

Comedy from William Wycherley to Oscar Wilde

Historical background: the Restoration of Charles II

- 1660: Stuart restoration – Charles II back from his exile in France;
- well received by the people: political stability; relief after the oppressive puritanical morality of the years of the Protectorate;
- the “Merry Monarch”: imported French worldliness and immorality but also the love of art and the Neo-Classical taste of the court of Louis XIV (Corneille, Racine, Boileau);
- surrounded himself with the best wits of the period (much poetry written by amateur poet noblemen);
- almost all the important literary figures of the Restoration were associated with the King’s court.

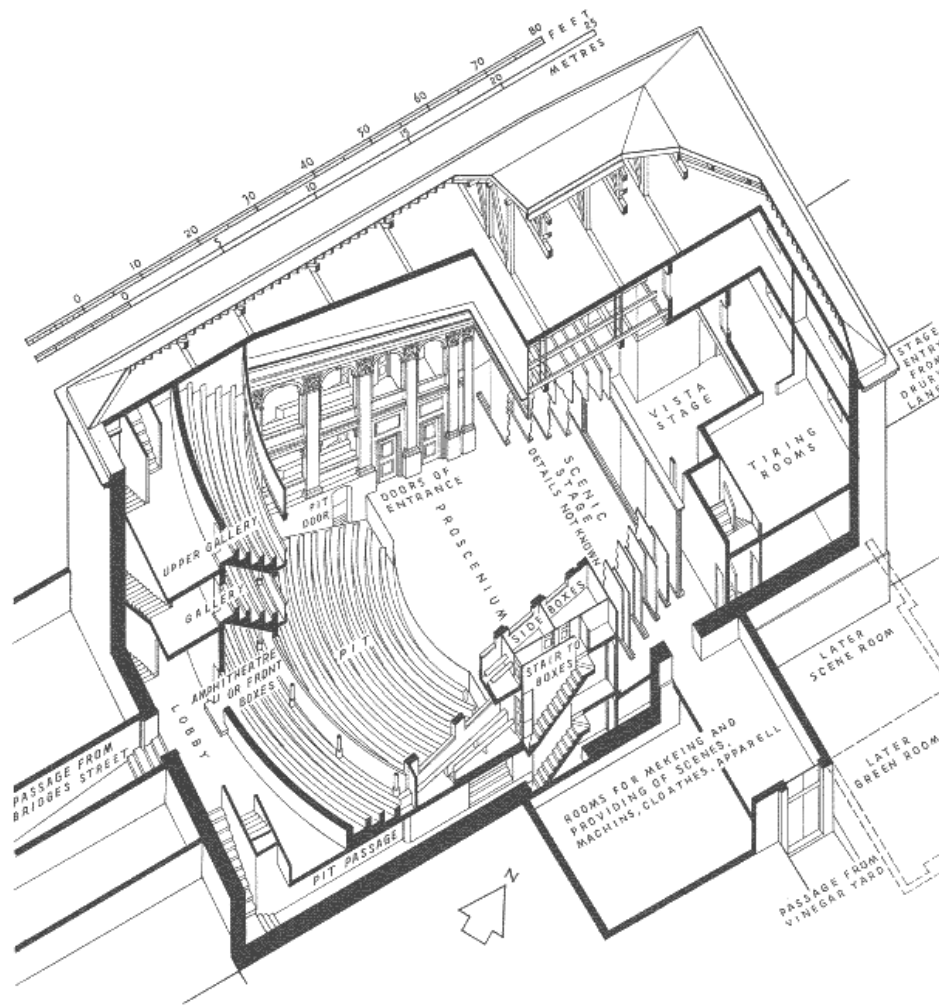
The Theatre

- theatres closed during the Protectorate;
- 1660: Charles II gave patents to his friends Sir William Davenant (The Duke’s Company) and Thomas Killigrew (The King’s Company) to start producing and staging plays;
- decisive court influence in the theatres;
- French influence: female players, indoor theatres, movable perspective scenery (separation of the forestage and the scenic stage), rhymes in the high (heroic and tragic) genres, neo-classical aesthetic norms (three unities, etc.);
- new developments:
 - the opera (Davenant: *The Siege of Rhodes* [1656], Purcell [semi-opera], later Handel);
 - the heroic play: love and honour; artificial, rhetorical in character; ranting (loud, violent, theatrical oratory); often rhymed; most typical and successful example: Dryden, *The Conquest of Granada* in two parts (1670, 1671);
 - the comedy of manners.

The Comedy of Manners

- most typical, artistically the most successful of all restoration genres;
- Sir George Etherege, William Wycherley: the “fathers” of the genre; both courtiers, wrote only a few plays between 1668 and 1676 (the first great period);
- second period (1693-1707): Congreve, Vanbrugh, Farquhar;
- the **plot**: wild, worldly, mostly about seducing women, cuckolding men and tricking other people for their money (e.g. Wycherley, *The Country Wife*);
- stock characters:
 - **coxcomb** (or **fop**): a conceited man of inferior wit, who dresses up in extravagant clothes which are not appropriate to his social position or for the occasion;
 - **rake**: rival of the coxcomb; the type of the “natural” man with a strong appetite for pleasure and money and with sufficient cunning to achieve his ends;
- **manners**: an explicit pattern of conduct or decorum for every station in life; if one pretends to manners for which one is unqualified, one becomes comic;
- charge of immorality refuted:
 - there is a cynical morality of revealing all pretences, of unmasking human follies;
 - the exaggerated artificiality suspends the moral perspective
- literary merit: an anatomy of contemporary life.

Elizabethan Comedy	Restoration Comedy
Lack of props and scenery (imagination counted on)	Stagecraft for lightning, thundering waves, etc.
All roles played by male actors	Actresses appear (French influence)
Democratic, relatively cheap	Aristocratic, posh
Hell – Earth (Globe) – Heaven (Balcony): vertical	horizontal : Doors of Entrance, perspective
One stage space	Depth scaled on stage
Usually set in distant place or time	Set in contemporary London
Fundamental units: scenes (unlimited number)	Fundamental units: acts (5)
Afternoon performances outdoors	Evening performances indoors
Time and place can vary on a broad scale	Unity of time, place, and action (rigid)



Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (1674)

Oliver Goldsmith (1730/31–1774)

- Anglo-Irish origin – precursor of Oscar Wilde’s absurd;
- 1750: BA in Trinity College, Dublin (theology and law) – inordinate lifestyle, riots, gambling, flamboyance;
- University of Edinburgh, University of Leiden, University of Padua – touring Europe;
- *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766): novel;
- *The Deserted Village* (1770): pastoral poem;
- *She Stoops to Conquer* (1771/73): comedy of manners;
 - reaction to the trite commonplaces of sentimental comedy (“I give it up – morals won’t do for me; / To make you laugh, I must play tragedy,” see Prologue);
 - revival of Restoration theatre **but** with more natural plotting, even in the use of masks and disguises;
 - Three Unities largely observed: time, place, and action;
 - the several metamorphoses of Miss Hardcastle – active female protagonist: reversal of roles;
 - character development – optimistic outlook.

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

- Irish origin; the greatest wit of his age, also a full-fledged ‘celebrity’ in today’s sense of the word;
- poet, fiction writer, playwright (*Salome*: Symbolist tragedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*: comedy of manners);
- great satirist of Victorian society and fine parodist of traditional genres;
- confessional poem: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*; fairy tales: *The Happy Prince*; Gothic novel: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*;
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), 3-act comedy of manners:
 - burlesque elements;
 - paradox: false appearances turn out to be the key to a higher/deeper truth and reality (like in Goldsmith: pretence and mistaken identities lead to eventual denouement and a more profound knowledge of each other);
 - punning and malapropisms (e.g. Chasuble);
 - twisted plot follows the absurdities of contemporary society.