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Study Material 3rd Chapter UG Paper - I

RESTORATION COMEDY

In comedy alone Dryden showed a certain incapacity, his mind seemed to be too rugged and unresilient to catch the sharper moods of the current wit. Fortunately this weakness of his was atoned for by the activities of a brilliant group of dramatists who made Restoration comedy a thing apart in English literature. The new comedy was of slower growth than the heroic play and for some years after 1660 comedy was restricted to revivals of pre-Commonwealth plays, but but the decadent cynical spirit of the later age

was alien to the romantic comedy of the Elizabethans. Even so, Restoration comedy drew its main inspiration from the native tradition which had flourished before the closing of the theatres in 1642. In particular it was indebted to Beaumont and Fletcher and to Ben Jonson. Like the heroic play however, comedy was strongly influenced by continental writers and especially by Moliere and the Spaniard Calderon. It reflected closely the dissolute court life of the period and between that and the court life of France there was a community of spirit which led naturally to an interest in French comedy. Moliere provided English dramatists with ideas for plots and with an example of fine comic characterization. Spanish drama served to strengthen that love of intrigue and incident already firmly established in English comedy. But here it is important to stress that foreign influences while improve-

important were not the predominant factors in the evolution of Restoration Comedy. They blended with a tradition already strongly established and assisted the natural process of change demanded by the changing temper of the age but they were transformed into something essentially English and contemporary. Thus the comedy of Moliere was changed into a harder more loosely knit form which lacked the warmth and depth of insight of the original. The new drama is full of vitality and moves with great pace, but the exuberance which led the Elizabethans to the poetic romance is supplanted by a polished and intellectual control which replaces emotion by wit and poetry by a clear concise prose which adds much point and gives a fine precision to the dialogue. Of this new style the passage of Congreve given below is a good specimen. The prevailing tone is one of cynicism and the plays show a close and

often satirical observation of life and manners which recalls the work of Ben Jonson. Plots and subplots are intricate and numerous and centre mainly upon amorous intrigues which reflect an open contempt for the ordinary standards of morality that in Wycherley and others often takes the form of gross sensuality. In the hands of the best and most restrained of the dramatists, Etherege and Congreve, the immorality still remains but it is purged of much of its grossness and offensiveness by the fact that it is essentially intellectual, witty and free from the cruder realism which mars Wycherley's work. The lack of passion and emotion in these plays gives them a polished, crystal hardness which saves them from the worst forms of licentiousness. The immorality of Restoration drama was the object of fierce Puritanical attacks, the most notorious of which was the Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage

(1698) of Jeremy Collier. Though this work is notable only for its wrathful tone and its stupidity as dramatic criticism, it provoked many replies from the offending dramatists but beyond this its objections seem to have had no effect. The characters in Restoration comedies are largely types whose dispositions are sufficiently indicated by a study of their names. We have Sir Fopling Flutter, Scrub Colonel Bully, Sir John Brute Squire Sullen, Cribfoot, Lady Bountiful. They have thus many of the qualities of the Jonsonian character with its predominant humour. But by the last part of the period there has evolved something distinct from the comedy of humours the comedy of manners. A manner is difficult to define. It does not imply the portrayal of life so much as a genteel sophisticated brilliant quality, what one critic has called a grace or habit of refined culture.