

Eighteenth century Sentimental Comedy

During eighteenth century drama was on the wane. It is not probable to divide the whole century into periods and study the dramatic developments period-wise because it had lost its vitality, originality and talent. Tragedy had lost its importance though young's 'Revenge' had its admirers and Johnson's 'Greene' too is also not without literary value. The reasons for this decline were (i) the very spirit of the age was against the 'tragic move' and (ii) artificial style of poetry with its love for smooth versification devoid of sentiments blocked the way of tragedy. It was a period of novels but people still loved theatre and stage and went to witness a play by hearing the names of the actors and not so much on the name of the playwrights. The proof of

this fact is that we find the revival of many of the dramas of Shakespeare. Another reason for the revival of old dramas was the weakness of the stage to attract people by its new creations. In the words of Legouis "This revival of old works came in part from the importance of the stage to show the verie Age and Bodie of the Time, his form and pressure" It hindered the creation of new plays. This resulted in the historicity and retrospectivity of interest. Tragedies written during this period were known as 'domestic tragedies' but the type of drama that became very popular during this period had in them the element of sentimentalism also and hence, they came to be known as sentimental comedies. The main basis of this type of comedy was a belief in goodness of human nature "which succee

did the nature of the belief in that - some grossness and perversity and enough to be caused easy tears of sensibility to flow. This is against the nature of any comedy which provokes smiles. Legouis sums up by saying:

"From the beginning of the century comedy itself began to follow a similar path. It was becoming sentimental and began to replace the cynical malice of the Restoration the amused satire of men's weakness, egotism and hypocrisy by the stirring of virtuous emotions."

The two dramatists who were the first in giving a direction to the comedies of the period were Colley Cibber and Richard Steele. Shaftesbury's 'optimistic philosophy' and later Rousseau's influence did much to reinforce this type of comedy. The dramatist believed in the goodness of human

heart and instinct. The new comedy, known as sentimental comedy, and the domestic tragedy did the moralising act and in turn joined the forces which encouraged the development of a kind of drama known as melodrama. In this type of drama we find pathos, comic scenes and long speeches. Legouis ~~has~~ has termed this type of drama as 'hybrid drama' and the best known representative of the writers of this kind of drama is Richard Cumberland. His well known plays are 'Brothers', 'The West Indian', and 'The Fashionable Lover'. George Colman was another comedy writer of ~~his~~ his time who started by taking sides with Fielding in his campaign against sentimental drama in Polly Honeycombe but in the end was swept away by the current of the time and made room for tender emotions in his masterpiece 'The Clandestine'.

line marriage.

Two more great names in the field of drama of the day are Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Goldsmith is an ~~ant~~ antisermonist satirist and has produced two dramas namely 'The Good Nature'd Women' and 'She Stoops to Conquer' which has been derived from Fergusson's 'Beaux' ~~and~~ 'Stratagem'. R.B. Sheridan had a more sparkling wit. He got his immediate success with 'The Rivals' which he was under four and twenty. His other two dramas are 'The Critic' and 'The School for Scandal' in which he has combined the comedy of manners with sentimental admixture. 'The Rivals' and 'The Critic' have been written on farcical lines. Hugh Kelly's 'False Delicacy' was an enormous success. He carried on the sentimental comedy after the middle of the century. His

brother John Kelly's 'The married philosopher' was also a success. He introduced sentimentalism by adapting a French sentimental work in English. At the end of the century Thomas Holcroft came with his comedies. He was the chief writer of sentimental comedies of his time. His best play 'The Road to Ruin' came in 1791 and remained popular for a long time. According to Hazlitt "it carried his fame as a dramatic writer into every corner of the Kingdom, where there was a playhouse".

We may very well close the chapter by repeating the opinion of Rickett, "With Sheridan, the great age of artificial comedy closes."

The end.

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