Chapter - VIII

BY WAY OF SUMMING UP
In the foregoing chapters an attempt was made to study in some detail Goldsmith and Sheridan's determined opposition to sentiment and sentimental comedy as well as their effect to revive and write 'laughing comedies'. Their plays were examined against the background of the drama and theatrical conditions of their times, and also in relation to the Georgian comic tradition which was very much alive. It remains only to sum up in this brief chapter the main line of argument developed and some of the important observations made in the previous chapters.

Sentimental comedy against which Goldsmith and Sheridan hoisted their flag of revolt, emerged and established itself early in the eighteenth century in strong reaction against the allegedly morally lax and profane Restoration comedy of manners, which had been patronised by the narrow courtly and aristocratic circles and sustained by its tastes. The middle classes, which began to rise towards the close of the seventeenth century, and became not only socially important, politically influential but also a dominant and demanding component of the expanding theatrical audience with no defined tastes, wanted to be entertained by plays which did not offend their moral susceptibilities and flout their moral principles. Sentimental comedy gratified this general demand, and became respectable as well as popular by virtue of its avowed and overt moral purpose, moralistic tone, sententious dialogue, and refined characters. It appealed specially to emotions, dwelt deliberately on tears and pity, affirmed faith in the essential goodness and nobility of human nature and its capacity for reform, and presented triumphant goodness and frustrated vice. Often it upheld virtuous characters, who are invariably rewarded, as exemplars. In the process laughter and humour lost their importance and pride of place in the comedy, which more often than not became dull and insipid.
Both sentimentalism and sentimental comedy held such sway over the audience and playwrights for a time that necessarily, though sporadically, reaction began to set in against them even by the time of Fielding and Gay. As the century wore on dissatisfaction with them began to build up gradually. By the 'fifties and 'sixties of the century there were in the theatre a sufficient number of professional dramatists, notably Charles Macklin, Samuel Foote, David Garrick, Arthur Murphy, George Colman the Elder, and others who had been ridiculing sentimentalism and sentimental comedy, and upholding the spirit of laughter and comedy in their plays, of course with varying degrees of emphasis. The spirit of laughter was better kept alive in the afterpieces than in the mainpieces which had to accommodate considerable sentiment. The conservative audience generally expected a serious or at least genteel mainpiece and a humorous afterpiece. These playwrights formed a sort of anti-sentimental tradition in Georgian comedy from which both Goldsmith and Sheridan greatly benefited. In fact both drew upon it consciously and unconsciously. Therefore, contrary to the conventional view, they were neither the first to attack sentimental comedy nor lone campaigners for laughing comedy. However, by virtue of their superior gifts as dramatists they proved to be the most successful and influential of campaigners.

Sentiment and sentimental comedy had begun to decline from the overwhelming ascendency they had enjoyed, about the time Goldsmith and Sheridan entered the fray against them. But it would be wrong to conclude that they had become a spent force. They were very much a force to reckon with even in the theatre, and continued to have an important place in the theatrical fare, although they were far more popular with the readers of plays in the closet. This situation apparently led to a noticeable difference between the apparently acted text of a play and its reading text which was made deliberately more sentimental to please the reader's appetite for sentiment. However one wonders whether the
theatre-going public and the reading public could be rigidly told apart. The fact seems to be that sentiment did continue to have a general appeal. Therefore Goldsmith's and Sheridan's fear that the drama of the woeful countenance posed a threat to true or laughing comedy was certainly well-founded. Significantly they both had as their targets of attack the same playwrights - Hugh Kelly and Richard Cumberland - who had written immensely popular sentimental comedies.

Between Goldsmith and Sheridan, Goldsmith was the more vehement opponent of sentimental comedy. He had earlier attacked it in his prose and non-dramatic works before he took to playwriting. He found it necessary, to theorise polemically about laughing comedy and 'weeping comedy'. But he did not, nor Sheridan did, take into account the countless afterpieces which had preserved the spirit of comic laughter intact. However the stand he took against sentimental comedy was worth taking. In his two plays he tried to realise concretely his conception of a 'laughing comedy'. In his first play The Good-Natured Man he made an attempt to ridicule sentimental comedy by using its very frame-work, characters and situations: a sentimental-sounding title, a potentially sentimental protagonist who mistakes his extravagance for generosity and his gullibility and imprudence for universal benevolence, his fifth act reformation, his beneficial and benevolent incognito uncle etc. It is the way in which Goldsmith handles this material that makes the play antisentimental. He succeeds in ridiculing sentimentalism, although he comes close enough to a failure in this regard while handling his protagonist. Unlike the sentimental playwright he neither dwells at length on emotions for their own sake nor makes a direct appeal to the spectator's emotions, though there are situations which could have lent themselves to such a treatment. There is comparatively speaking no elaborate expression of contrition or lengthy protests. Nor is there any special pleading for forgiveness by the reforming hero. The play makes clear what true benevolence is or ought to be
and distinguishes it from mere self-indulgence. There is considerable humour and laughter. However, viewed as a whole, *The Good-Natured Man* appears as an anti-sentimental comedy rather than a laughing comedy of Goldsmith's conception.

If *The Good-Natured Man* seems an interesting experiment rather than an accomplished work, Goldsmith's second play, *She Stoops to Conquer*, is a resounding success and masterpiece as a laughing comedy. It is anything but polemical in content and spirit, even though the inspiration to write it came from his opposition to sentimentalism. It admirably accomplishes Goldsmith's notions of laughing comedy, and from first to last it remains hilarious. In other words, it is much more than a mere attack on sentimental comedy or an anti-sentimental play. As in the case of *The Good-Natured Man*, in this play too but to a greater extent, Goldsmith draws upon the comic tradition of his times, and fuses admirably into a harmonious whole diverse comic modes - romantic comedy (Hastings and Miss Neville), gentle satire of follies and foibles (Mr and Mrs Hardcastle), hilarious farce (Tony Lumpkin), Restoration comedy of manners and wit, and sentimental comedy (Marlow and Miss. Hardcastle) etc and transcends them. *She Stoops to Conquer* succeeds remarkably in exposing the hollowness of the weeping comedy, precisely because it cannot be simply reduced to be an attack on sentimental comedy. Had Goldsmith not died prematurely, he would have certainly written some more competent comedies and enriched the English comic tradition.

Sheridan too was a born dramatist like Goldsmith, but he was more productive although his active dramatic career was as short as Goldsmith's. As Goldsmith and others had already led the assault against sentiment and sentimental comedy with vigour, Sheridan could gain from their experience and tilt at sentimentalism more confidently. He was no less earnest although he might appear less fiery and furious and more amused in his attack. Sentiment and
sentimentalism were still an issue to reckon with in the theatre and outside when
he entered the theatre. Three of his plays and his 'prologue' to the revised version
of his first play *The Rivals* are ample proof of it. Like Goldsmith's, his plays too
are woven out of eighteenth-century fabric. For his plays he drew freely, like most
dramatists, on literary tradition in general, and particularly he drew upon the
Georgian comic tradition, notwithstanding his debt to Congreve and Vanbrugh
among the Restoration writers of comedy of manners.

Written in the spirit of a burlesque, Sheridan's first comedy *The Rivals*
ridicules in an ostensibly light-hearted way the romantic and sentimental excesses
among the young, particularly in matters of love. Thereby it makes fun of
sentimental attitudes not only in plays but also in the popular sentimental and
romantic fiction of the day. Lydia Languish of the main plot who has fed herself
to the brim on such fiction that she has completely lost her head, and Faulkland who
makes himself and his lady love Julia miserable by his want of self-esteem, his
neurotic self-torment and jealousy—these two are the prime targets of Sheridan's
ridicule. Sentimental excesses are exposed unambiguously and made fun of in the
Lydia-Captain Jack plot. But the Julia-Faulkland plot has few moments when it
seems to come close enough to being sentimental, although Faulkland is
presented as a caricature of man of feeling and self-torturing sensibility. Viewed
as a whole the play is certainly anti-sentimental and it has its basis in the laughing
tradition. There is no compromise with sentiment.

*The School for Scandal*, Sheridan's next play and a universally
acknowledged masterpiece, like Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, is a
triumphant laughing comedy though in a different way. It is, like Goldsmith's play,
more than a mere anti-sentimental play. If it accommodates a few elements of
sentiment it is only to ridicule them and to discredit sentimentalism. It has several
elements of a sentimental comedy: the man of sentiment, the man of feeling and extravagant benevolence who reforms, the benevolent incognito uncle, a romantic sentimental heroine etc. All these are used for purposes of comedy. The main difference-significant one at that-between Sheridan and others who have attacked 'sentiment' and sentimentalism is that he recognises the two faces of sentiment, true and false. In the play however 'sentiment' is used as a euphemism for harmful malicious hypocrisy, double-dealing, dissembling, which together indicate the false face of sentiment. The other face of it, its true face, is implicitly indicated by good nature, constructive benevolence, humanitarian impulse and sensitiveness to other's distress. Joseph Surface is the 'man of sentiment' of the former kind, and his brother Charles possesses the other qualities, though he is not called a man of true sentiment in the play, probably to avoid confusion. Joseph is unmasked, his knavery exposed, and his true nature revealed in the course of the play largely because of his own over-clever contrivances. Charles is the man of sensibility. While his good nature, sensitiveness to others' distress and impulse towards benevolence are recognised, the wisdom of his imprudent and reckless benevolence and his profligate mode of life are questioned even by those who are partial to him. And he is not presented as an exemplar of virtue, as a sentimental comedy would have done, nor is the fulfilment of his love for Maria regarded as a reward for his benevolence. Scenes of pathetic distress, emotional excess, and heavy moralising are totally avoided in the play. Charles's reform is made as brief and informal as possible. Even the incognito benevolent uncle is presented as a comic character. Sheridan's fresh interpretation of 'sentiment', which draws attention to certain deep-seated destructive qualities of the human mind, makes The School for Scandal a unique anti-sentimental play. There is plenty of wit, laughter and humour in it, which give it an important place in the laughing tradition.
The Critic. Sheridan’s last important contribution to the laughing tradition, is a longish afterpiece, episodic in character, inspiration for it deriving from current political and literary conditions. Its assault on ‘genteeel comedy’ and sentimental excesses is largely confined to the first act, though satire on sentimental conventions are spread over this burlesque. To write this witty, funny, satirical and farcical parody of current comedy and tragedy, Sheridan drew consciously and unconsciously on the long tradition of stage burlesques. Although ostensibly attention is focussed on the absurdities of plays and theatrical conventions and practices of the day, The Critic effectively ridicules all that is false, bogus, pretentious, inflated, unnatural, distorted and exaggerated in letters as well as life. Needless to say that sentimental comedy too comes under this orbit.

It has been argued that sentimentalism was a part of the mental make-up of Goldsmith and Sheridan and that they compromised with sentiment, Goldsmith in The Good-Natured Man and Sheridan in The Rivals. The evidence provided by the plays themselves shows that there was no such compromise. Living as they did in an environment in which ‘sentiment’ was held in high esteem, they could not have escaped from being affected by it. Perhaps they could attack vigorously sentimentalism, precisely because they had first hand knowledge of its pitfalls from their own experience. How successful were they in stemming the tide of sentimentalism in drama, and in combating the vogue of sentimental comedy? Theatrical evidence shows that they could not give it any notable pause. Plays with sentimentalism continued to be written even in the early decades of the next century. The taste of the audience being what it was, they laughed when they saw a laughing comedy and shed tears when they saw a weeping comedy. The real achievement of Goldsmith and Sheridan in their determined assault on sentimental comedy, lay in their writing two of the best comedies of the century, She Stoops to Conquer and The School for Scandal, which also have stood the test of time, as recent revivals of those plays have demonstrated.