

english restoration theatre

English Restoration theatre represents a vibrant and pivotal era in the history of dramatic arts, emerging from the ashes of Puritanical suppression to spark a renaissance of wit, spectacle, and social commentary. This period, spanning roughly from the restoration of King Charles II in 1660 to the end of the 17th century, witnessed a dramatic shift in theatrical conventions, audience expectations, and the very nature of playwriting. From dazzling court masques to biting comedies of manners, Restoration drama offered a mirror to a society grappling with political upheaval, emerging scientific thought, and evolving social mores. This comprehensive exploration will delve into the key characteristics that defined this dynamic period, the celebrated playwrights who shaped its legacy, the enduring themes that resonated with audiences, and the lasting impact of English Restoration theatre on the theatrical landscape.

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The Dawn of a New Era: The Restoration and its Theatrical Rebirth

The year 1660 marked a profound turning point for England, with the return of King Charles II signaling the end of the Commonwealth and the Protectorate. This event, known as the Restoration, ushered in a period of renewed royal patronage and a liberalization of societal norms after decades of Puritanical rule. Crucially, it lifted the ban that had been imposed on public theatrical performances during the Interregnum. The closure of theatres under Oliver Cromwell had a devastating impact on actors, playwrights, and the entire theatrical infrastructure. However, with the monarchy's return, the demand for entertainment surged, and the theatre quickly re-established itself as a vital form of social and cultural expression.

The reopening of theatres was not merely a restoration of a pastime; it was a resurrection of an art form that had been forced underground. The initial years saw the establishment of new playhouses, often modelled on the elaborate indoor theatres that had been popular before the Civil War. These new venues were designed to cater to a sophisticated and often aristocratic audience, eager for diversion and intellectual stimulation. The enthusiasm for theatre was palpable, and the period quickly laid the groundwork for what would become a golden age of English drama, characterized by

its innovation, wit, and engagement with the pressing issues of the time.

Key Characteristics of English Restoration Theatre

English Restoration theatre is instantly recognizable by a distinct set of characteristics that set it apart from its predecessors and influenced subsequent theatrical movements. These elements contributed to its unique flavor and its enduring appeal. The period saw a deliberate departure from the more solemn and moralistic dramas of the preceding era, embracing instead a spirit of sophisticated entertainment and social observation. The plays often reflected the tastes and values of the court, which played a significant role in shaping theatrical trends.

The Dominance of Comedy of Manners

Perhaps the most defining genre of the Restoration period is the Comedy of Manners. These plays were renowned for their sharp wit, satirical portrayal of aristocratic society, and intricate plots often revolving around courtship, marriage, and social intrigue. They meticulously dissected the artificiality, hypocrisy, and follies of the upper classes, using clever dialogue and sophisticated wordplay to expose societal flaws. The characters were often archetypes of their social class, embodying traits like vanity, affectation, and economic ambition. The humor was often cynical and detached, reflecting a world where appearances and reputation were paramount.

The Rise of the Female Playwright

A significant and progressive development during the Restoration was the emergence of female playwrights who successfully navigated the male-dominated literary landscape. Figures like Aphra Behn not only wrote plays but also achieved considerable commercial success and critical recognition. Their contributions offered fresh perspectives, particularly in their exploration of female agency, societal constraints on women, and the complexities of romantic relationships from a woman's point of view. This era marked an important, albeit often challenged, step towards greater gender inclusivity in the theatrical world.

The Influence of French and Spanish Drama

Restoration playwrights were deeply influenced by the theatrical traditions of continental Europe, particularly France and Spain. The sophisticated plotting and character development found in French drama, especially the works of Molière, resonated with English writers. Similarly, Spanish Golden Age drama provided models for complex plots and dramatic intensity. This cross-pollination of ideas enriched English playwriting, leading to more intricate narratives and a greater focus on psychological realism in character portrayal.

The Spectacle and Theatrical Innovation

The Restoration saw significant advancements in stagecraft and theatrical presentation. The

development of proscenium arch theatres, with their elaborate scenery, painted backdrops, and sophisticated stage machinery, created a more immersive and visually spectacular experience for audiences. The use of movable scenery, trapdoors, and flying devices allowed for dramatic entrances and exits, contributing to the overall theatrical impact. Furthermore, the introduction of female actresses to the professional stage, replacing the boy actors who had traditionally played female roles, brought a new level of realism and emotional depth to performances.

The Restoration Licence System

A key structural element of Restoration theatre was the system of royal patents and licences. King Charles II granted only two patents, one to Thomas Killigrew for the King's Company and another to Sir William Davenant for the Duke's Company. This duopoly meant that only these two companies were legally permitted to perform plays. While this limited competition, it also fostered a sense of professionalization and encouraged the development of highly skilled acting troupes and well-produced theatrical events. The rivalry between these two companies often spurred innovation and a drive for excellence in their productions.

The Golden Age of Playwrights

The Restoration period produced a constellation of playwrights whose works continue to be studied and performed today. These writers masterfully captured the spirit of their age, offering audiences a potent blend of wit, social commentary, and dramatic engagement. Their diverse styles and thematic preoccupations contributed to the richness and variety of Restoration drama, solidifying its place as a significant chapter in literary history.

William Wycherley: The Master of Cynical Wit

William Wycherley is celebrated for his sharp, cynical comedies of manners, most notably "The Country Wife" and "The Plain Dealer." His plays are characterized by their biting satire, often portraying characters as driven by lust, greed, and deception. Wycherley's dialogue is famously witty and often outrageous, pushing the boundaries of social acceptability for his time. His exploration of the corrupting influence of money and social climbing, coupled with his unflinching depiction of human foibles, cemented his reputation as a master of sophisticated, albeit dark, comedy.

William Congreve: The Apex of the Comedy of Manners

William Congreve is widely regarded as the most brilliant playwright of the Restoration. His comedies, including "The Way of the World," "Love for Love," and "The Double Dealer," represent the pinnacle of the Comedy of Manners. Congreve's plays are distinguished by their exquisite prose, intricate plotting, and profound understanding of human psychology. He elevated the genre with his elegant dialogue, complex characterizations, and sophisticated exploration of social customs and the intricacies of love and marriage. "The Way of the World" is often cited as his masterpiece, a complex web of wit, intrigue, and social commentary that continues to captivate audiences.

John Vanbrugh: Architect of Satire and Social Critique

John Vanbrugh, also known for his architectural achievements, brought a keen eye for social critique and witty dialogue to his plays. "The Relapse" and "The Provoked Wife" are prime examples of his work, skillfully blending humor with a shrewd observation of societal hypocrisy and the challenges faced by women within marriage. Vanbrugh's plays often feature dynamic characters and lively plots, engaging with themes of reputation, infidelity, and the pursuit of happiness within the rigid social structures of the era.

Aphra Behn: Pioneering Voice of the Restoration

Aphra Behn stands out as a remarkable and pioneering figure. As one of the first English women to earn a living as a professional writer, her contribution to Restoration theatre is invaluable. Her plays, such as "The Rover" and "The Lucky Chance," offered bold explorations of female desire, independence, and the social consequences of sexual liberty. Behn's work was often controversial, challenging prevailing moral conventions and providing a voice for female experiences that were largely unrepresented in the dramatic works of her male contemporaries.

Thomas Otway: Master of Tragedy

While comedy dominated the Restoration stage, tragedy also found its champions. Thomas Otway, though not as prolific as the comedy writers, produced enduring tragedies such as "Venice Preserv'd" and "The Orphan." These plays were characterized by their intense emotional depth, dramatic suspense, and often tragic portrayals of love, betrayal, and political intrigue. Otway's tragedies offered a powerful counterpoint to the prevailing comedies, demonstrating the breadth of dramatic expression that defined the era.

Enduring Themes and Motifs in Restoration Drama

The plays of the English Restoration period, despite their often lighthearted veneer, delved into a range of complex and enduring themes that continue to resonate with modern audiences. These thematic explorations provided a critical lens through which societal norms, human nature, and the prevailing social order were examined and often satirized. The playwrights masterfully wove these ideas into their narratives, ensuring that their works were not just entertaining but also thought-provoking.

Marriage, Money, and Social Mobility

The institution of marriage was a central concern in many Restoration plays. Often depicted as a social and economic contract rather than a union of love, marriage was frequently the subject of intricate plotting and satirical commentary. Plays explored the pressures of marrying for financial gain, the consequences of infidelity, and the often-strained dynamics within marital relationships. Social mobility, or the lack thereof, was also a significant motif, with characters striving to improve their social standing, often through strategic marriages or clever manipulation.

Appearance versus Reality

The pervasive theme of the discrepancy between appearance and reality was a hallmark of Restoration drama. Characters often adopted masks of respectability or virtue to conceal their true, more cynical or self-serving motives. The intricate plots frequently involved deception, disguise, and the unmasking of false pretenses. This theme reflected a society where reputation and social facade were paramount, and where true intentions could be easily hidden beneath a polished exterior.

Wit, Language, and Social Discourse

The sophisticated and often dazzling use of language was not merely a stylistic choice but a thematic element in itself. Wit was highly valued, and plays were structured around elaborate verbal sparring, epigrams, and clever repartee. The mastery of language was seen as a key indicator of social status and intellectual acuity. The plays thus celebrated and critiqued the art of conversation and the power of words to influence, persuade, and manipulate within the social arena.

Love, Lust, and Morality

While often dealing with themes of love and romance, Restoration drama frequently blurred the lines between genuine affection and carnal desire. Lust was a powerful driving force for many characters, and the plays explored the consequences of unchecked passion and the often-precarious balance between moral restraint and sensual impulse. The concept of morality itself was frequently questioned, with characters often operating in a grey area where societal rules were bent or broken for personal gain or pleasure.

The Role of Women and Gender Dynamics

Restoration plays offered a complex and often contradictory portrayal of women and gender roles. While some plays, particularly those by Aphra Behn, championed female agency and explored women's desires and frustrations, many comedies of manners reinforced traditional gender stereotypes. Women were often depicted as either virtuous paragons or cunning manipulators, and their pursuit of marriage and social security was a recurring plot device. The plays provide valuable insights into the patriarchal structures and the evolving, though often limited, opportunities for women in the period.

The Evolution of Stagecraft and Performance

The English Restoration theatre witnessed significant advancements in both the physical presentation of plays and the art of acting itself. These developments transformed the theatrical experience, making it more visually engaging and emotionally resonant for the audience. The renewed energy and investment in the theatre led to a more professionalized and sophisticated approach to production.

The Proscenium Arch Theatre

The construction of new theatres, predominantly featuring the proscenium arch, marked a crucial step in stage design. This architectural feature created a clear separation between the stage and the auditorium, framing the action and allowing for the development of more elaborate and detailed scenic designs. The proscenium arch facilitated the use of perspective scenery, painted backdrops, and elaborate stage machinery, contributing to a more immersive and illusionistic theatrical world.

Advancements in Scenography and Machinery

The Restoration era saw a heightened emphasis on visual spectacle. Playwrights and theatre managers invested in sophisticated scenery, including painted backcloths, wing-and-flats systems, and trapdoors. These elements allowed for rapid scene changes, dramatic entrances and exits, and the creation of magical effects such as flying machines or ghostly apparitions. The integration of music, dance, and elaborate costumes further enhanced the visual richness of these productions, appealing to the audience's desire for entertainment and diversion.

The Introduction of Female Actors

One of the most transformative changes in Restoration theatre was the official permission for women to perform on the public stage. Prior to 1660, female roles were played by young boys. The introduction of actresses brought a new dimension to performances, allowing for more nuanced and emotionally authentic portrayals of female characters. Actresses like Nell Gwyn and Elizabeth Barry became celebrated stars, captivating audiences with their talent and charisma, and significantly influencing the development of acting as a profession.

The Rise of the Actor-Manager

The period also saw the emergence of influential actor-managers, such as Sir William Davenant and Thomas Betterton. These individuals were not only skilled performers but also shrewd businessmen who managed theatre companies, selected plays, and oversaw productions. Their leadership and artistic vision were instrumental in shaping the repertoire and the quality of performances, contributing to the professionalization and growth of the theatre as an institution.

The Influence and Legacy of Restoration Theatre

The English Restoration theatre left an indelible mark on the subsequent development of dramatic arts, influencing playwrights, actors, and theatrical conventions for centuries to come. Its innovative spirit, sophisticated wit, and engagement with social themes continued to shape the theatrical landscape long after the era itself had passed.

Impact on Later Dramatic Forms

The techniques and themes explored during the Restoration, particularly the Comedy of Manners, continued to influence dramatic writing throughout the 18th century and beyond. The emphasis on witty dialogue, social satire, and character-driven plots laid the groundwork for subsequent comedic traditions. The exploration of psychological complexity in characters also paved the way for later advancements in dramatic realism.

Enduring Appeal of Restoration Plays

Many Restoration plays, such as Congreve's "The Way of the World" and Wycherley's "The Country Wife," remain staples of the theatrical repertoire. Their sharp wit, insightful social commentary, and complex characters continue to engage audiences and provoke discussion. The plays offer a valuable window into the social, cultural, and political dynamics of 17th-century England, while their thematic concerns, such as the nature of love, marriage, and societal expectations, remain remarkably relevant.

The legacy of English Restoration theatre is one of innovation, artistry, and a profound engagement with the human condition. From its daring comedies to its innovative stagecraft, this vibrant period of theatrical history continues to inform and inspire.

Frequently Asked Questions

What were the key characteristics of English Restoration theatre?

Restoration theatre was characterized by its witty dialogue, often with double entendres, its focus on aristocratic and middle-class characters and their social intrigues, its use of elaborate costumes and scenery, and the re-establishment of actresses on stage, replacing the boy actors of the Elizabethan era.

Who were some of the most influential playwrights of the English Restoration period?

Prominent playwrights include William Wycherley, William Congreve, John Vanbrugh, and George Farquhar, known for their comedies of manners, and John Dryden, who was a significant figure in drama and poetry.

What is a 'comedy of manners' and why was it popular during the Restoration?

A comedy of manners satirizes the customs, conventions, and behaviors of a particular social class, often the aristocracy. It was popular because it reflected the social realities and fascinated audiences with its witty observations on societal norms, fashion, and reputation.

Why was the reopening of theatres in 1660 a significant event?

The reopening of theatres in 1660, following the Puritan-led Commonwealth which had banned public entertainment, marked a return to theatrical performance and a shift in cultural and social attitudes. It ushered in a new era of drama influenced by French and Italian styles.

What was the role of actresses in Restoration theatre?

The introduction of actresses, permitted by King Charles II, was a revolutionary change. It led to a more realistic and engaging portrayal of female characters and the rise of celebrated stage stars, but also sometimes led to controversial exploitation of actresses.

What were some of the popular theatrical genres besides comedy of manners?

Besides comedy of manners, heroic drama, tragicomedy, and opera were also popular. Heroic drama often featured grand themes of love, honor, and loyalty, while operas combined music, drama, and spectacle.

How did the staging and stagecraft of Restoration theatres differ from previous eras?

Restoration theatres featured more elaborate scenery, including painted backdrops and wing-and-pulley systems for scene changes. Stages were proscenium-arch structures, creating a clearer separation between the audience and the performance, and the use of artificial lighting, like candles, became more common.

What are some common themes explored in Restoration plays?

Common themes include marriage and its economic and social implications, infidelity, social climbing, the follies of aristocratic society, wit versus sense, and the nature of love and desire. Satire of societal pretentiousness was also prevalent.

What was the significance of the 'benefit performance' in Restoration theatre?

A benefit performance was a special evening where the proceeds went to a particular actor, actress, or playwright. It was a crucial way for performers and writers to supplement their income and was often accompanied by special prologues or epilogues, adding a personal touch.

How did the Restoration period influence later theatrical traditions?

Restoration theatre laid the groundwork for later developments in English drama by introducing more naturalistic dialogue, complex characterization, and a focus on social commentary. The use of actresses and more sophisticated stagecraft also had a lasting impact.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to English Restoration Theatre, each beginning with "":

1. *Restoration Comedies and Their Context*

This book delves into the vibrant and often scandalous world of Restoration comedies, exploring the social, political, and cultural forces that shaped these satirical masterpieces. It examines key playwrights and their most famous works, analyzing how they reflected and challenged the prevailing norms of the era. Readers will gain insight into the witty dialogue, intricate plots, and often bawdy humor that defined this theatrical period.

2. *The Age of Dryden: Theatre and Society*

Focusing on the influential playwright John Dryden, this work investigates his significant contributions to Restoration drama and the broader societal impact of theatre during his time. It explores the interplay between literary innovation and the evolving tastes of the London audience. The book also contextualizes Dryden's work within the political landscape, highlighting how theatre became a site for commentary and debate.

3. *Women on the Restoration Stage*

This title highlights the groundbreaking emergence of actresses on the English stage during the Restoration period, a significant departure from earlier traditions. It examines the careers and performances of prominent female players, exploring their social standing and the complexities of their roles. The book discusses how women's presence influenced playwriting and theatrical conventions.

4. *The Licensing Act of 1737 and its Aftermath*

While technically just outside the Restoration, this book's focus on the licensing laws that profoundly impacted theatre resonates with the later legacy of Restoration practices. It traces the origins of censorship in the theatre and its long-term consequences, examining how playwrights and theatre managers navigated these restrictions. The study provides context for understanding the evolving relationship between state power and artistic expression.

5. *The Reopening of the Theatres: 1660 and Beyond*

This book chronicles the momentous period following the Puritanical closure of theatres, detailing the triumphant return of dramatic performance in 1660. It explores the initial challenges faced by the newly established companies and the innovations they introduced. The work also sets the stage for understanding the subsequent flourishing of Restoration drama.

6. *The Aesthetics of Restoration Performance*

This study delves into the visual and auditory elements that characterized Restoration stagecraft, from elaborate scenery and costumes to acting styles and musical interludes. It analyzes how these aesthetic choices contributed to the overall theatrical experience and appealed to contemporary audiences. The book offers a rich understanding of what it was like to attend a play in this era.

7. *The Morality of Restoration Comedy*

This exploration tackles the often-debated issue of morality within Restoration comedies, examining their controversial themes and characters. It analyzes the ways in which these plays both reflected and questioned societal values regarding marriage, social conduct, and sexuality. The book considers different critical interpretations of the ethical dimensions of these comedies.

8. *The Business of Theatre in 17th-Century London*

This title provides a fascinating look at the economic realities of running a theatre during the Restoration, including the structures of the playhouses, the management of acting companies, and the financial incentives for playwrights. It sheds light on the commercial aspects that underpinned the creative output of the era. Understanding this business side offers a different perspective on the theatrical landscape.

9. Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare

This book examines how Shakespeare's plays were reimagined and performed during the Restoration period, often with significant alterations to plots, characters, and endings. It analyzes the reasons behind these adaptations and how they reflected the changing tastes of the audience and the prevailing dramatic conventions. The study offers insight into how classic works are received and transformed over time.

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