

Semester V

Restoration Comedy

Restoration comedy is English comedy written and performed in the Restoration period of 1660–1710. Comedy of manners is used as a synonym for this. After public stage performances were banned for 18 years by the Puritan regime, reopening of the theatres in 1660 marked a renaissance of English drama. 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 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 socially diverse audiences included aristocrats, their servants and hangers-on and a major middle-class segment. They were attracted to the comedies by up-to-the-minute topical writing, crowded and bustling plots, introduction of the first professional actresses, and the rise of the first celebrity actors. The period saw the first professional female playwright, Aphra Behn.

Theatre companies

Original patent companies, 1660–1682

The sumptuously decorated Dorset Gardens playhouse in 1673, with one of the sets for Elkannah Settle's *The Empress of Morocco*. The apron stage at the front which allowed intimate audience contact is not visible in the picture (the artist is standing on it).

Charles II was an active and interested patron of drama. Soon after his restoration in 1660 he granted exclusive staging rights, so-called Royal patents, to the King's Company and the Duke's Company, led by two middle-aged Caroline playwrights, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant. The patentees scrambled for performance rights to the previous generation's Jacobean and Caroline plays, as the first necessity for economic survival before any new plays existed.

Their next priority was to build splendid patent theatres in Drury Lane and Dorset Gardens, respectively. Striving to outdo each other, Killigrew and Davenant ended with quite similar theatres, both designed by Christopher Wren, both optimally providing music and dancing, and both fitted with moveable scenery and elaborate machines for thunder, lightning, and waves.

The Restoration dramatists renounced the tradition of satire recently embodied by Ben Jonson, devoting themselves to the comedy of manners.

The audience of the early Restoration period was not exclusively courtly, as has sometimes been supposed, but it was quite small and could barely support two companies. There was no untapped reserve of occasional playgoers. Ten consecutive performances constituted a success. This closed system forced playwrights to respond strongly to popular taste. Fashions in drama changed almost week by week rather than season by season, as each company responded to the offerings of the other, and new plays were urgently sought. In this hectic climate the new genres of heroic drama, pathetic drama and Restoration comedy were born and flourished.

United Company, 1682–1695

Both the quantity and quality of drama suffered in 1682 when the more successful Duke's Company absorbed the struggling King's Company to form the *United Company*. Production of new plays dropped off sharply in the 1680s, affected by the monopoly and the political situation (see Decline of comedy below). The influence and incomes of actors dropped too. In the late 1680s, predatory investors ("adventurers") converged on the United Company. Management was taken over by the lawyer Christopher Rich, who tried to finance a tangle of "farmed" shares and sleeping partners by slashing salaries and dangerously by abolishing traditional perks of senior performers, who were stars with the clout to fight back.

War of the theatres, 1695–1700

The company owners, wrote the young United Company employee Colley Cibber, "had made a monopoly of the stage, and consequently presum'd they might impose what conditions they pleased upon their people. [They] did not consider that they were all this while endeavouring to enslave a set of actors whom the public were inclined to support." Performers like the legendary Thomas Betterton, the tragedienne Elizabeth Barry and the rising young comedian Anne Bracegirdle had the audience on their side, and confident of this, walked out.

The actors gained a Royal "licence to perform", so bypassing Rich's ownership of the original Duke's and King's Company patents from 1660 and forming their own cooperative company. This venture was set up with detailed rules for avoiding arbitrary managerial authority, regulating the ten actors' shares, setting the conditions of salaried employees and the sickness and retirement benefits of both categories. In 1695, the cooperative had the good luck to open with the première of William Congreve's famous *Love For Love* and the skill to make it a huge box-office success.

London again had two competing companies. Their dash to attract audiences briefly revitalised Restoration drama, but also set it on a fatal slope to the lowest common denominator of public taste. Rich's company notoriously offered Bartholomew Fair-type attractions – high kickers, jugglers, rope dancers, and performing animals. The co-operating actors, while appealing to snobbery by setting themselves up as the one legitimate theatre company in London, were not above retaliating with "prologues recited by boys of five and epilogues declaimed by ladies on horseback".