

## Rise of realistic comedy in 17th-century England

The early part of the 17th century in England saw the rise of a realistic mode of comedy based on a satiric observation of contemporary manners and mores. It was masterminded by Ben Jonson, and its purpose was didactic. Comedy, said Jonson in *Every Man Out of his Humour* (1599), quoting the definition that during the Renaissance was attributed to Cicero, is an imitation of life, a glass of custom, an image of truth. Comedy holds the mirror up to nature and reflects things as they are, to the end that society may recognize the extent of its shortcomings and the folly of its ways and set about its improvement. Jonson's greatest plays—*Volpone* (1606), *Epicoene* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610), *Bartholomew Fair* (1614)—offer a richly detailed contemporary account of the follies and vices that are always with us. The setting (apart from *Volpone*) is Jonson's own London, and the characters are the ingenious or the devious or the grotesque products of the human wish to get ahead in the world. The conduct of a Jonsonian comic plot is in the hands of a clever manipulator who is out to make reality conform to his own desires. Sometimes he succeeds, as in the case of the clever young gentleman who gains his uncle's inheritance in *Epicoene* or the one who gains the rich Puritan widow for his wife in *Bartholomew Fair*. In *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, the schemes eventually fail, but this is the fault of the manipulators, who will never stop when they are ahead, and not at all due to any insight on the part of the victims. The victims are almost embarrassingly eager to be victimized. Each has his ruling passion—his humour—and it serves to set him more or less mechanically in the path that he will undeviatingly pursue, to his own discomfiture.

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English comedy of the later 17th century is cast in the Jonsonian mold. Restoration comedy is always concerned with the same subject—the game of love—but the subject is treated as a critique of fashionable society. Its aim is distinctly satiric, and it is set forth in plots of Jonsonian complexity, where the principal intriguer is the rakish hero, bent on satisfying his sexual needs, outside the bonds of marriage, if possible. In the greatest of these comedies—Sir George Etherege's *Man of Mode* (1676), for example, or William Wycherley's *Country-Wife* (1675) or William Congreve's *Way of the World* (1700)—the premium is on the energy and the grace with which the game is played, and the highest dramatic approval is reserved for those who take the game seriously enough to play it with style but who have the good sense to know when it is played out. The satiric import of Restoration comedy resides in the dramatist's awareness of a familiar incongruity: that between the image of man in his primitive nature and the image of man amid the artificial restraints that society would impose upon him. The satirist in these plays is chiefly concerned with detailing the artful dodges that ladies and gentlemen employ to satisfy nature and to remain within the pale of social decorum. Inevitably, then, hypocrisy is the chief satiric target. The animal nature of man is taken for granted, and so is the social responsibility to keep up appearances; some hypocrisy must follow, and, within limits, society will wink at indiscretions so long as they are discreetly managed. The paradox is typical of those in which the Restoration comic dramatists delight; and the strongly rational and unidealistic ethos of this comedy has its affinities with the naturalistic and skeptical cast of late 17th-century philosophical thought.

## Sentimental comedy of the 17th and 18th centuries

The Restoration comic style collapsed around the end of the 17th century, when the satiric vision gave place to a sentimental one. Jeremy Collier's *Short view of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*, published in 1698, signaled the public opposition to the real or fancied improprieties of plays staged during the previous three decades. "The business of plays is to recommend Vertue, and discountenance Vice": so runs the opening sentence of Collier's attack. No Restoration comic dramatist ever conceived of his function in quite these terms. "It is the business of a comic poet to paint the vices and follies of humankind," Congreve had written a few years earlier (in the dedication to *The Double-Dealer*). Though Congreve may be assumed to imply—in accordance with the time-honoured theory concerning the didactic end of comedy—that the comic dramatist paints the vices and follies of humankind for the purpose of correcting them through ridicule, he is, nonetheless, silent on this point. Collier's assumption that all plays must recommend virtue and discountenance vice has the effect of imposing on comedy the same sort of moral levy that critics such as Thomas Rymer were imposing on tragedy in their demand that it satisfy poetic justice.

At the beginning of the 18th century, there was a blending of the tragic and comic genres that, in one form or another, had been attempted throughout the preceding century. The vogue of tragicomedy may be said to have been launched in England with the publication of John Fletcher's *Faithfull Shepheardesse* (c. 1608), an imitation of the *Pastor fido*, by the Italian poet Battista Guarini. In his *Compendium of Tragicomic Poetry* (1601), Guarini had argued the distinct nature of the genre, maintaining it to be a third poetic kind, different from either the comic or the tragic. Tragicomedy, he wrote, takes from tragedy its great persons but not its great action, its movement of the feelings but not its disturbance of them, its pleasure but not its sadness, its danger but not its death, and from comedy it takes laughter that is not excessive, modest amusement, feigned difficulty, and happy reversal. Fletcher adapted this statement in the address "To the Reader" that prefaces *The Faithfull Shepheardesse*.

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The form quickly established itself on the English stage, and, through the force of such examples as Beaumont and Fletcher's *Phylaster* (1610) and *A King and No King* (1611) and a long sequence of Fletcher's unaided tragicomedies, it prevailed during the 20 years before the closing of the theatres in 1642. The taste for tragicomedy continued unabated at the Restoration, and its influence was so pervasive that during the closing decades of the century the form began to be seen in plays that were not, at least by authorial designation, tragicomedies. Its effect on tragedy can be seen not only in the tendency, always present on the English stage, to mix scenes of mirth with more solemn matters but also in the practice of providing tragedy with a double ending (a fortunate one for the virtuous, an unfortunate one for the vicious), as in Dryden's *Aureng-Zebe* (1675) or Congreve's *Mourning Bride* (1697). The general lines separating the tragic and comic genres began to break down, and that which is high, serious, and capable of arousing pathos could exist in the same play with what is low, ridiculous, and capable of arousing derision. The next step in the process came when Sir Richard Steele, bent on reforming comedy for didactic purposes, produced *The Conscious Lovers* (1722) and provided the English stage with an occasion when the audience at a comedy could derive its chief pleasure not from laughing but from weeping. It wept in the delight of seeing virtue rewarded and young love come to flower after parental opposition had been overcome. Comedy of the sort inaugurated by *The Conscious Lovers* continued to represent the affairs of private life, as comedy had always done, but with a seriousness hitherto unknown; and the traditionally low personages of comedy now had a capacity for feeling that bestowed on them a dignity previously reserved for the personages of tragedy.

This trend in comedy was part of a wave of egalitarianism that swept through 18th-century political and social thought. It was matched by a corresponding trend in tragedy, which increasingly selected its subjects from the affairs of private men and women in ordinary life, rather than from the doings of the great. The German dramatist Gotthold Lessing wrote that the misfortunes of those whose circumstances most resemble those of the audience must naturally penetrate most deeply into its heart, and his own *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767) is an example of the new serious comedy. The capacity to feel, to sympathize with, and to be affected by the plight of a fellow human being without regard for rank in the world's esteem became the measure of one's humanity. It was a bond that united the fraternity of humankind in an aesthetic revolution that preceded the political revolutions of the 18th century. In literature, this had the effect of hastening the movement toward a more realistic representation of reality, whereby the familiar events of common life are treated "seriously and problematically" (in the phrase of the critic Erich Auerbach, who traced the process in his book *Mimesis* [1946]). The results may be seen in novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–48) and in middle-class tragedies such as George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) in England; in the *comédie larmoyante* ("tearful comedy") in France; in Carlo Goldoni's efforts to reform the *commedia dell'arte* and replace it with a more naturalistic comedy in the Italian theatre; and in the English sentimental comedy, exemplified in its full-blown state by plays such as Hugh Kelly's *False Delicacy* (1768) and Richard Cumberland's *West Indian* (1771). Concerning the sentimental comedy, it must be noted that it is only in the matter of appropriating for the bourgeoisie a seriousness of tone and a dignity of representational style previously considered the exclusive property of the nobility that the form can be said to stand in any significant relationship to the development of a more realistic mimetic mode than the traditional tragic and comic ones. The plots of sentimental comedy are as contrived as anything in Plautus and Terence (which with their fondness for foundling heroes who turn out to be long-lost sons of rich merchants, they often resemble); and with their delicate feelings and genteel moral atmosphere, comedies of this sort seem as affected in matters of sentiment as Restoration comedy seems in matters of wit.

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Oliver Goldsmith, in his "A Comparison Between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy" (1773), noted the extent to which the comedy in the England of his day had departed from its traditional purpose, the excitation of laughter by exhibiting the follies of the lower part of humankind. He questioned whether an exhibition of its follies would not be preferable to a detail of its calamities. In sentimental comedy, Goldsmith continued, the virtues of private life were exhibited, rather than the vices exposed; and the distresses rather than the faults of humankind generated interest in the piece. Characters in these plays were almost always good; if they had faults, the spectator was expected not only to pardon but to applaud them, in consideration of the goodness of their hearts. Thus, according to Goldsmith, folly was commended instead of being ridiculed. Goldsmith concluded by labeling sentimental comedy a "species of bastard tragedy," "a kind of *mulish* production," a designation that ironically brings to mind Guarini's comparison of tragicomedy in its uniqueness (a product of comedy and tragedy but different from either) to the mule (the offspring of the horse and the ass but itself neither one nor the other). The production of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) and of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Rivals* (1775) and *The School for Scandal* (1777) briefly reintroduced comic gaiety to the English stage; by the end of the decade, Sheridan's dramatic burlesque, *The Critic* (first performed 1779), had appeared, with its parody of contemporary dramatic fashions, the sentimental included. But this virtually

concluded Sheridan's career as a dramatist. Goldsmith had died in 1774, and the sentimental play was to continue to govern the English comic stage for over a century to come.