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**A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON ELIZABETHAN AND RESTORATION
COMEDIES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S
DREAM AND THE WAY OF THE WORLD***

Ms. Himangi Narendra Yadav

*Undergraduate Student,
Department of English, B.N.N. College,
Bhiwandi, Maharashtra*

Abstract:

The research paper presented is a qualitative analysis of the Elizabethan and Restoration Comedies and distinctively presents both periods in their prestige and fame. The paper presents how messages were not only conveyed through performances but how the costumes and make-up and the political reformation took place in those periods and how it helps us to understand the comparative perspective about both important periods in the history of British English Literature.

Keywords: *Interpretation, Language, Characterization, Politics, etc.*

The Elizabethan era began in 1558, with the Queen's commencement of her reign whereas the ending date is tentative. Some people consider it was when the queen died, in 1603, whereas others place it when the theatres were closed in 1642. Whereas, The Restoration period was one of the most important and interesting aspects of literature in the way that it both responds to and is inevitably shaped by the political context in which it is written. The restoration title comes from the crowning of Charles II, which marks the restoring of the traditional English monarchical form of government following a short period of rule by a handful of republican governments. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek in *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* states, In principle, the discipline of comparative literature can be studied in two ways. First, Comparative Literature means the knowledge of more than one national language and literature, and/or it means the knowledge and application of other disciplines in and for the study of Literature, and second, Comparative Literature has an ideology of inclusion of the other, be that was London, theatrical literature in its several meanings of marginality, a genre, various text types, etc. (Zepetnek, 1998)

A comparative perspective talks about two distinct topics with their own sets of merits and flaws and does not intend to present a biased view.

Interpretation:

The play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is famous as an exuberant, chaotic mix-up of love stories together. The play runs smoothly despite so many contrasts drawn in scenes, characters, and plot building. The prose versus verses, the law and order of the city versus the mischievous creatures from the haunted fairy woods, the jealous lovers, the confused lovers, and how the love potion was misused for fairies mischief plays.

Act III, Scene I, Bottom says, "I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me; / to fright me, if they could" (Rackham, 59)



Here, the word “ass” is figuratively used as a fool, but it applies to Bottom after Robin turns his head to a donkey’s head or an “ass”. Such wordplays are used as scenes when the action is troubling, this elevates the comic mood for the audience.

The Comedy of Manners or Restoration period is known to be introduced in the New Comedy of the Greek Menander, c. 342-292 BC (as distinguished from the Old Comedy represented by Aristophanes c. 450- c. 385 BC) and was developed by the Roman dramatists like Plautus and Terence in the Third and Second centuries BC. Starting from satirical and risqué the period was marked for inculcating variation in the writings and spanned the spectrum from the previous periods. In 1688, James II, Charles II’s brother, was dethroned, and this dethronement is used by many scholars use to mark the end of Restoration literature. The plays dealt with the vicissitudes of young lovers. Further actions included what became the character with purpose apart from the stock characters. But these were comedies that came much later.

The language used in Shakespearean dramas is referred to as Early Modern English, which lasted between 1500 to 1750 time period. Shakespeare uses rhymed verse, iambic pentameter, and prose to create a mixing of cultures and ideas on the subjects of love. The nobility, iambic pentameter, use of stiff and formal way of talking dialogues to showcase their natural detachment from emotional courtship. To give an instance, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* had the language and style comprised of prose and verse, Verses were for the upper class - Theseus and the Fairies, whereas the prose was for commoners.

Queen Elizabeth’s reign was supreme and people were not allowed to wear what they liked or wanted to due to the Sumptuary Laws. The English Sumptuary Law of 1574 (The Statutes of Apparel) stated the following: “Note also that the meaning of this order is not to prohibit a servant from wearing any cognizance of his master, or henchman, heralds, pursuivants at arms; runners at jousts, tourneys, or such martial feats, and such as wear apparel given them by the Queen, and such as shall have a license from the Queen for the same.”

The above clause applied to actors (and their costumes). The acting troupes were to be licensed if they wanted costumes to showcase upper rich class, and applied by the Queen to the aristocratic people for the maintenance of these acting troupes that included the Earl of Leicester’s Men, Lord Strange’s Men, Chamberlain’s Men, and the Admiral’s Men.

During the Elizabethan era, dressing up was art more than fashion. Even the color of the costumes, therefore, conveyed an enormous amount of information. On stage, Clothes for women characters included Taffeta and brocade that were widely used, and dresses were fully skirted and sleeved. The Elizabethan period was known for introducing high stiff collars and the sleeves were worn apart and the ensemble was accessorized with shoes, capes, hats, and reticles. The Men’s costume at the Elizabethan theatre included shirts, stockings, and corsets. Outer garments were britches, doublet which was a well-fitted coat, sleeves separated with the same stiff high collar and an overcoat and rounded off with a cape and hat. Cravats were also an integral part of men’s attire.

The outfits were colorful, vibrant, and eye-catching whereas the stage makeup also played a vital part in understanding the character. Stage makeup helped the audience in understanding a character. During those times, pale-skinned, fair women were said to be the most beautiful ones. So, for such a character, a white face, red cheeks, and a blonde wig turned a boy actor in his adolescent stage into a beautiful woman.

For fairy fiction and metaphysical characters, Crushed pearls or silver could be added to make-up to produce a shimmering effect. This effect was useful for dramas that needed candles/candlelight for characters of Fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when two characters wore the same make-up and wigs (and often costumes too) you know they were twins- if they did not ok alike. And as soon as the actor walked on the stage with such symbolism, it was understood by the audience.



Restoration comedies kept all sections of their audience happy by blending wit with 'low' humor such as farce and burlesque. The language of wit incorporated a full armory of linguistic devices: double entendre, pun, antithesis, paradox, paradox, aphorism, similitude, raillery, repartee, quibble, irony, epigram, and conceit.

The fashion in the Restoration period has some extravagant trends that included majorly excessive curls, ribbons, puffs, flounces, feathers, and the shortening of sleeves. Ribbons and lace, in particular, appeared everywhere. It was quite popular, from men's shoes to their walking sticks. Their use has come to define the fashion of both sexes during the period. Lace was very valuable. Bright vivid colors were extremely popular and boldly combined in outfits. Individuals preferred lively and vibrant colors over dark and subdued shades which were popular when Puritans were of great importance.

The flood of Bold colors during the Restoration was not only a reflection of the latest European Fashions but may have also been Charles' efforts to reaffirm the end of the Puritan period. Men of the Restoration period were crossdressers. They wore heels and hose value long-haired wigs and even applied makeup. Some argue that men's fashion was more extravagant than women's. Women's clothing depicted a rebellious response to the rigid, conservative Puritan styles of the period before. Also, the fact that mistresses became some of the most powerful women at this time.

During the Restoration period, semi-operas were rising. The design and architecture of the actual stage as well as advances in stage machinery gave way to a flourishing theatrical era in the 1660s. These advances, also, allowed for more elaborate scenes and set design. Now, even transformation scenes were possible. "The Duke's Theatre", was planned by William Davenant and designed by Christopher Wren. With the start of the Restoration Period, the theatre and its presence with its audiences now began to flourish. Structurally and virtually, an advanced addition to the stages emerged because of a technology innovator, *Inigo Jones*, since The Jacobean period and, also, introduced the concept of moving scenery and the "proscenium arch" to English theatre. *John Webb*, Jones' son-in-law, carried on the innovations and brought them into the Restoration period, giving theatre a technological advance.

Another common trend during the period was a reinterpretation of older plays. Semi-operas, with singing, dancing, and special effects to old Shakespearean dramas. Within three months, Charles II had granted letters patent to his veteran Cavaliers, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, giving them exclusive rights to each establish a theatre. The patent specified that women rather than adolescent boys should play women's characters. So, Women as well began to make an appearance in theatre with the advent of the Restoration. The playwrights began casting females for their productions, and the women would go on to meet with good reception from the public audiences. This addition also allowed for sexually suggestive scenarios on stage to become even more open and raunchy which was well-suited for the audience at that time.

The audience knew they were watching an illusion of high society. Therefore, themes of masking, gulling, and an additional edge in the plays. In his diary, Samuel Pepys refers to frequent scenes of disorder which he blamed on the large number of 'cits', apprentices, and 'mean types' seated in the gallery. On stage, Puritans were ridiculed, portrayed as mercenary hypocrites bent upon spoiling innocent fleshly pleasures. Restoration comedy tends to be overshadowed by the achievements of the Elizabethan comedies. Although it may follow a prescribed set of conventions, within these rules it explores a range of challenging ideas that were highly topical in late 17th-century society. In terms of their gender politics, the place remains fresh and relevant today.



Some have pointed to the loss of a sense of social and natural order caused by years of fighting neighbors, friends, and kin. Some believe that such prolonged trauma can rob people of their faith in personal relationships.

Characterization:

The celebration of the wedding of Duke Theseus of Athens and the Amazon Queen Hippolyta, which are set simultaneously in the woodland and to the realm of fairyland, under the light of the moon.

Act II, Scene 1:

A wood near Athens, Oberon speaks about the love potion,
“Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
Cupid all arm’d: a certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts;
But I might see young Cupid’s fiery shaft
Quench’d in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
And the imperial votaress passed o,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free.
Yet mar’d I where the bolt of cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,
Before milk-white, now purple with love’s wound,
And maidens call it love-in-idleness.
Fetch me that flower; the herb I shew’d thee once:
The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid
Will make or man or woman madly dote
Upon the next live creature that it sees”
(Rackham,32)

Mythology has various stories attributing the color of certain flowers to staining by the blood of Adonis or Aphrodite. The story of Venus and Adonis was well known to the Elizabethans and inspired many works, including Shakespeare’s own hugely popular narrative poem, Venus and Adonis, written while London’s Theatres were closed because of plague.

In Ancient Greece, the summer solstice was marked by Adonia, a festival to mourn the death of Adonis, the devoted mortal lover of the goddess Aphrodite. According to Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Persephone raised Adonis in the underworld when Aphrodite took him there, and he grew to be a beautiful young man. When Aphrodite came back to retrieve him, Persephone refused to give him up. Zeus settled the dispute by dividing equal one-third of the year of Adonis with each of them. And so, he chose to spend two-thirds of the year with Aphrodite. His death was caused when gored by a boar and took his last breath in his lovers’ arms.

Act I Scene I:

(Pg 2) Theseus:

“Hippolyta, I woo’d thee with my sword,
And won thy love, doing thee injuries;”

(Pg 7) Lysander:

“Ay me! For aught that I could ever read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,



The course of true love never did run smooth;”

(Pg 11) Helena:

“The more I love, the more he hateth me.”

Act II Scene I:

(Pg 28) Titania:

“Your buskin’d mistress and your warrior love,
To Theseus must be wedded, and you come
To give their bed joy and prosperity.”

(Pg 28) Oberon:

“How canst thou thus for shame, Titania,
Glance at my credit with Hippolyta,
Knowing I know thy love to Theseus?”
(Rackham,1914)

Different kinds of love are experienced throughout the play from the jealous lovers to young lovers, the fairies, and the mortal beings are all claimed to be in love but the realness and depth of their love are questionable. The love for each couple has different stimulation, whereas Hermia and Lysander are in true love with each other and demand a life together, Helena’s love for Demetrius is one-sided but enough for her to pursue him through and after to the haunted woods. As the noble characters, The Duke and Queen have a decent love, which makes the Queen be her Duke’s trophy wife, but the Fairy King, Oberon, and Fairy Queen, Titania are jealous lovers, for the most part, jealousy surrounds their match.

Restoration Comedies amused the audience by blending wit with ‘low’ humor such as farce and burlesque. ‘The rake’ is the invention of Restoration comedy. Seductive, witty, and arrogant, are his armour traits and he represents a flattering type of male prowess and drive. Through the rake, the plays explore the possibility of sexual freedom which was simply not possible in London society at large but was more than tolerated at court.

The newly enriched middle-class, prelanders, and foolish fop characters present the rake of their depths in the courtship games. Fops are of great concern because they understand women and they can get close to them with their shared interests in fashion, gossips, and Faro. The rake has many enemies to defeat on his journey. He starts from possessing and controlling the female body. Here, Intelligent, and manipulative women pose a particular threat. Since they have already lost their honor to the rake, they are dangerous free agents. The rake reminds us that there were real anxieties concerning male authority in an uncertain age. Women had run estates and businesses very capable while men fought in the civil wars. Old assumptions about the family based on belief in religious and national hierarchies were being challenged. The King’s sexual prowess was legendary, yet his wife was childless and he had no Protestant heir to continue the Stuart line. Audiences thronged the theatres to laugh at impotence jokes, applaud serial seducers, and laugh at the energetic intrigues and other sexually frustrated wives of the Restoration theatres.

Playwrights such as Aphra Behn could write great parts for women characters, giving them more agency and longer speeches in the drama. At worst, allowing to act meant that new plays were more likely to feature scenes containing sexual harassment and rape threats, which were largely intended to titillate audiences.

Towards the end of the century, new ideas emerged about the position of women in marriage. Their subservience to their husbands, though fully endorsed in law, was no longer seen as a natural



rather than a social circumstance. The rise of women actors helped some playwrights like Congreve to explore concerns of particular interest to them (The Way of the World).

Act 4 Scene :

Mira:

I denounce against all fruit-Lacing, Squeezing for a Shape, 'till you mould my Boy's Head like a Sugar-laf; and instead of a Man-Child, make me the Father to a crooked-billet. Laftly, to the Dominion of the Tea-Table I Submit. But with proviso, that you exceed not in your Province; but refrain your self to native and simple Tea-Table Drinks, as Tea, Chocolate and Coffee. As likewise to Genuine and Authoriz'd Tea-Table Talk, Such as mending of fashions, spoiling Reputations, railing at absent Friends, and to forth But that on no Account you encroach upon the Mens Prerogative, and perfume to drink Healths, or toast Fellows; for prevention of which, I banish all Foreign Forces, all Auxillaries to the Tea-Table, as Orange-Brandy, all Annifeed, Cinamon, Citron and Barbado's-Waters, to- for Couflip-Wine, Poppy-Water and all Dormitives, those I allow, These proviso's admitted, in other things I may prove a tractable and complying Husband.

Milla:

O horrid proviso's! Filthy strong Waters ! I toast Fellows, Odious Men ! I hate your odious proviso's.

Mira :

Then we're agreed. Shall I kiss your Hand upon the Contract? And here comes one to be a Witness to the Stealing of the Deed" (Congreve, 47).

Proviso scenes became increasingly common. Usually, to put unity first in their marriages one of them gave up power over the other one and penance individual rights. In Restoration Comedy, the finest couples make the best financial deal for themselves in the marriage. Mutual attraction, if it exists, is a bonus, but in the real world, circumstances were not so stable. Some returning cavaliers had failed to recoup their lands and fortunes. So they had to widen their search for a wife to include the daughters of the middle class. This sharpened competition for wives and placed an extra premium on women's honor and reputation.

Act 5, Scene 1:

"From hence let those be warn'd, who mean to wed;
Left mutual Falshood stain the Bridal-Bed:
For each Deceiver to his Coft may find,
That Marriage Frauds too oft are paid in kind."
(Pg 68)(Congreve, 1706)

Marriage is always the proper end to a Restoration Comedy. Women may roam freely, engage in repartee and intrigue, but in the end, they consent to marry. This ending also conformed to the patriarchal values. Although the plays may ask probing questions about the natural hierarchies underpinning the family and society, their endings are ultimately reassuring to audiences who have, after all, come to the theatre to be entertained.

Criticisms:

English Literary Criticism is derived partly from old British scholars and partly from Italian scholars. The earliest text for literature is Leonard Coxe's *Arte or Crafte of Rhetoryke*, written around 1524, and it was derived in part from Melanchthon. Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetrike* followed in 1553. The English stage was a great topic for controversy among the dramatists, their adherents, and the puritanical element. Ben Jonson's *Discoveries*, 1641 closes the period and is of prime importance,



though unfortunately, it is, as has been said, not a representative apology or explanation of the current practice, but an attack upon it.

Different opposers displayed their indignation towards theatre. Still the one that played a vital role in the decline of the theatre was, *Jeremy Collier*, a Protestant minister, who possessed particularly strong feelings about Restoration theatre. With his belief that such a theatre should be eradicated. Collier also wrote 'A short view of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage' in 1698 regarding Restoration Theatre ("Western Theatre History").

In this pamphlet, Collier argued three points: the distasteful and bawdy material, the recurrent references to the Bible or biblical characters, and the slander and insults directed towards the clergy. James II issued a formal declaration. In order to correct issues with Restoration theatres in context with themes of immorality and profaneness, some writers were persecuted and popular actors and actresses were fined. Many dramatists strove to improve the theatre, but it was not that successful.

The controversy between religious conservatives and dramatists transpired for years. Writers did not seek to reform their works. Instead, they approached laughter, satire, and ridicule as ways to attack their enemies. The rake was the invention of Restoration comedy. Seductive, witty, and arrogant, he represented a flattering type of male prowess and drive, much admired in court circles. Through the rake, the plays explore the possibility of sexual freedom which was simply not possible in London society at large but was more than tolerated at court.

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