

Restoration Comedy in Opposition to Puritanism

by Zach Elton

"I have greater ambitions...greater even than to be queen. I will have undying honor. I will know a godlike eternal fame. I will be a playwright....I'll earn my bread or go hungry."

- Aphra Behn, *Or*,

During the Interregnum (1649-1660), or the time in between King Charles I's and King Charles II's reigns, Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans had firm control over the British government. With their power, they banned everything that was considered lavish, excessive, or sinful. The theaters were one of the first places Cromwell closed down. However, when Charles II ascended to power, he reopened the theaters within three months and gave Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant exclusive rights to establish two theaters in his name. They created the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane and the Dorset Garden Theatre where many of the best Restoration comedies were soon produced.

Restoration comedy is a genre of plays that were written in England from 1660-1700, primarily under the rule of King Charles II and King James II. While as many as 500 Restoration comedies exist today, very few are still performed; however, there are some that are still regularly studied and produced by theaters, such as *The Way of the World* by William Congreve, *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley, and *The Rover* by Aphra Behn—the protagonist of *Or*.

There are a few characteristics that define Restoration comedy. First and foremost, Restoration comedies were known to be bawdy and immoral. In a response to the Puritans' strict rules from the previous decade, these plays emphasized sexuality and gender expression. Before the Restoration, female roles were usually played by adolescent boys dressed up as women. Although women had been allowed on stage in France and Italy for many years, they had never been allowed to perform on public stages in England. Now, for the first time, women were playing female roles. Nell Gwynne—who is portrayed in *Or*,—was one of the first acclaimed English actresses.

A second characteristic of Restoration comedies was that these plays combined lowbrow humor, such as farce and burlesque, with impeccable wit, which was considered highbrow humor. In her article "An Introduction to Restoration Comedy," Diane Maybank claims, "In the 17th century, wit meant more than the ability to make people laugh. Wit was governed by a serious playfulness with words and ideas, where language was used in an intellectually stimulating and surprising way. Such language was elegant, structured, and subtle. The style in which an original thought was expressed was as worthy of attention as the idea itself. Playwrights would sacrifice pace to allow time for displays of wit between rivals aiming to cut each other down to size, or, more popular still, for the sparring, flirtatious wit between would-be lovers." These characters would employ literary devices such as puns, antithesis, repartee, irony, conceit, and double entendre to trip up the other character and prove their superiority.



THE DORSET GARDEN THEATRE.



THE ROVER. THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY, 2016. PHOTO BY ELLIE KURTZ.

Due to the combination of low- and high brow humor, the demographics of the audience began to shift as well during Charles II's reign. More people from the middle and lower classes began to buy tickets to the theater, leading to a price gap between different seating areas. The aristocrats would primarily sit in the box seats and higher rows of the theater, while the lower classes would sit on the ground level. Many actors liked this division because they could play to different areas of the house at different moments. There were no illusions of the fourth wall, so actors had the freedom to talk directly to the audience. When an actor was in the middle of a battle of wits, they may have played to the aristocrats in the boxes; when the same actor had a bawdy line or was in a farcical situation, they may have played to the lower classes on the ground.

The comedy of manners was one of the most popular subgenres of Restoration comedies. These plays were satires of the upper class's manners and behaviors. The tone of these plays were cynical, condemning, and highly sexually. The high-class characters were often driven by either lust or greed, and many of the plots were extremely intricate, leading to an atmosphere of deceit and moral confusion. While Puritans still stayed away from the theater, Puritan characters were a staple in these comedies. They would often be portrayed as the hypocritical villains of the show. While operating within the status quo, the playwrights actively

made a social commentary on class, religion, and gender inequality.

By the time Charles II and James II had died, there was widespread unrest in Britain. William and Mary, the new royals, were not interested in theater, and soon there were multiple pieces of legislation that impeded playwrights' freedom to write without backlash. Playwrights could be charged with "offending public decency," and soon the Lord Chamberlain had the right to censor plays before they were performed for the public. Religious leaders began to condemn Restoration comedy outright, and the public's opinion about the plays began to shift. People were no longer interested or impressed by Restoration comedy. When William Congreve's play *The Way of the World* premiered, it was greeted with indifference and even hostility, and, although the play is now seen as a masterpiece of Restoration comedy, it was out of step with the new age and the new royal family.

While Restoration comedies were only written and produced for a few decades, a tremendous amount of plays came from this time period. Perhaps more impressively, over 300 years later, we are still studying these playwrights and their works. Aphra Behn is still legendary for being the first female playwright to earn her living through her writing, and her play *The Rover* is still one of the most produced Restoration comedies today.