

The Rivals - An artificial Comedy of Manners

Sheridan's dramatic work marks at once the height of the reaction against sentimental drama and the most finished achievement of the English Comedy of Manners. In this warfare with the sentimentality Goldsmith is an elder not a better soldier than Sheridan. They declare an open revolt against the Sentimental Comedy that is completely devoid of comic Muse. They revive the spirit of the artificial Comedy and bring it to the highest perfection with some new innovation of their own.

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A Comedy of Manners presents the manners, habits, convention and follies of a particular section of society. It aims at satirizing the superficial mannerism of the people who live the most superficial life. Actually, this type of comedy grew out of Ben Jonson's Comedy of Humours as a natural product of the Puritans' austerity imposed before the Restoration. But, towards the close of the century a revulsion of feeling was noticed against a coarseness and immoral tone of the Comedy of Manners. The reaction resulted in the rise of Sentimental Comedy. But, this too indulged in too much tears and emotional outbursts, killing the comic Muse. Sheridan reacted against this and sought to satirize the manners and follies of his contemporary life. He re-introduced the Comedy of Manners.

The Rivals is the triumph of the Comedy of Manners. It displays the same brilliant artificiality, the same sparkling wit, the same vivacity of spirit and the same fertility of dramatic invention. It presents the very atmosphere of Congreve, modified by the Humours of Jonsonian type. It depicts the superficial habits, manners and hypocrisy of the 18th Century fashionable Society of England. Its life rounds under the influence of love affairs, intrigues and pleasures. All the characters of the Play run to Bath, a fashionable place, in search of husband and wife. They

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imitate the latest fashion to New their love. Bob Acres is conscious of his style and dresses. David praises Acres' new dress in these words:-

"You are quite another creature, believe me master, by the mass! an' we've my luck we shall see the Devon monkeyroney in all the print shop in Bath."

Sheridan exaggerates the distinct qualities of his characters and creates an atmosphere of artificiality. In Mrs. Malaprop, a queen of Dictionary, he satirizes the ladies trying to live up to the smartness of Bath. She also exposes the follies of an old husband hunting woman, who thinks herself charming enough to attract young men. Sir Anthony Absolute presents a picture of a self-willed authoritative father who believes in keeping an iron hand over his son.

"The Lady shall be as ugly as I choose, she shall have a hump on each shoulder; she shall be as crooked as the Crescent; her one eye shall roll like the Bull's in Cox's Museum; she shall have a skin like a mummy and the beard of a Jew. yet I will make you ogle her all day, and set up all night to write Sonnets on her beauty."

Lydia is a portrait of a spoiled girl of fortune whose head is gone stray by reading romantic novels. Her proposal for elopement shows the absurd lengths to which her romantic conception of life can carry her. Sir Lucious is a man who takes fighting as a kind of pastime and tries to mend his fortunes by marrying a rich girl. Faulkland is a humorous character in whom jealousy is carried to comic exaggeration. He is the hero of the sentimental episode, set up as a butt of wit, satire and raillery. Bob Acres, a comical, satirical and farcical character, tries to win

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his lady by putting on fine dresses.

Of course, the Rivals shows some traits of Sentimental Comedy. There are also some farcical scenes which make us laugh. But this laughter is not an end in itself. It is a means through which Sheridan exposes the absurdities in characters in general and the sentimentality of the age in particular.

To conclude, the Rivals has roots in contemporary social and political circumstances. It satirically depicts the manners of the fashionable society of the age. It is artificial in its plot construction. Its dialogue is witty, sharp and keen, at places humorous and sparkling in brilliant exchange of words.