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Topic - Sentimental
Comedy.

Sentimental Comedy

The Age of Johnson was unaccountably poor in drama. It was an age of sentimental comedy which was based on cheap sentimentalism and defeated the very purpose of comedy. Goldsmith and Sheridan, the true dramatists, reacted against the sentimental comedy and tried to restore it to its real comic spirit.

The sentimental comedy catered to the needs and tastes of the middle-class audiences. With the end of the Stuart rule there set in a sweeping reaction against the licentiousness and immoral tone of the comedy of manners — the reaction which was spearheaded by the sober and literary section of the middle class. Jeremy Collier in his pamphlet *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (1698) voiced the middle-class uneasiness and concern at the grossness and vulgarity of the comedy of manners. This pamphlet paved the way for the change which gradually manifested itself in the advent of sensibility in place of wit and immorality in comedy. The new comedy offered them powerful stories full of pathetic and touching scenes which made them weep for the distress of lovers. In these comedies the course of true love never ran smooth till the lovers were rewarded for their sufferings and constancy in the last scene. This type of comedy had two conspicuous features — first, an excessive display of sensibility by the chief characters and secondly, the strong homiletic strain in their utterances. Nicoll remarks: "In the place of laughter they sought tears; in the place of gallants and witty damsels, pathetic damsels and serious lovers." Sentimental comedy, though it occupied the stage for more than half a century, did not give any memorable work because it lacked wit, humour, verbal dexterity and skill in characterisation which are essential to great comedy.