that is mean and low. It avoids low and mean characters and their "mechanic humours". Everything low and vulgar in conversation is painstakingly eschewed and an unprecedented refinement of language is achieved. Thus, words like 'whore', 'pump', etc, are avoided. Indeed, wit, the saying of the fine sparkling things, emerges as the leading characteristics of Restoration Comedy, while plot and characterization are its weakest points. Though it eschews the use of improper words, it is extremely obscene and immoral. Congreve, Dryden and Wycherley are its most important practitioners.

William Congreve is one of the greatest dramatist of the Restoration Age. His comedies "The Old Bachelor" and "Love for Love" and "The Way of the World" are the important examples of the comedy of manners. Dryden turned his versatile genius to comedy in "The Wild Gallant" and "Marriage a La Mode". His plays were written to please the king and his courtiers. His contemporary, George Etherege was more successful. In him, we first look for the typical Restoration comedy of manners. His "The Man of Mode" has been regarded as the comedy of this pattern.

William Wycherley enjoys the reputation of being the most brilliant and the most vicious writer of the age. His best comedies are "The Country Wife" and "The Plain Dealer." Both are based on the Moliere's best known comedies and are marked by the bitterness and scorn natural to Restoration comedy. Vanbrugh and Farquahar are two comic dramatist who wrote their comedies in the form of mannerism. Vanbrugh's best known plays are "The Relapse", "The Provoked Wife" show the Restoration comic mode breaking down. Farquhar's best comedies are "The Recruiting Officer" and "Beaust Stratagem".