

SUBJECT : ENGLISH

B.A.(HONS.),PART-I,PAPER-I,GR.-C

TOPIC : THE RESTORATION COMEDY

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THE RESTORATION COMEDY

The Restoration drama observed a natural reaction against the Puritan attitude to all pleasures, including theatrical performances. It represented in England the dramatic and theatrical conventions of contemporary France. Since the purpose of the drama is always to hold the mirror up to life, Restoration drama naturally reflected the tone of the society. Moody and Lovett write, "Restoration Comedy is genuine reflection of the temper, if not the actual life, of the upper classes of the nation, and as such it has sociological as well as a

literary interest.” Restoration Comedy reflect the external details of life, the fashions of the time, its manners, its speech, its interest. The dramatists confine themselves to drawing rooms, coffee houses, streets and gardens of London. The characters are mainly types who represent chiefly the people of fashion. The plots of the restoration comedies are mainly love intrigues. They are remarkable for their neat, precise, witty balanced and lucid prose style. It developed in two distinct types- the Heroic tragedy and the comedy of manners.

At the head of this drama stands the literary dictator of the age, John Dryden (1631-1700). Dryden’s work for the theatre is uneven in quality. His comedy has neither the naturalness nor the wit of those Restoration dramatists whose plays can still hold the stage. His tragedies for the most part exemplify these artificialities of style that are especially associated with restoration tragedies. “The Indian Emperor” , “The conquest of Granada” and “Aurangzeb” are carefully structured extravaganzas, in rhyming couplet, whose central themes are those of honour and love. In his plays “ All for Love

or Don Sebastian” Dryden brought an artistic discipline. Beside Dryden, Thomas Otway (1652-85) and Nicholas Rowe (1674-1718) wrote some of the most successful tragedies of the period.

The true reflection of the age is however not in its artificial tragedy, but in its artificial comedy which, with all its limitations, is enriched with sparking wit and racy dialogues, like its tragedy, restoration comedy derives its art and inspiration from French and Spanish sources. In characterization, the influence of Ben Jonson cannot be ignored, while the plot owes to Fletcher and his school. The characters are typical and suggest Ben Jonson’s *Comedy of Humour*.

William Wycherley (1635-91) enjoys the reputation of being the most brilliant writer of the age. His best comedies are *The country Wife* and *The Plain Dealer*. He satirises men of all classes but is particularly keen against women’s hypocrisy. In the structure of his play he is mechanical and leaves nothing to the spectator’s imagination.

George Etherege (1635-91) is remarkable for his comedy *The Man of Mode* or *Sir Fopling*

Flutter. Sir John Vanbrugh with his *Provoked Wife* and *The Relapse* and George Farquhar with his *The Recruiting Officer* and *Beaux' Stratagem* enriched the Restoration Comedy.

But it was William Congreve (1670-1729) whose dominance in the world of drama was recognised by all his contemporaries. He brought to perfection the form which is known as the 'Comedy of Manners'. His important plays are, *The Old Bachelor*, *The Double Dealer*, *Love for Love* and *The way of the World*. He also wrote *The Morning Bride* but undoubtedly his best comedy is "The Way of the World". This drama is a classic English comedy because of its many artistic excellences, such as flashes of wit, brilliant and sparkling dialogues, construction and characterization. In this play the story scarcely matters. There is never much resemblance to real life in the plots and machinations of restoration drama. This play is no exception in this respect. But such scenes in which reputations are murdered by gossips, such characters as Mrs. Millamant and Mirabel, such flashes of wit as in the talk between Mr. Marwood and Mrs. Millamant, or for the matter of that any

scene, where Mrs. Millament is to the fore, reveal the Restoration Drama at its zenith.
