



“The Rover” as a Restoration Comedy: Third Lecture



INTRODUCTION

- "Restoration comedy" is English comedy written and performed in the Restoration period from 1660 to 1710.
- Comedy of manners is used as a synonym of Restoration comedy.
- After public stage performances had been banned for 18 years by the Puritan regime, the re-opening of the theatres in 1660 signaled a renaissance of English drama.
- Charles II was an active and interested patron of the drama. Soon after his restoration, in 1660, he granted exclusive play-staging rights, to the King's Company and the Duke's Company, led by two middle-aged Caroline playwrights, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant.
- Sexually explicit language was encouraged by King Charles II (1660–1685) personally and by the rakish style of his court.

• Historian George Norman Clark argues: The best-known fact about the Restoration drama is that the dramatists did not criticize the accepted morality about gambling, drink, love, and pleasure generally 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 delicately improper... The dramatists did not merely say anything they liked; they also intended to shock those who did not like it.



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CHARACTERISTICS :

- Comedy of manners is a kind of comedy which portrays the ridiculous behaviour pattern of the individuals of an aristocratic society.
- It is concerned with the coarseness immorality, faithlessness, jealousy, intrigue etc. of an artificial society.
- It always seeks to give a real picture of one section of contemporary life. • It's purpose is to give a criticism of society with skilful satiric touches.
- It's success depends on the dramatist's capacity to present the unemotional treatment of sex.
- The comedy of manners is rich with wit and satire. It gives the image of the time.

- The heroine is more important and interesting than the hero in it.
- The hero of this type of comedy is well-born, well-dressed and capable of contest of wit.
- The heroine is also a paradox of virtues and affections. She is as self-possessed and witty as her male opponent.




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- They are surrounded by a set of fops, wits, half-wits who carelessly laugh at all social and moral codes.
- However, "manners" means a quality acquired by a person from free social intercourse with cultivated men and women.
- The Restoration comedy is called Comedy of Manners as it presented the superficial habits and manners of only a section of the society – the elegant aristocracy with their vices, intrigues and outward glamour of polished behaviour.
- The manners displayed were the affections and the cultured veneer of the society. • Amorous intrigue played a very crucial part in the action of the drama.

- As an artistic piece of literature, the Restoration comedy of manners mirrored the dilettante society of the day.
- The exquisite poetry of Elizabethan comedy gives place to prose in Restoration comedy, the poetry being reserved for the more rapturous moments.
- The main plot is very often accompanied by sub-plots, sometimes more than one, all revolving around the extra-marital affairs and sexual intrigue.



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- In the comedy of manners, the passion and emotion are replaced by a rapier-sharp wit with a crystalline polish and hardness. Bonamy Dobree called this bonanza of wit ‘verbal pyrotechnics.’
- Dr. Johnson calls the characters ‘intellectual gladiators. The scintillating dialogues with its quick repartees and discussions of marital relations reflect the contemporary social milieu.
- The characters of the Manner Comedy are mostly types with descriptive names. There are sexually frustrated widows, bawds, 6 country squires and fops with names like Sir Fopling Flutter, Colonel Bulley, Squire Sullen, Lady Bountiful and Sir John Brute.
- Restoration comedies dealt exclusively with the social elite and were town-based. Hazlitt commented about Restoration Comedy, ‘What a rustle of silks, and waving of plumes!’ They usually had London or some other fashionable resort like Bath as their locale.



Leading names include William Wycherley (*The Country Wife*, 1675), George Etherege (*The Man of Mode*, 1676), Aphra Behn (*The Rover*, 1677), John Vanbrugh (*The Relapse*, 1696) and William Congreve (*The Way of the World*, 1700).


Although scholars have identified these particular plays as worthy of study, they were not necessarily the most popular choices among audiences at the turn of the 18th century.

Within this select group there is much variety. The obscure and impoverished Aphra Behn was the only woman and the first to 'write for bread'.


Wycherley, Etherege and Vanbrugh were aristocrats with close links to the Stuart court, and where men who saw writing plays as a gentleman's pastime.

Congreve was an intellectual and a Whig supporter, whose writing celebrates the values of the powerful new elite that had forced the Stuarts into exile in 1688.






Restoration comedy writers dealt with a number of immoral **themes**, their comedies have been almost without exception damned or branded as "trivial, gross and dull," ever since the seventeenth century. That is why Restoration comedies had received little critical attention until the middle of twentieth century.



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Rover as a Comedy:

- Written by Aphra Behn (1640? – 1689), a prolific British female playwright, poet, and novelist from the Restoration Period (1660 – 1710), *The Rover* is basically a silly comedy of manners, but it is also exceptional since the female characters are outspoken in expressing their “modern” sexual desires.
- This was radically *avant-garde* during the Restoration Period
- Largely, [*The Rover*](#) embodies the spirit of Restoration Comedy, especially in its first half.
- Much of the enjoyment derived from the play comes from **farce**—that is, the slapstick tomfoolery and hijinks that the characters get themselves into.
- Take for instance, Lucetta's deception of the doltish Blunt which leaves him naked and without money.
- This scene is played purely for laugh as a likable character is able to fool someone who is unlikable.





To be continued:

- ▶ However, despite its general adherence to the standards of Renaissance comedy, *The Rover* takes on a much darker tone in its second half: Lucetta's trick angers Blunt and he attempts to rape her.
- ▶ Though the rape never comes to fruition, it is still disturbing, especially to contemporary audiences.



Disguise and Deceit

- *The Rover* was one of the most popular comedies of the Restoration Age. The scene above is focused on disguise and deceit: the women—Hellena, Florinda and Valeria—are disguised as gypsies. This emphasis on deception and disguise is a popular theme in the Comedy of Manners of the Restoration Age.

Enter Florinda, Hellena, and Valeria, dressed like Gypsies; Callis and Stephano, Lucetta, Philippo and Sancho in Masquerade.

Sir, there's your Englishman, and with him a handsom proper Fellow—I'll to him, and instead of telling him his Fortune, try my own.

Willmore. Gipsies, on my Life—Sure these will prattle if a Man cross their Hands. [Goes to Hellena]—Dear pretty (and I hope) young Devil, will you tell an amorous Stranger what Luck he's like to have?

Hellena. Have a care how you venture with me, Sir, lest I pick your Pocket, which will more vex your English Humour, than an Italian Fortune will please you.

Willmore. How the Devil cam'st thou to know my Country and Humour?

Hellena. The first I guess by a certain forward Impudence, which does not displease me at this time; and the Loss of your Money will vex you, because I hope you have but very little to lose.

Willmore. Egad Child, thou'rt 'th' right; it is so little, I dare not offer it thee for a Kindness—But cannot you divine what other things of more value I have about me, that I would more willingly part with?

Hellena. Indeed no, that's the Business of a Witch, and I am but a Gipsy yet—Yet, without looking in your Hand, I have a parlor's Guess, 'tis some foolish Heart you mean, an inconstant English Heart, as little worth stealing as your Purse. (Act I, Scene 2)



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Thank you.

