

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ENGLISH COMEDY AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE GENRE THROUGH THE WORKS OF SHERIDAN

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Abstract

This article explores the genre of English comedy, focusing on its historical development, key artistic features, and its impact on theatrical and literary tradition. Particular attention is given to the works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, one of the most prominent representatives of 18th-century English comedic drama. His plays are analyzed as examples of typical traits of English comedy, such as satirical orientation, witty dialogue, social critique, and a gallery of recognizable character types. The article concludes by emphasizing the significance of comedy as a powerful medium for reflecting social realities through art.

Keywords: English comedy, Sheridan, drama, satire, theatre, social critique, character.

Introduction

English comedy has played a significant role in shaping the evolution of global dramatic literature. Its evolution, marked by historical, cultural, and linguistic shifts, reflects the changing tastes, values, and sensibilities of British society. From the satirical undertones of medieval farce and the rich verbal play of Elizabethan theatre to the refined wit of the Restoration and the social critique of 18th-century drama, English comedy has consistently adapted its form and message to engage audiences in both amusement and reflection.

Comedy, as a dramatic genre, seeks to provoke laughter, but its function extends far beyond mere entertainment. It frequently functions as an effective tool for social critique, revealing the flaws, hypocrisies, and inconsistencies of modern society. The comic playwright, through irony, exaggeration, parody, and satire, holds a mirror up to society, inviting the audience to reconsider norms and ideals through humor.

One of the most distinguished figures in the tradition of English comedy is Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816), whose plays epitomize the classical comedic spirit of the Enlightenment era. Sheridan's works, particularly *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*, demonstrate a masterful fusion of traditional comic devices—such as mistaken identities, romantic misunderstandings, and witty repartee—with a deep moral concern and sharp social insight. His comedies are not only celebrated for their lively dialogue and engaging plots but also for their capacity to question social hierarchies, criticize superficiality, and uphold the values of honesty and virtue.

In studying Sheridan's contribution to the genre, one gains a clearer understanding of the core characteristics of English comedy: its emphasis on dialogue, character-driven humor, and its capacity to reveal truth through laughter. Sheridan builds upon the legacy of earlier dramatists such as William Congreve and Oliver Goldsmith, yet brings his own freshness and moral sophistication to the stage. His characters, from the malapropism-prone Mrs. Malaprop to the gossiping Lady Sneerwell, remain vivid examples of how language and behavior intertwine in the construction of comic effect.

This article aims to explore the defining features of English comedy as a genre and trace its cultural and artistic significance through the lens of Sheridan's dramaturgy. By analyzing thematic concerns, character archetypes, structural conventions, and linguistic style, the study highlights the enduring relevance of Sheridan's work and underscores the role of comedy in shaping the moral and aesthetic consciousness of both past and present audiences.

1. Historical ddevelopment of English comedy.

English comedy began its development during the Renaissance. Even in Shakespeare's works, we find features that would become classic for the genre: romantic plots, disguises, comic misunderstandings, and satire of social and domestic norms. In the 17th century, with the Restoration of the monarchy, the comedy of manners emerged, known for bold plots, brilliant dialogue, and sharp satire.

By the 18th century, the genre had transformed again—comedy became more moralistic, giving rise to the "comedy of sentiment," which aimed to evoke empathy and moral reflection. Sheridan became a voice of this transitional period, blending satire with emerging sentimental tendencies.

2. Key features of English comedy.

English comedy is characterized by the following elements:

- **Satirical orientation** – criticism of morals, social norms, and hypocrisy;
- **Character typification** – vivid masks such as the gossip, the hypocrite, the spendthrift, the fool, etc.;
- **Comic intrigue** – based on misunderstandings, mistaken identities, and romantic entanglements;
- **Witty language and dialogue** – verbal ingenuity and wordplay are highly valued;
- **Social themes** – significant societal issues are explored through humor.

3. Sheridan's work as an example of English comedy.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816) was a prominent English playwright and theatre manager whose works represent the height of 18th-century English comedy. His most famous plays, *The School for Scandal* and *The Rivals*, embody the finest traditions of English stage comedy.

• *The School for Scandal* is a peak of satirical theatre, targeting the hypocrisy and malicious gossip of London high society. Sheridan portrays how deceit and moral duplicity damage social relations.

• *The Rivals* is a comedy of manners that combines romantic intrigue with sharp social commentary. The character of Mrs. Malaprop, who humorously misuses words, became a classic example of English comic character development.

Sheridan skillfully employs traditional elements while enriching them. His characters are deeper, his conflicts more engaging, and his dialogues more vibrant. His plays both entertain and provoke reflection on the nature of human relationships and societal values.

4. The influence of English comedy and Sheridan's legacy.

Sheridan's comedies had a significant impact on the later evolution of both English and European theatrical traditions. His characters and themes were echoed in the 19th century, and the use of satire and comic conflict continues to inspire modern playwrights. Notably, Sheridan helped to establish comedy not just as entertainment, but as a vehicle for enlightenment and critique.

Conclusion

In summarizing the study of English comedy and its development through the works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, it becomes clear that this genre serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a mirror of societal values, moral concerns, and cultural evolution. English comedy, in its various historical manifestations—from Shakespearean humor to Restoration wit and 18th-century satire—has consistently adapted to reflect the shifting priorities and contradictions of British society.

Sheridan's comedies hold a distinctive and important position within this tradition. They exemplify the refinement of comic form and content in the Age of Enlightenment, balancing sharp social criticism with intellectual wit and emotional resonance. His plays offer nuanced portraits of human behavior, exposing the follies and pretensions of the upper class while promoting ideals of sincerity, morality, and rationality. Sheridan went beyond simply replicating earlier comedic formulas—he infused them with vitality, sharp wit, and exceptional dramatic skill. What distinguishes Sheridan's contribution is his ability to maintain the traditional comic structure—mistaken identities, romantic misunderstandings, stock characters—while using them as tools for deeper commentary. In *The School for Scandal*, for instance, the culture of gossip is not only ridiculed, but presented as a destructive force in the moral fabric of society. His characterizations, especially of figures like Mrs. Malaprop, combine humor with linguistic and psychological insight, making them enduring symbols of human folly.

Furthermore, Sheridan's legacy extends beyond his era. His influence can be traced in the works of later dramatists, both British and international, who continued to use comedy as a vehicle for satire and social critique. The themes he explored—false virtue, the tension between appearance and reality, the education of the young—remain relevant and relatable across centuries.

In a broader cultural context, English comedy represents the resilience and adaptability of the English literary tradition. It demonstrates how humor can be both a weapon and a balm—a way to challenge power structures, question norms, and at the same time foster communal understanding through shared laughter.

Thus, the study of English comedy, and particularly Sheridan's contribution to it, is not merely a literary endeavor but an exploration of human nature,

communication, and the ever-evolving relationship between the individual and society. Comedy, in this light, is not frivolous or secondary, but a vital, dynamic force in the arts—one that deserves both scholarly attention and popular appreciation.

References

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