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Editor-in-Chief: Bijender Singh

Email: [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)  
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**REVIEWING L.C. KNIGHTS' CRITIQUE OF RESTORATION COMEDY<sup>1</sup>**

**Vandana**

**Assistant Professor**

**Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi**

**Abstract**

This paper is aimed at meeting two ends. Firstly, it reviews a scholarly essay, written on a literary era, as a piece of academic writing thereby analyzing its efficacy and exactitude. For this, I have investigated the methodology used by the writer so as to present his argument concisely and in a well-formulated manner, if at all, in the essay. Secondly, this, being an appraisal of such a scholarly essay, alongside, offers a comprehensive understanding of the era and its literary productivity per se. Since the essay taken into account for review is a critique of Restoration Comedy, in my paper, I have scrutinized both positive as well as the negative aspects of Knights' approach in criticizing and commenting upon the same.

**Key-Words**

Academic Writing, Restoration Comedy, Drama, Criticism, Degeneration.

<sup>1</sup> Knights, L. C. "Restoration Comedy: the Reality and the Myth". *Selected Essays in Criticism*. 1981. Print.



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The academic writing under review – L. C. Knights' "Restoration Comedy: the Reality and the Myth" – appears to be argumentative in nature for it is well-equipped with arguments, reasons, and justifications. Moreover, throughout the essay, the argument flows scrupulously without any ambiguity. Use of precise language, concise ideas, and declarative statements with regard to criticizing Restoration Comedy on multiple grounds are duly supported by author citations and views of other literary critics. In fact, the essay is structurally divided into three sections dealing with three distinguished thematic concerns, the details of which will follow gradually in the course of this review.

In order to substantiate his own standpoint, Knights begins the essay by referencing a figure of authority, i.e. Henry James' perception of Congreve's works, which according to James are "insufferable". Stretching the argument further, Knights proclaims that most of Restoration Drama itself is "insufferably dull". Following this, Knights acknowledges that Collier<sup>2</sup> onwards, critics began to target Restoration Comedy on moral grounds but he makes it clear that his present critique in particular, and literary criticism in general have broader horizons to penetrate, explore and deconstruct, than im/morality.

The first section of the essay contains his confrontational evaluation of Restoration

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Collier's *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage*. It was a pamphlet in which, Collier, the conformist puritan launched a vindictive attack on stage-play and English Drama on moral grounds.

Drama and its limitations in terms of form and content, which is strongly backed by views of many popular literary and historical critics counting Jeremy Collier, Margaret Lamb, Matthew Arnold, Thomas B. Macaulay, and J. E. Spingarn, as well as textual quotes from some of Congreve's best known Comedies. Furthermore, others' ideas are properly accredited; both while paraphrasing as well as while directly quoting. The resultant writing style, hence, encompasses a formal arrangement and structure. For instance, attempting to build up momentum in support of his assessment, Knights begins by eulogizing the positive aspects — “the quality and variety”— of Elizabethan Drama, a predecessor to Restoration drama. He writes that Elizabethan dramatists dealt with not just dramatic elements but also addressed the entire oeuvre of literature on the whole and the larger human experience, thereby executing multi-dimensional themes via rich language texture and style. As such, comparison with another, ‘better’ alternative form – Elizabethan drama – becomes the foundation for his critique.

Thereafter, Knights concedes Restoration Satire as somewhat the only worthy representative of the Restoration Age and its artistic contribution in the literary realm. He argues that Dryden's use of non-dramatic prose, in his *Critical Prefaces*, for instance; the thematic eminence of Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*; and the semantic clarity and precision of Halifax's *Character of Charles II*, may have been limited, but unlike Restoration Comedy, they are not “altogether decadent”(107). In this regard, he writes— “... the prose in which Restoration Comedy is written – select which dramatist you like—is poor and inexpressible in comparison with the staple non-dramatic prose.” (109)

To illustrate this point in detail, he explains the traceable loopholes in Congreve's literary style and criticizes him for the indolence and monotony in expression. In fact, as evidence we are provided with multiple quotes from Congreve's plays that ‘justify’ Knights' point. This shows how the latter delved deep into the former's writing fashion— his strengths as well as weaknesses as a writer— to prove his own end, for he also quotes Congreve's diverse characters to demonstrate the similarity in articulation and wit usage. In line with the New Critical stance, Knights had adopted, he is aimed at closely scrutinizing the paradoxes, tensions, ambiguities and ironies inherent in the work(s) under discussion by means of deconstructing the narrative techniques, form, structure and perspective.

In fact, he concludes the first section by placing other contemporary playwrights of the same genre such as Wycherley, Etherege, and Vanbrugh, on the same pedestal as

Congreve, with slight variations. According to Knights, all of them offer almost a similar course of action. For instance, 'forceful' usage of wit, recurring similes, metaphors and antithesis, and that they are confined unto "a miserably limited set of attitudes" so much so that they appear "artificial" (111). He argues that in laying emphasis on manners and wit, in the first place, the plot of Restoration Comedies suffered inextricably and inevitably.

The problematic of sexual politics and its link with the display of polite behavior/culture forms the basis of the second section of the essay. Here, Knights refer to certain positive commentaries on the worth of Restoration Comedy. For instance, Bonamy Dobree's appraisal of comic dramatists and how he views Restoration Comedy as a space allowing 'naked' expression to women's desires and thus attempting to celebrate the bodily. Following Dobree's quoted perception, Knights too acknowledges this unprecedented feature of the arena under debate, but still complains of it just being "factitious" and "superficial". In order to validate this standpoint, he asks his readers to go through a secondary reading, K. M. Lynch's *The Social Mode of Restoration*, and read up the selected textual passages she has quoted in her study to come to terms with the same idea.

Knights also refers to Miss Lynch's underlying 'theory of the double standard' wherein she argues how the 'pretence' of displaying one's manners was/is the most fitting criteria to pass value judgment about characters like Dorimant in contrast with characters like Sir Foppling Flutters, Froths and Dapperwits. For the latter ones are the "false pretenders to wit". In the same breath, she establishes that a sexist stance easily gets overlooked with respect to the ill-treatment women characters such as Mrs. Loveit suffer at the hands of the pretenders of machismo and politeness. This standpoint pin-pointing the germane thematic of appearance versus reality, it seems, is Knights' point as well. But at no point does he try to authorize himself as the inventor of these ideas, rather he lets Lynch's argument flow in its true essence via his paraphrasing, and quoted allusions where necessary.

The third section is laden with criticism of Restoration Comedy on grounds of being 'patriarchal' and enforcing misogyny. He begins by stating that—"In the matter of sexual relations Restoration Comedy is entirely dominated by a narrow set of conventions." In this regard, we are offered quotes from texts such as *The Provok'd Wife*, *She Wou'd If She Cou'd*, *The Way of the World*, *Marriage a la Mode*, and *The Man of Mode*. All of which contribute to build up a safe bet with respect to ascertaining that Restoration comedy tended to promote objectification of women

and exhibiting marriage as a prison-house of monotony and boredom, for it tends to place vigilance on the gallant's liberty amidst libertine ethos. Nonetheless, the fact that it was narrowly limited to the upper classes and the gallantry spirit of celebration and carnivalesque becomes yet another facet of Knights' criticism.

There is a paragraph in which while discussing Restoration Comedy's outrageous outspokenness on sex and sexual relations, the sub-sections of a longish sentence, divided internally by semi-colons, are elaborated in the footnotes. For illustration, the sentence goes like— "Sex is a hook baited with tempting morsels; it is a thirst quencher; it is a cordial; it is a dish to feed on; it is a bunch of grapes; *it is anything but sex.*" (emphasis mine). And it is through the footnotes that we find that the first five fractions of the sentence are a series of ideas taken from different plays. While only the last italicized part is Knights' comment on the same.

Knights' selection of textual quotes is again praiseworthy. They are indeed representative of his unfathomable insight and understanding that must have facilitated this well-researched work. At one point, he quotes the opening song of Dryden's *Marriage a la Mode*, and argues in favor of how the lyrics are capable of defining the essence of Restoration comedy on the whole. Similarly, when he is arguing about the idea of 'constancy' being boring, he has *The Way of the World's* Fainall's dialogues to justify his inference. In addition, at a point, he considers it perfect to offer a brief summary of Etherege's *The Man of Mode* so that he could make easy references to the various characters and the plot line, in the course of the essay.

However, it is here where the precincts of Knights' study design come out clearly as he ostensibly ignores the essence of character portrayal of, say, Harriet of *The Man of Mode*. Being a transgressive heroine, she shudders off the pro-establishment that although was based on libertine ethos, yet was undeniably misogynistic and biased towards men. In this regard, inclusion of readings of critics such as Harold Weber<sup>3</sup> could have added to Knights' credibility as a literary critic. For Weber and his ilk sees in Harriet, a rational, manipulative body politics, using which she stands somewhere in-between of being considered a whore and a virtuous woman, and shows how her persona succeeds in destabilizing stereotypical binaries. As a result, the not-so-positive interpretations made by Knights do not appear to be entirely convincing. He could have developed the argument further thereby attributing due credit to the strengths of character representation such as that of Harriet. Moreover,

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<sup>3</sup> Weber, Harold. *The Restoration Rake-Hero: Transformations in Sexual Understanding in Seventeenth Century England*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1986. Print.

the striking innovation of introduction of female actors on stage which coincided with the intercession of the first English woman playwright, Aphra Behn into the literary realm, does not even find a single mention in the whole essay. None of her plays and character portrayals is referred to, nor does her immense contribution in the institutionalization of Restoration comedy, find a minor recognition.

Even though the concluding remark which states — “The criticism that defenders of Restoration comedy need to answer is not that the comedies are ‘immoral’, but that they are trivial, gross and dull.”— is firmly supported by preceding arguments, his critique, on the whole, appears way too sharp. Various distinguishing elements of Restoration comedy are taken one by one, and we see how Knights attempts to deconstruct them systematically by using apt evidences and arguments from other authors and critics. Yet some other persuasive accounts of positive reading of Restoration comedy like that of Harold Weber, Helena Modjeska<sup>4</sup>, Robert D. Hume<sup>5</sup>, and David Roberts<sup>6</sup> goes unacknowledged and so does their views. Had Knights chosen to present their perception, and then develop his argument in response to their romanticized perception, the essay would have been more wholesome and authentic unto itself.

Also, although nowhere the author attempts to demonstrate the title of his essay, it becomes apparent from the detailed argument that he considers Restoration Comedy to be no more than a “myth”. The reason for it not being the “reality”, according to Knights, being the fact that even though it is categorized under the umbrella of a comic genre, it is hopelessly dreary, doltish and wearisome.

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<sup>4</sup> Modjeska, Helena. “Women and The Stage”. Theatredatabase.com. Web. 9 Oct 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Hume, Robert D. *The Rakish Stage: Studies in English Drama, 1660-1800*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1949. Print.

<sup>6</sup> Roberts, David. *The Ladies: Female Patronage of Restoration Drama, 1660-1700*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. Print.