

The Rivals as A Comedy of Manners

By definition, the Comedy of Manners is a literary genre that aims at satirising the mannerisms and affectations of a society or the social class, often employing stock characters. It originated in the restoration period and was in vogue until the later part of the 18th century. It satirised the contemporary aristocratic society of 17th and 18th century England, mainly their pomp and show, foppish mannerisms, affectations, intrigues etc.

The Rivals mirrors the 18th-century aristocratic society of England, particularly the upper-class life of Bath. This society is the den of intrigues, gossip, scandals and frivolity. As typical of the comedy of manners, the Rivals has plots of three love affairs in it: Absolute-Lydia affair, The Faulkland- Julia affair and Mrs Malaprop-sir Lucius affair. All these love affairs are intricately connected and have parallel developments which keep the audience's interest alive. Through the character of Lydia, the play satirises the romantic notions of love. She is an avid reader of romance novels and stories which fed her imagination so much that she actually wanted to marry a poor man for the romance of it. The character of Malaprop is ludicrously hypocrite as she tries to put restrictions on her niece Lydia while herself falling in love with a tall Irish baronet and writing letters to him under the assumed name of Delia. The Faulkland-Julia love story parodies Sentimental Comedies of the 18th century. Julia is portrayed as an excessively sentimental girl, while Faulkland is portrayed as the most whimsical and eccentric lover. Faulkland greatly amuses us by his account of anxieties that fill his mind regarding Julia.

The play abounds in wit and repartee as expected of the Comedy of manners. The verbal skirmishes between Sir Anthony and his son are genuinely amusing and witty. Humour and wit also have a free play in scenes where captain Absolute befools Malaprop and Lydia.

The play is full of boisterous situations, witty dialogues, the amusing mistaken identities which are evidently resolved in the end; all make Sheridan's *The Rivals* a fine specimen of the comedy of manners of his time.