RESTORATION COMEDY (1660- 1700)

For B.A. Honours Part- 1

Paper – 1

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"THEN came the gallant protest of the Restoration, when Wycherley and his successors in drama commenced to write of contemporary life in much the spirit of modern musical comedy. . . . A new style of comedy was improvised, which, for lack of a better term, we may agree to call the comedy of Gallantry, and which Etherege, Shadwell, and Davenant, and Crowne, and Wycherley, and divers others, laboured painstakingly to perfect. They probably exercised to the full reach of their powers when they hammered into grossness their too fine witticisms just smuggled out of France, mixed them with additional breaches of decorum, and divided the results into five acts. For Gallantry, it must be repeated, was yet in its crude youth. . . . For Wycherley and his confreres were the first Englishmen to depict mankind as leading an existence with no moral outcome. It was their sorry distinction to be the first of English authors to present a world of unscrupulous persons who entertained no special prejudices, one way or the other, as touched ethical matters."

-- JAMES BRANCH CABELL, *Beyond Life.*
1. INTRODUCTION TO THE RESTORATION AGE -

FROM 1642 onward for eighteen years, the theatres of England remained nominally closed. There was of course evasion of the law; but whatever performances were offered had to be given in secrecy, before small companies in private houses, or in taverns located three or four miles out of town. No actor or spectator was safe, especially during the early days of the Puritan rule. Least of all was there any inspiration for dramatists. In 1660 the Stuart dynasty was restored to the throne of England. Charles II, the king, had been in France during the greater part of the Protectorate, together with many of the royalist party, all of whom were familiar with Paris and its fashions. Thus it was natural, upon the return of the court, that French influence should be felt, particularly in the theatre. In August, 1660, Charles issued patents for two companies of players, and performances immediately began. Certain writers, in the field before the civil war, survived the period of theatrical eclipse, and now had their chance. Among these were Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, who were quickly provided with fine playhouses.
2. NATURE OF RESTORATION COMEDY

In almost every important respect, Restoration drama was far inferior to the Elizabethan. Where the earlier playwrights created powerful and original characters, the Restoration writers were content to portray repeatedly a few artificial types; where the former were imaginative, the latter were clever and ingenious. The Elizabethan dramatists were steeped in poetry, the later ones in the sophistication of the fashionable world. The drama of Wycherley and Congreve was the reflection of a small section of life, and it was like life in the same sense that the mirage is like the oasis. It had polish, an edge, a perfection in its own field; but both its perfection and its naughtiness now seem unreal.

The heroes of the Restoration comedies were lively gentlemen of the city, profligates and loose livers, with a strong tendency to make love to their neighbours’ wives. Husbands and fathers were dull, stupid creatures. The heroines, for the most part, were lovely and pert, too frail for any purpose beyond the glittering tinsel in which they were clothed. Their companions were busybodies and gossips, amorous widows or jealous wives. The intrigues which occupy them are not, on the whole, of so low a nature as those depicted in the Italian court comedies; but still they are sufficiently coarse. Over all the action is the gloss of superficial good breeding and social ease. Only rarely do these creatures betray the traits of sympathy, faithfulness, kindness, honesty, or loyalty. They follow a life of pleasure, bored, but yawning behind a delicate fan or a kerchief of lace. Millamant and Mirabell, in Congreve's Way of the World, are among the most charming of these Watteau figures.

Everywhere in the Restoration plays are traces of European influence. The Plain Dealer of Wycherley was an English version of The Misanthrope of Molière; and there are many admirable qualities in the French play which are lacking in the English. The Double Dealer recalls scenes from The Learned Ladies (Les femmes savantes); and Mr. Bluffe, in The
*Old Bachelor*, is none other than our old friend Miles Gloriosus, who has traveled through Latin, Italian and French comedy. The national taste was coming into harmony, to a considerable extent, with the standards of Europe. Eccentricities were curbed; ideas, characters, and story material were interchanged. The plays, however, were not often mere imitations; in the majority of them there is original observation and independence of thought. It was this drama that kept the doors of the theater open and the love of the theater alive in the face of great public opposition.

3. **WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS**

Soon after the Restoration women began to appear as writers of drama. **Mrs. Aphra Behn (1640-1689)** was one of the first and most industrious of English women playwrights. Her family name was Amis (some writers say Johnson). As the wife of a wealthy Dutch merchant she lived for some time in Surinam (British Guiana). Her novel, *Oroonoko*, furnished Southerne with the plot for a play of the same name. After the death of her husband, Mrs. Behn was for a time employed by the British government in a political capacity. She was the author of eighteen plays, most of them highly successful and fully as indecent as any by Wycherley or Vanbrugh. Mrs. Manly and Mrs. Susannah Centlivre, both of whom lived until well into the eighteenth century, also achieved success as playwrights. The adaptations from the French, made by Mrs. Centlivre, were very popular and kept the stage for nearly a century.

4. **APPEARANCE OF WOMEN ON THE ENGLISH STAGE**

It will be remembered that great indignation was aroused among the English by the appearance of French actresses in 1629. London must have learned to accept this innovation, however, for in one of the semi-private entertainments given during the Protectorate at Rutland House, the actress Mrs. Coleman took the principal part. *The Siege of Rhodes*, a huge spectacle designed
by Davenant in 1656 (arranged in part with a view of evading the restrictions against theatrical plays) is generally noted as marking the entrance of women upon the English stage. It is also remembered for its use of movable machinery, which was something of an innovation. The panorama of *The Siege* offered five changes of scene, presenting "the fleet of Solyman the Magnificent, his army, the Island of Rhodes, and the varieties attending the siege of the city."

5. PERSISTENCE OF ELIZABETHAN PLAYS

With this influx of foreign drama, there was still a steady production of the masterpieces of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. The diarist Samuel Pepys, an ardent lover of the theatre, relates that during the first three years after the opening of the playhouses he saw *Othello*, *Henry IV*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, two plays by Ben Jonson, and others by Beaumont, Fletcher, Middleton, Shirley, and Massinger. It must have been about this time that the practice of "improving" Shakespeare was begun, and his plays were often altered so as to be almost beyond recognition. From the time of the Restoration actors and managers, also
dramatists, were good royalists; and new pieces, or refurbished old ones, were likely to acquire a political slant. The Puritans were satirized, the monarch and his wishes were flattered, and the royal order thoroughly supported by the people of the stage.

Richard Boyle, Earl of Orrery (1621-1679), seems to have the doubtful glory of re-introducing the use of rhymed verse. Boyle was a statesman, as well as a soldier and a dramatist. During the ten years or so following the Restoration, he wrote at least four tragedies on historical or legendary subjects, using the ten-syllabled rhymed couplet which (at the moment) he borrowed from France. It runs like this:

"Reason's a staff for age, when nature's gone;
But youth is strong enough to walk alone."

No more stilted sort of verse could well be contrived for dialogue. Monotonous as well as prosy, it was well suited to Orrery's plots. He took a semi-historical story, filled it with bombastic sentiments and strutting figures, producing what was known as "heroic drama." Dryden, who identified himself with this type of play, described it as concerned not with probabilities but with love and valour. A good heroic play is exciting, with perpetual bustle and commotion. The characters are extricated out of their amazing situations only by violence. Deaths are numerous. The more remote and unfamiliar the setting the better; and the speech should be suited to the action: hence the "heroic couplet." Pepys saw Guzman, by Orrery, and with his engaging frankness said it was as mean a thing as had been seen on the stage for a great while.
6. PARODY OF HEROIC DRAMA

Other writers, Davenant, Etherege, and Sir Robert Howard, had also produced specimens of heroic plays, and by the time *The Conquest of Granada* reached the stage these clever gentlemen had grown tired of the species. Compared to Dryden they were nobodies in the literary world; but among them they contrived a hilarious burlesque called *The Rehearsal*, in which these showy but shallow productions were smartly ridiculed. Dryden is represented as Bayes (in reference to his position as poet laureate), and his peculiarities of speech and plot are amusingly derided. Though *The Rehearsal* was condemned as "scurrilous and ill-bred," yet it served a useful turn in puncturing an empty and overblown style.

7. COLLIER'S ATTACK ON THE STAGE

Although the Puritans had lost their dominance as a political power, yet they had not lost courage in abusing the stage. The most violent attack was made by the clergyman Jeremy Collier in 1698, in a pamphlet called *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the*
English Stage, in which he denounced not only Congreve and Vanbrugh, but Shakespeare and most of the Elizabethans. Three points especially drew forth his denunciations: the so-called lewdness of the plays, the frequent references to the Bible and biblical characters, and the criticism, slander and abuse flung from the stage upon the clergy. He would not have any Desdemona, however chaste, show her love before the footlights; he would allow no reference in a comedy to anything connected with the Church or religion; and especially would he prohibit any portrayal of the clergy. Next to the men in holy orders, Collier had a tender heart for the nobility. He said in effect that if any ridicule or satire were to be indulged in, it should be against persons of low quality. To call a duke a rascal on the stage was far worse than to apply such an epithet to plain Hodge, almost as libellous as to represent a clergyman as a hypocrite. Collier made the curiously stupid error of accusing the playwrights of glorifying all the sins, passions, or peculiarities which they portrayed in their characters. He had no understanding of the point of view of the literary artist, nor any desire to understand it.

Collier's attack, unjust as it was, and foolish as certain phases of it appear today, yet it made an impression. The king, James II, was so wrought up over it that he issued a solemn proclamation "against vice and profaneness." Congreve and Vanbrugh, together with other writers, were persecuted, and fines were imposed on some of the most popular actors and actresses. Dryden, Congreve and Vanbrugh made an attempt at a justification of the stage, but it did little good. D'Urfey, Dennis, and others entered the controversy, which raged for many years. The public buzzed with the scandal set forth in The Short View, but did not stay away altogether from the playhouses. The poets answered the attack not by reformation, but by new plays in which the laughter, the satire, and the ridicule were turned upon their enemies.

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