



The Restoration Comedy of Manners: Reconsideration

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Abstract

This research paper revolves around the representations related to the Restoration comedy of manners with particular reference to William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. It makes some touches upon the literary features of this kind of drama. There will be a reference to the influence of the ancient French masters, Realism and Formalism on the Restoration comedy of manners. The Satiric Comedy is The defined so that the satirical aspects against those two plays are unfolded. paper also deals with the origin of the comedy of manners, unfolding the shaping factors of this genre, the main themes of the Restoration comedy of manners, the Manipulation of character and settings. There is a section on the relation between the Restoration comedy of manners and the modern comedy and on the concept of social satire, for this paper makes particular reference to those two plays as significant social satire against the social ills of the time.

المستخلص

يدور البحث حول المعطيات المتعلقة بكوميديا الأخلاق في عصر العودة بإشارة محددة لمسرحيتي وليم ويجرلي ووليم كونكريف الموسومتين على التوالي ب (طريق العالم) و (الزوجة الرقيقة). ويتناول البحث بعض السمات لهذا النوع من الدراما وكذلك تتم الإشارة الى تأثير رواد الكوميديا الفرنسية والمذهبين الواقعي والشكلي على كوميديا الأخلاق في عصر العودة. لقد تم إعطاء تعريفا للكوميديا الهجائية بهدف



كشف الجوانب الهجائية لهاتين المسرحيتين. يتناول البحث ايضا نشأة كوميديا الأخلاق والعوامل المكونة لهذا النوع من الادب وأهم موضوعات كوميديا الاخلاق في عصر العودة إضافة الى المخرجات الزمكائية لها. وقد تم تخصيص مبحثا يتناول العلاقة بين كوميديا الاخلاق لعصر العودة والكوميديا الحديثة وكذلك مبحثا يتناول مفهوم الهجاء الاجتماعي الذي يواجه الشرور الاجتماعية لهذا العصر كون الهجاء الاجتماعي يعد محورا مهما لهاتين المسرحيتين.

Restoration Comedy of Manners: Reconsideration

The most significant purpose of this study is to unfold those instances in Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Congreve's *The Way of the World*, which are the subject of the social satire the two dramatists want to express in them due to the fact that they are two contemporary dramatists of the Restoration period in which they both wrote those dramas respectively. These two dramas are regarded the best ones representative of the English comedy of manners: "Excellent examples are William Congreve's *The Way of the World* and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*" (Andrew sanders, 1999, p. 50). Therefore, the essential demand of this study is to point out the interaction of both character and action that leads the researcher to grasp ideas that aid him to pinpoint the point of social satire that is aimed by the those dramatist to express throughout depicting on the stage the kind of life lived by the Restoration society. They find themselves in a position yet morally responsible for satirizing the vices of their society. The plays chosen for this study are generally agreed upon as two representatives of the life of the society of the Restoration period with its manners that are not to be morally accepted. They are those manners that are imposed on society due to the immoral aspirations of the political system represented by King Charles II and his entourage.

Throughout my experience when teaching literature, I come to the conclusion that literature in general and drama in particular is a mirror of the age in which it is written, a notion said and discussed by many giant critics such as Dr. Samuel Johnson and others. Literature or drama is described in this way because it is an artful responsive yet spontaneous overflow made to satisfy the demands and taste of the contemporary readers and audiences. The two dramas in question can be seen as



compatible to what has already been posed in this regard. Thus, this study is to expose those immoral scenes and the immoral behavior of the characters concerned, not to mention the thematic implications related to the exposition of the immoral aspirations of character and action that are basically related to sex, greed and intrigues.

Wycherley and Congreve have contributed too much to the English comedy of manners. Rather, they are regarded as the pioneers of this genre of comedy. This study has been motivated by the researcher's observations that those two dramatists along with their comedies of manner share particular significant facts related to the manipulation of character and action in their dramas, not to mention their satirical attitudes towards the social evils of the contemporary society. Interestingly enough, the two dramatists have exposed throughout the respective comedies the manners and ideals of the audiences watching their plays. They have presented upon the stage the manners, way of thinking, aspirations and ambitions, and the likes and dislikes of the audiences that watch them on the stage in their times:

The drama of the 'Restoration' period ought, however, to be seen as essential an essential element in the literature of a revolutionary age. Unlike much of its satirical poetry the comedies of the last forty years of the seventeenth century have retained immediacy, a [sic] subversiveness, and an ability to provoke the prejudices of audiences. If scarcely revolutionary in themselves, the plays of the period are a response to revolution and to the seventeenth century's experimental reversal of values. The comedies do not offer anything so pretentious as redefinitions but they do continue to irritate and laugh audiences into reaching out for definitions.

(Andrew Sanders, 1999, p. 273)

The Literary Features of the Restoration Period: The Rise of Neoclassicism

Every period of literature is regarded as unique in its forms and contents due to the peculiarities related to the prevailing social, economic and political doctrines. It may be noted that the literature of the Restoration period shows a breaking away



from the literature of the Renaissance, for it mirrors the spirit of the age that is characterized by looseness in moral values and the spirit of corruption which prevailed in the life of the society concerned, and are reflected in literature. People come to believe in the real and the material and are disposed towards ideal of behavior in accordance with the common sense and reason to which men and women must adapt themselves. New etiquette norms and the social behavior had already been established and made to conform to the existing narrow bound already prescribed. These tendencies were reflected in the literature of the period, whether poetry or prose. All writers agree to follow the rules and principles and make their writings appear to be compatible to them: "They express superficial manners and customs of the aristocratic and urban society and did not pry into the mysteries of human mind and heart" (Vijay Chavan, 2012).

Imitation of the Ancient Masters

Due to the belief that the ancient writers had reached the peak of excellence in everything including literature and due to their lack of exceptional literary talents, literary men had turned their attention to the ancient writers to get guidance and inspiration. Thus, the writers of the Restoration period considered the classics their model:

Thus grew the neo-classical school of poetry. The neo-classicists or pseudo-classicists could not soar to great imaginative heights or could not penetrate deeply into human emotions. They directed their attention to the slavish imitation of rules and ignored the importance of the subject matter. This habit was noticeable in the age of Dryden. It strengthened in the succeeding age of Pope.

(Vijay Chavan, 2012)

Imitations of the French Masters

As the Elizabethan period witnessed the influence of the Italian masters, the Restoration period witnessed the influence of the French masters which extended into the next century as well. Writers of the Restoration period had got their peculiar



reasons why to imitate such a literature as this. They found it necessary to imitate

the French literature because it is unique in its characteristic features:

the contemporary literature of France was characterized particularly by lucidity, vivacity, and by reason of the close attention given to form – correctness, elegance and finish. It was essentially a literature of polite society, and had all the merits and all the limitations of such a literature. I was moreover a literature in which intellect was in the ascendant and the critical faculty always in control. It was to this congenial literature that English writers now learned to look for guidance; and thus a great impulse was given to the development alike in our prose and in our verse of the principles of regularity and order and the spirit of good sense.

(Vijay Chavan, 2012)

It may be added that there was a certain growth of artificiality on the part of poetry that is made on the expense of feeling and spontaneity. The most prominent French writers such as Corneille, Racine, Moliere and Boileau were imitated, who became very famous in this period due to their ideal sensibility. On the other hand, the English writers of this period as it has been said, blindly imitated the French whose influence was reflected in the decency and coarseness reflected in the comedy of manners. The French and the classical models resulted in the appearance of the heroic tragedy. However, the French influence alone resulted in the appearance of the English opera (Vijay Chavan, 2012).

Realism and Formalism

It cannot at all be denied that Restoration literature is characterized by realism in that it was very much closely related to the life of people along with their dialects, fashion, dress and manners. It has been said that the early Restoration writers had the tendency to draw realistic pictures of the court corruption and corrupt society. They laid much emphasis on the dark aspects of society that were represented by vicious behavior instead of the virtuous, coarseness instead of politeness and the like. They presented plays dealing with indecent subject matters related to all kinds of vicious behavior—illegal sex, robbery, intrigues and gossiping. On the other



hand, it can be suggested that those plays should present moral criticism on the part of the audiences that might satirize themselves when watching characters like them

commit vicious deeds on the stage. As far as style:

The Restoration writers eschewed all extravagances of thought and language and aimed at achieving directness and simplicity of expression. Dryden accepted the excellent rule for his prose, and adopted the heroic couplet, as the next best thing for the greater part of this poetry. It is largely due to Dryden that —writers developed formalism of style, that precise, almost mathematical elegance, miscalled classicism, which ruled the English literature for the next century.

(Vijay Chavan, 2012)

The Satiric Comedy

The satirical comedy is a genre of comedy that ridicules the political and social criteria considered to be against the moral philosophical doctrines. It attacks the deviations from the accepted social norms by ridiculing and presenting them in a very funny way. Political policies, immoral social practices and, evils and vices are to be attacked by contemporary writers as a means of correcting them. Abrams and Harpham (2009, p. 49) comment that the satirical comedy attacks in a ridiculous way the political practices deviated from the accepted social order; hence, violators of the standards that govern right yet correct behavior are to be satirized as corrective to them. Abrams and Harpham (2009, p. 49) point out that the first master of the satiric comedy is supposed to be the Greek Aristophanes (c. 450-c. 385 BC) who in his plays political, philosophical and literary matters of the age had been mocked. They proceed to point out that Ben Jonson wrote *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* in an attempt to ridicule and satirize the “greed and ingenuity of one or more intelligent but rascally swindlers, and the equal greed but stupid gullibility of their victims, are made grotesquely or repulsively ludicrous rather than lightly amusing” (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p. 49).

Basically, Wycherley and Congreve address their plays to the court society that patronizes the theatre, for they do so mainly with an intention of asserting a point of



view which is their own which correspond to the assumptions and values of their contemporary society as is the case with their *The Country Wife* and *The Way of the World* respectively. In their time, the two comedies witnessed better criticism made by the middle-class society that had regarded them to be within the domain of the kind of drama that advocated immorality of situation and the indecent verbal expressions that did not conform with generally accepted standards of behavior, especially in relation to sexual matters.

It has been pointed out that the immorality of situation and the indecent dialogue of the comedy of manners, especially Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Congreve's *The Way of the World* led to a reaction of the majority of people which caused the appearance of the eighteenth-century sentimental comedy:

In the latter part of the century, however, Oliver Goldsmith (*She Stoops to Conquer*) and his contemporary Richard Brinsley Sheridan (*The Rivals* and *a School for Scandal*) revived the wit and gaiety, while deleting the indecency, of Restoration comedy. The comedy of manners lapsed in the early nineteenth century, but was revived by many skillful dramatists, from A. W. Pinero and Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of being Earnest*, 1895) through George Bernard Shaw and Noel Coward, to Neil Simon, Alan Ayckbourn, Wendy Wasserstein, and other recent and contemporary writers.
(Andrew Sanders, 1999, p. 50)

The Origin of the Comedy of Manners

The comedy of manners is a genre that has been originated in the Greek New Comedy developed by Menander (c.342-292 BC) as distinguished from the Old Comedy developed by Aristophanes. Menander's new comedy of manners was further developed by the Roman dramatist Plautus and Terrence in the third and second centuries BC, whose plays had dealt with the "vicissitudes of young lovers and included what became the *stock characters* of much later comedy, such as the clever servant, old and stodgy [dull and uninspired; lacking originality or excitement] parents and the wealth rival" (Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p. 49).



William Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Much Ado about Nothing* are very good examples of the English comedy of manners which have been nurtured and ripened within the Restoration Comedy (1660-1700). The French playwright Moliere's witty drama (1622-73) has its tremendous effects on the Restoration comedy of manners. This is the kind of drama that deals with the social relationships among men and women, especially the kind of love relationships whose aim is to ultimately be marriage. The plays exhibit a great deal of intrigues, wit, plots and clever dialogues:

The Restoration form owes much to the brilliant drama of the French writer Moliere, 1622-73. It deals with the relations and intrigues of men and women living in a sophisticated upper-class society, and relies for comic effect in large part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue—often in the form of *repartee*, a witty conversational give-and-take which constitutes a kind of verbal fencing much—as well as on the violations of social standards and decorum by would-be wits, jealous husbands conniving rivals, and foppish dandies.

(Abrams and Harpham, 2009, p. 49)

The Restoration literary media witnessed the imitation of the French writers. Historically speaking King Charles II and his followers spent a certain period of time during which they became acquainted with the literature of France, especially the theatrical performances of the dramas of Moliere, Racine and others. As they came to England they aspired to see that the English dramatist follow the style of drama to which they had become accustomed in the country of their exile—France. The new era of literature did no longer allure the taste of people to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, for the latter did no longer satisfy the needs, demands and taste of people living in a new age in which the majority of the spectators had already directed their attention to styles different from that of the Elizabethan period. Vijay Chavan (2012) has quoted Pepys famous comment on this situation when he commented in his diaries that “he was bored to see Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The Italian influence had been dominant in Elizabethan period.



Now began the period of French influence, which showed itself in English literature for the next century.” Moreover, the French influence on English literature has been referred to by W. H. Hudson who implied that

the contemporary literature of France was characterized particularly by lucidity, vivacity, and by reason of the close attention given to form – correctness, elegance and finish. It was essentially a literature of polite society, and had all the merits and all the limitations of such a literature. I was moreover a literature in which intellect was in the ascendant and the critical faculty always in control. It was to this congenial literature that English writers now learned to look for guidance.
(Vijay Chavan, 2012)

The Restoration comedy of manners exhibits characters with immoral human behavior and the indecency of the verbal expressions allusive to sexual meanings and connotations. Allardyce Nicoll comments that the Restoration spectators are highly interested in the comic spirit rather than in the tragic aspects reflected in tragic dramas; they are interested to watch on the stage the manners of people that reflect social relationships, witty and clever characters able to form *repartees* in many and various situations—the kind of *repartees* which they like most—and everything that is related to man's life and experience, and as he explicates it in the following passage: “The one thing on which their [Restoration audiences'] minds were set was social brilliance; fine manners, witty conversation was practiced and admired, intrigue formed the daily business of the gallants and their ladies” (Allardyce Nicoll, 1976, pp. 278-79).

The Shaping Factors of and the Influences on the Restoration Comedy of Manners

The Restoration pointed to the return of King Charles II from France and the beginning of a new era with theaters opened which were once closed by the Puritans and many and various changes and innovations witnessed on the English stage. In this section, there is a close look at the influences of the French theater on the



English due to the King and his followers' tendency to live in an artistic atmosphere which they had experienced and accustomed to in France. The new drama of this period addressed the French in many aspects. First, there was the appearance of woman actresses on the English stage, which was once forbidden by both the church and the social conventions:

The Restoration is credited in theatre history for the introduction of women onto the English stage. In France, women had been appearing onstage as early as the fifteenth century. There were few French women who tried to be actors early on, especially since it would incur the anger of the Church, but we do know that at least by 1545 there was an actress called Marie Ferre in France. Even though women in England were not members of professional theatre troops before the Restoration English women of various walks of life still performed in many ways.

(Anne Melissa Potter, 2016, p.2)

The introduction of actresses in the English theater during the Restoration period was regarded as an excitingly new factor that contributes to the newness of the new theater supported by the King and his followers. Actresses such as Mrs. Nell Gwynn, Mrs. Bracegirdle and Mrs. Barry were the first to assume their existence on the English stage. Thus, sexual references were made more exciting than before due to the appearance of actual women as actresses that presents scenes such as the ones enacted in Wycherley's *The Country Wife*:

At least a more realistic sexual atmosphere was possible on the stage. Elizabethan audiences knew that Shakespearean Cleopatra, for instance, was really a boy-actor dressed as a woman and this gave only a poetic amorousness to the love-scenes with Antony. But the 'realistic' thrill was provided in the Restoration period because there *really* were two sexes on the stage.

(Wilson, 1964, p. 172)



That women had been given access to acting on the stage of the English theater was to serve the dramatic purposes and experiences of the Restoration period and was regarded as a turning point in history of the English drama in particular and in the history of drama as a whole. The use of women in the English theater gives new impetus and interest in the drama of the Restoration period. Actresses were watched by the spectators as able to produce *repartees*. They were capable of assuming the role of rake heroes. This new turning point in the history of drama let the Restoration drama have permanency. Drama strengthened its existence within the domain of the English theater. The role of Charles II in this regard could not be denied, for he had chosen all the actresses of the Restoration stage such as Nell Gwynn that is regarded as a well-known example of the Restoration actresses. The new demands and tastes of the Restoration spectators could be found in their tendency towards limited amusing situations related to wit, clever retorts and sex, which could be made the factor that excites and motivates laughter. They are not made to think so much of sophisticated subject matters, and at the same time the presence of the Elizabethan tinge of drama could hardly be felt, for it had been said that Shakespeare and Ben Jonson seemed to be almost completely absent from the

Restoration stage:

Here are some comments by Samuel Pepys on certain Shakespeare revivals: 1662--...saw Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare), the first time it was ever acted, a play the worst that ever I heard in my life. Midsummer Night's Dream (Shakespeare), which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life. 1663—Twelfth night (Shakespeare), a silly play, and not related at all to the name of the play.

(John Burgess Wilson, 1964: 172-3)

It can be suggested that the employment of women as actresses on the English stage can be regarded as a revolutionary step in the history of the English theater. There was a profound understanding of the importance of the role of woman as a



professional actress, which is considered a cultural exchange in seventeenth-century England and France. Women performing their roles on the stage for the first time might have created a sexual display and attraction on the part of the audiences, and at the same time the audiences would have a sense of reality, not to think that what they watched were mere men in disguise. Critics might have raised certain debates

which are, according to Potter, served

to illustrate some of the many issues that were raised by the actual physical presence of women onstage. While women appearing onstage is one of the aspects of French theatre that influenced English theatre at the time, it is simply one of many and hopefully one that we can keep in mind as we look more closely at the texts of a collection of play.

(Anne Melissa Potter, 2016, p.3)

What prevailed on the stage during the Restoration period was the comedy of manners. Due to the harsh and bawdy criticism that unfolds the dealing with sexual matters in a comical way—subject matters that were humorously indecent—the sentimental comedy of the eighteenth century was to replace it. The indecent ingredients of the comedy of manners were evicted and a new tendency started to prevail on the stage as a kind of reaction. The new genre deviates from presenting fools and villains to presenting the virtuous and the prudent: “Too bawdy and too mordant for its critics, Restoration comedy gave way to 18th-century sentimental comedy, which shifts emphasis from exposing folly and villainy to rewarding virtue and prudence” (Ian Ousby, 1996: 87). It was not surprising that the character of Horner that figured in *The Country Wife* was imported from France to England: “One of the major shifts from the ... French plays to the English play is the presence of the rake character, Mr. Homer. He begins the story and even though the play is called *The Country Wife* it seems that Homer is the character that drives most of the play” (Anne Melissa Potter, 2016, p. 17)



When the Puritan closed the theaters in 1642 as they considered them blasphemous, drama-writing and drama-acting were destroyed. Within a very short time after the return of Charles II, two patents to open two theaters were granted to establish dramatic companies responsible for reviving the English drama within a new mold of form and content and styles responsive to the new taste of people living in era very different from the Elizabethans'. Thus, according to Wilson, the intimacy of the Elizabethan theater was lost (Wilson, 1964: 171).

The main goal of this study is to highlight those aspects significant to the presentation of *The Country Wife* and *The Way of the World* as two satirical dramas intended to criticize the manners of a society living in certain exceptional circumstances which once constrained it and deprived it of its right of expression and freedom. Moreover, this study shows how these two dramas were illustrative and declarative of the society living in the age in which those plays were written.

Due to King Charles II's interest in the French comedy of manners in which he came to be interested in France during his years of exile, the English comedy flourished in his time; hence, the favored courtiers of the royal court were those poets, dramatists and men of wit and of letters such as John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, Charles Sackville, Earl of Dorset, and William Wycherley. Despite the fact that the latter dramatist, Wycherley, was without wealth or title, the plays he wrote in 1675 has established him as a significant personality famous for the new interesting dramas that were received with high enthusiasm and encouragement, not mention his social stature in the court. His dramatic achievements very much contributed to recommending him to be accepted within the royal circle. Furthermore, due to his new social status, he was given access in speech and talks to the mistresses of Charles II who had so much admired his wit and dramatic performance of his comedy *The Country Wife*. This comedy was received as his wittiest and bawdiest comedy that had ever been watched on the English stage at that time. Interestingly enough, Wycherley spent a certain period of time with Charles II in France where they enjoyed watching the plays of Moliere that has so



much attracted the English audiences who were no longer interested in the kind of drama enacted during the Elizabethan drama that adhered to the classics:

The public had been entertained, and sometimes disappointed with farce, with intrigue-comedies based on Spanish plots, and with plots involving sexual skirmishing and reconciliations. The satiric 'humorous' comedies of Ben Johnson and the witty comedies of Fletcher were well-represented in the repertoires.

(Peter Dixon, 1996, p. vii)

As to the taste of the Restoration audiences, it can be said that they wanted to watch plays that had got fast action and movements. They were interested in the complications and the new varieties created by witty conversations and *repartees*, which were characteristic features of Wycherley's comedies. Wycherley was able to insert such qualities as these very easily—qualities that were of many moods ranging from absurdities to satire, so that he would be able to meet and satisfy the new demands of the spectators:

The attempt to view the drama of the late seventeenth century in a socio-historical context, to see the plays, rightly or wrongly, as reflections of the 'manners' of the court circle and those who tried to imitate it, gave way to moral considerations later in the nineteenth century. Thomas Babington Macaulay disparaged the "bad" morality of a restoration society that was fond of everything 'ridiculous and degrading.' Wycherley, and the Restoration comedy of which he was regarded a part, was adversely affected by this kind of provincialism.

(Robert C. Neagle, 1989, pp. 2-3)

As to the English ideologies before and after the Restoration age, it can be said that it comprises two kinds of trend in this respect because of the fact that the seventeenth century was eventful. At the beginning of the reign of Charles II, the entire situation of the preceding era was changed. The civil war in 1642 had exhausted the England and its people on many and various levels. Of course, the



literary scene could not be exempted in this regard. The crown was destroyed by Oliver Cromwell and his entourage represented by the Puritans who were the dominant military force that practiced the kind of repression supported by the parliament. Theaters were closed, and drama assumed little presence on the English scene.

The Puritans tried to apply Christian principles very strictly, which of course repressed and destroyed the artistic aspirations of playwrights. But, after the Restoration of the monarchy and the return of the legal heir of the throne King Charles II, a new era started point to a new development in the English literature. The new King had so much contributed to the appearance of a new ideology that gave vent to the many and various way of thinking and expressions. As to drama, it develops a new course looking for exposing the manners of the aristocrats—their behavior, likes and dislikes, vices and the kind of social relationships along with the motivating factors that brought them to being.

The new age marked the beginning of adopting new literary styles and techniques that were highly influenced and inspired by the French writes of the time, especially the playwrights: “While in exile in France, the court of Charles II had acquired a new tone of worldliness and self-conscious, sophistication that was to affect literary as well as social forms” (Martin Price, 1973: 7). In a word, the revolutionary aspects of the 1640s had turned upside down and became reactionary in the new era:

If scarcely revolutionary in themselves, the plays of the period are a response to revolution and to the seventeenth century’s experimental reversal of values. The comedies do not offer anything so pretentious as redefinitions but they do continue to irritate and laugh audiences into reaching out for definitions.
(Sanders, 1999: 273)



The Main Themes of the Restoration Comedy of Manners

The Restoration comedy of manners became very popular in the seventeenth century. This genre of drama which dealt with bawdy and dirty subject matters, along with dialogues that usually address scandalous representations, events and situations related to matters of sex, betrayal, cuckoldry and intrigues. The plots of the comedy of manners exposed stories about unfaithful wives, dupe husbands easily cuckolded and deceitful lovers whose main goal was to love and marry for the sake of getting money, properties and estates. The plays of this genre make fun of ridiculous characters, especially those stupid and foolish ones. This kind of drama meets the taste of the Restoration spectators who go to the theatre for the sake of laughter that was provoked by means of using indecent dialogues, sexual connotations and scandalous events. George Norman Clark (1956, p.369) argues in his:

The best-known fact about the Restoration drama is that it is immoral. The dramatists did not criticize the accepted morality about gambling, drink, love, and pleasure generally, or try, like the dramatists of our own time, to work out their own view of character and conduct. What they did was, according to their respective inclinations, to mock at all restraints. Some were gross, others delicately improper....The dramatists did not merely say anything they liked: they also intended to glory in it and to shock those who did not like it.

The new dramatists of the Restoration period were mainly specialized, to a great extent, in comedies that reflect the manners of society, especially that slice of life represented by the aristocrats of time whose main concerns and interests are related to lust, cuckoldry and sexual intrigues exposed within the framework of wit. According to Sabhash Bisaria, the general atmosphere of these dramas was greatly colored by a sense of immorality, which could be explained as a kind of reaction against the Puritan austerity and radical and extremist ideology:



Social conventions are accepted but they are often projected or made to appear ridiculous. Wit and clever dialogue, in which indecent thought and imagery are masked, are predominant. Critics have lamented about the immorality of these plays too much but there is little reason that they should be taken so seriously

(Sabhash Bisaria, 2009: 4)

The austere Puritan principles, values and conventions had been confronted by the new values that advocated a sense freedom that was to free the Restoration society from the shackles impose upon it by the Puritans, and thus society gets relieved from suppression, looking forward to enjoying a new life characterized by freedom in almost every particular aspect of life.

The Manipulation of Character in the Restoration Comedy of Manners

The Restoration Comedy of manners exposes the kind of characters that represent the upper-class society, and at the same time it does not deny the existence of characters that represent the middle-class society. This kind of drama presents on the stage characters with the manners already adopted by the audiences; that is to say, the audiences watch characters whose style of life, manners, aspirations and likes and dislikes similar to those enjoyed by them. They are the characters that live in the fashionable world of the Restoration age who exhibit complicated social relationship, whose personal relationships were conditioned by economic, sexual and hierarchical concerns and interests. Their wealth and power gave no place to true feelings and genuine concerns. Though the Restoration comedy of manners lets its characters exhibit polite manners and high level of wit and refinement, they move and act according to their financial greed, power struggle and sexual appetites. Their conversations point to their high level of social status, which indicate their greed, sexual concerns and hypocrisy. Congreve's brilliant style and his well-made plot cause critics to consider his comedy *The Way of the World* representative of this kind of drama.



The characters of the comedy of manners exhibit stock characters that represent many and various type characters with names that indicate their own personalities. For instance, *The Way of the World* exhibits the characters of Millamant and Mirabell as true wits on the one hand, and Witwood and his best friend, Petulant, as false wits on the other. Fainnall is presented as an adulterous villain, and servants that help their masters and at the same time complicate the action of the play. Some of the characters reflect their nature. For instance Lady Wishfort is presented as one that wishes to have a husband; Fainll always feigns to be a gentleman; Millimant allegedly has many beloveds. Most of the characters manipulate one another by means of intrigues, cheating and betrayal as far as money is concerned. Eavesdropping, disguise and mistaken identity play a great role in the kind of social relationship of those characters.

Setting

The action of the comedy of manners take place in scenes that expose parlors, chocolate houses, coffee-houses, streets, gardens of familiar and real cities such as London, so that the audiences might think of the reality of the atmosphere created on the stage. Real places contribute to the element of realism.

The Restoration Comedy of Manners and Modern Comedy

Before saying anything about the influence of the Restoration comedy of manners on modern drama, it is worthwhile to consider the attempts of two dramatists of the late nineteenth century that were Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Oliver Goldsmith who tried to revive this genre in their plays *A School for Scandal* and *She Stoops to Conquer* respectively:

Late 19th century English man Oliver Goldsmith and Irish play write Richard Brinsley Sheridan revived the form of drama. Oliver Goldsmith in his play "She stoops to Conquer" employs much wit, craft and style in which one mistake feeds on another, and ultimately accumulating in a play of force. "She stoops to Conquer" is after all, a novel of sentimental comedy and



also a comedy of manners, which features treatment of social class as one of the main themes. However, not all of the characters play a part in the discrimination or standards of social class.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk%3AComedy_of_manners)

The researcher finds certain affinities between the Restoration comedy of manners and the plays written in modern times, especially the one written by Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, for the latter dealt with the problems of the societies among which they lived and exhibit unpleasant subject matters closely related to audiences. Like the comedy of manners, Ibsen and Shaw present the kind of drama in which audiences watch themselves on the stage.

Both dramatists, Wycherley and Congreve make reference to hypocrisy, intrigues and illegal sexual tendencies, adultery and most of the concerns and interests that are abhorred and banned by contemporary society. As shown the Restoration comedy of manners, those two dramatists create the kind of setting that is found in public places, parlors, sitting rooms etc., where characters could deal with one another. It may be suggested that the parlor comedy finds its origin in the Restoration comedy of manners, which is a kind of drama that had been developed by Shaw: "Typical of nineteenth-century drama was the 'parlor comedy,' which had its roots in the 'comedy of manners' popularized during the Restoration period (late-seventeenth century dramas" (www.encyclopedia.com > arts > man – and...).

The most important yet prominent concern and interest of modern dramatists had been the problems of society that had also been the most significant concern of the Restoration dramatists. Ibsen's and Shaw's plays on the one hand and Wycherley and Congreve had many things in common, whose dramas meet at many and various representations as to the activities of society and many thematic implications related to the question of love, marriage, adultery, cuckoldry, intrigues and courtship. For example, Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1905) "can be performed as a light comedy of manners" (www.encyclopedia.com > arts > man – and...).

Shaw's *Man and Superman* has been always regarded as a comedy of manners whose characters are highly interested in the intrigues of the Restoration comedy of manners in which the confidential and reluctant girl has seduced an unwilling man. Those plays exhibit on the stage those problems from which the audiences are suffering and they satirize those audiences whose disgraced practices and unpleasant subject matters are presented on the stage in front of them, and this is the reason why they are referred to be as unpleasant plays. Thus, Ibsen's parlor comedy is originated in the Restoration comedy of manners and has influenced Shaw accordingly. Shaw draws stock characters that are 'types' of people rather than 'individuals,' in so far as they exhibit the same qualities from beginning to end: "The parlor comedy moved the action to the parlor, the sitting room, where the characters discuss their predicaments....Shaw advanced the parlor comedy into the play of ideas. The play of ideas had evolved from Henrik Ibsen's serious parlor dramas" (www.encyclopedia.com > arts > man – and...).

According to J. H. K. Lockhart (1968: 18), Shaw and Wilde have significantly brought back to the stage the old traditions and conventions of the Restoration comedy of manners. Lockhart declares that Shaw has been influenced by nineteenth century drama, and at the same time he declares that the influence of the Restoration comedy of manners can by no means be denied: "...Of equal importance is his more sophisticated inheritance from the comedy of manners. Together with his fellow Dubliner, Oscar Wilde, he was to resurrect this tradition and give it life once more" (Lockhart, 1968: 18).

It is important to notice that the Restoration comedy of manners has its impacts on modern dramatists in that the latter become more concerned with social satire and criticism than anything else, depicting the social evils and vices of society such as prostitution, greed, landlordism and the bad treatment of the working class, and at the same time audiences of the modern theaters watch themselves on the stage throughout the characters that are similar to them in moral values, and they are made to infer the moral lesson that is intended by the dramatist to expose to them.



Modern dramatists have endeavored to satirize the negative aspects of not only society but also the forces that have given rise to the appearance of them—political, economic, or social. The main dramatists of the Restoration period that have significantly affected modernist dramatists are Wycherley, Congreve and Sheridan, whose main concern was to satirize be the society itself by means of the witty satirical comedies in order to unfold the follies of the upper-class society whose manners have been bitterly satirized. Anne Milessa Potter has her say in this regard, referring to the appearance of the character of Horner as a return from France. She indicates that that character is the result of the French influence on the Restoration comedy of manners, for the issue goes beyond the introduction of Horner onto something larger of what has come from France—the frank and open exposition of tabooed representations related to sexuality, cuckoldry, adultery and infidelity. She considers the introduction of the character of Horner a jumping point and a significant influence of French drama on the English. Horner feigned sexual impotence, so that he would be able to seduce more women in secret:

The disease, of course, is a fiction, but a fiction he uses to his benefit in his attempt to gain increased access to more women through feigning impotency. This could serve as a metaphor for a bigger picture of what has come from France. There is something sensual that has worked its way from France, and it is indeed both women on the stage and perhaps something else having to do with sexuality that is less overt. The plot of *The Country Wife* itself was borrowed from Moliere's *L'Ecole des maris* (1661) and *L'Ecole des femmes* (1662) and will be explored in this study.

(Anne Milessa Potter, 2016, pp. 3-4)

The Way of the World can be regarded as a social satire in which characters conflict and deal with one another within the framework of false relationships colored by intrigue and betrayal and infidelity. Mirabell is a handsome youth who has already finished his illicit relation with Arabella when he has married her off to



Fainall who is cheated to be her second husband. Millamant, his beloved finds herself obliged to be surrounded by men whose main concern is to benefit from her property by means of a convenient marriage; Mrs. Marwood has an illicit love relationship with Fainall, and at the same time she enjoys the habit of eavesdropping, so that she can harm Mirabell and Millamant for she has been neglected by Millamant, her ex-lover. In an attempt to secure her future life Mrs. Fainall marries Fainall. This is the reason why she always pretends that she looks younger than she really is. The Restoration comedy of manners managed to portray the kind of life lived by the aristocrats that was licentious and degraded.

Truly, the Puritans had practiced all kind of austere rule against the English people during their control of the country, and during the Restoration period there was a kind of reaction against their practices as if they had freed themselves from the bars of a prison. They could no longer be guided by the word of God. Thus, no sense of moral sense was to prevail among their social relationships, for each tried to cheat one another in one way or another. They came to live in a world verily colored by downright materialism. In the two plays under consideration, Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Congreve's *The Way of the World*, the main characters focus more on worldly pleasures and enjoyment and put the entire morality aside. They acted according to their egoistic self, not caring for anyone except themselves. They are self-centered, trying to enjoy themselves on the account of others. This kind of people as characters onstage was depicted, to a great extent, by Shaw in his dramas such as *Plays Unpleasant*, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, *Major Barbara* and *Arms and the Man*.

Social Satire and the Question of Feminism

Throughout examining the treatment of woman in the plays concerned, one can come to the conclusion that they were highly oppressed by men who considered them something to be bought and something to be sold—a commodity. It is significant to note that the Restoration comedy of manners could not have failed to consider the feminist awareness on the part of the dramatists of the Restoration



period in this regard. However, both Wycherley and Congreve could have shown their awareness of the fact that women were oppressed by men who tried by all means to exploit their rights. Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and Congreve's *The Way of the World* are regarded the most prominent dramas of the time, being most studied and explored dramas among the other Restoration comedies of manners. The themes which they exposed are related to sexual intrigues, love, money and convenient marriage.

Verily, the aristocrats in England find it convenient for them to acquire a great amount of fortune throughout marrying rich women who yield to them, because they are helpless and thus submissive. Such conditions and more many besides could have given rise to the feminist movement and ignited women's consciousness of their rights, human dignity, and above all their independency.

Wycherley's and Congreve were two hundred years ahead of their time in that they were fully aware of the ill conditions of women in the Restoration period, when considering the feminist movement. The beginning of the first half of the nineteenth century marked the appearance of feminist movement that even extended into the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Wycherley's and Congreve's dramas under considerations witnessed harsh criticism at the time when they were published simply because their criticism of the social ills concerning matters related to sex and bawdiness. However, contemporary audiences find their interest in this kind of drama in so far its themes, characters, thought and action are closely related to life. In a word, they deal with human nature, and human nature is the same at all times. It was for the first time in the history of the English drama that two dramatists had shed light on the notion that women of the time needed an organization to call for their freedom and free them from the men's oppressions.



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