Chapter -III

GOLDSMITH'S FIRST ATTACK ON 'GENTEEL COMEDY': THE GOOD-NATURED MAN
The foregoing account of some of the plays of Charles Macklin, David Garrick, Samuel Foote, Arthur Murphy, and George Colman the Elder, though cursory, indicates that these playwrights in different ways and degrees did oppose sentimentalism in drama and kept the spirit of comedy alive by writing laughing and satirical comedies, and that the spirit of laughter was more actively and consistently sustained in the short satirical afterpieces than in the mainpieces, which accommodated some sentiment either by choice or necessity. It is also seen how even such sentimental playwrights as Hugh Kelly and Richard Cumberland could not ignore the element of laughter altogether. On the whole, then, there was in the Georgian theatre a tradition of laughter and opposition to sentiment by the time Goldsmith, and after him, Sheridan, entered the scene to launch their onslaught against sentimental comedy. It is also found that they benefitted themselves by drawing upon the thriving comic theatre of their times. Therefore it would be incorrect to argue that they laughed the Georgian theatre out of an enervating taste for sentimental comedy. However, had those playwrights who opposed sentiment in drama really succeeded in their objective, the attack of Goldsmith and Sheridan against sentimental comedy would have been redundant. Obviously they had not. Although sentimental comedy was not certainly triumphant in the 60s and 70s of the century as previously supposed, it was very much there as a powerful enough factor and had to be reckoned with. Even Bevis, who maintains that "the importance of sentimental comedy per se seems to have been overestimated", admits, "To judge by the prologue to The Rivals, Sheridan did not think sentimental comedy a dead issue in 1775, and we find ample sentimentalism in late eighteenth and nineteenth century plays".
Goldsmith was always interested in the theatre, and "had been writing about it off and on since his earliest Grub Street days", long before he actually turned a dramatist by writing The Good-Natured Man. His comments on the theatrical managers and their commercial attitude, on actors and the theatrical traditions of the period, the plays, and the audience and their tastes or want of proper taste, may be seen scattered in his contribution to such periodicals of the day as the Monthly Review, The Enquiry, The Critical Review, The Public Ledger, (1761) and also in The History of England and the novel The Vicar of Wakefield. His essays contributed to The Public Ledger were collected and subsequently published under the title The Citizen of the World (1762). He devotes a whole Chapter (No.XI) to the stage in his An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning (1759). He particularly censures those critics of drama who are not satisfied with a comedy designed to provide laughter because tastes are 'genteel'. Does the poet paint the absurdities of the vulgar? Then he is low. Does he exaggerate the features of folly to render it more thoroughly ridiculous? he is then very low. In The Vicar of Wakefield Goldsmith finds an occasion to comment upon the tastes of the theatrical audience and their want of judgment. In Chapter XVIII of the novel, a strolling actor tells Dr.Primrose the Vicar, that the spectators go to the theatre 'only to be amused, and find themselves happy when they can enjoy a pantomime under the sanction of Jonson's or Shakespeare's name...: it is not the composition of the piece, but the number of starts and attitudes that may be introduced into it, that elicits applause... the works of Congreve and Farquhar have too much wit in them for the present taste'. Subsequently when Goldsmith published The Good-Natured Man after it was staged in January 1768, he added a preface to the printed text in which he tersely but pointedly stated his aims in
writing the play. Then again in January 1773, a couple of months before his second play *She Stoops to Conquer* was produced, he published anonymously in the *Westminster Magazine*, his now famous critique, "An Essay on the Theatre, or a Comparison between laughing and Sentimental Comedy", in which he makes a direct attack on sentimental comedy. During the interim between the "preface" to *The Good-Natured Man* and the essay "On the Theatre", his conception of comedy had developed. The "Preface" and the "Essay" are of course connected with each other. However, as the latter was not only an attack on sentimental comedy but seems to have been something of a polemical exercise and preparation for *She Stoops to Conquer*, it would be proper to examine it later while examining that play, rather than now.

The views expressed in the "Preface" to *The Good Natured Man*, could not have been an after-thought, and Goldsmith must have entertained them for quite some time. By the time he turned to the theatre he had already an established reputation as essayist, poet and novelist and was one of Dr. Johnson's circle of literary friends and would have had several opportunities to discuss literary issues including the current state of comic drama and what was wrong with it. It may not be farfetched to surmise that had Goldsmith not been obliged to "retrench in the representation" "in deference to the public taste" the bailiffs' scene from *The Good-Natured Man* which was hissed off by the audience during its very first performance, the tone and the contents of his "Preface" to the printed text of the play with retrenched scene restored, might have been different. Goldsmith must have felt provoked to explain to his readers as well as reviewers alike what he had set out to do in his play and why. He says that his endeavour in this comedy has
been to 'imitate' the "poets of the last age" (i.e. those of the age of Shakespeare) whose plays are conspicuous for "nature" and "humour", which they sought wherever they could find. He contends that these are conspicuously absent in the "genteel comedy" (i.e. sentimental comedy) of the day. He implicitly objects to the current practice of limiting comedy to the affairs of high society, and asserts that "Those who know anything of composition are sensible that, in pursuing humour, it will sometimes lead us into the recesses of the mean". Obviously, Goldsmith has a dig at the tastes of the audience of his play, who found the bailiffs' scene (Act III) "low" for its taste and forced its omission after the first performance, as well as the playwrights who had been nourishing such "delicate" taste. It is his conviction that 'too much refinement' will 'banish humour and character' from comedy as it has happened in French comedy. By such remarks as these Goldsmith intends to challenge those who champion 'genteel' comedy. In his own play, he claims, his principal aim has been to present 'nature and humour' and 'delineate character'.

That Goldsmith's views about the popularity of sentimental drama and popular taste were certainly not ill-founded is proved by his travails to get *The Good-Natured Man* accepted for production by either of the patented theatres, even several months after the script was ready. Garrick to whom he submitted the play first, temporised for weeks raising objections to the script and suggesting extensive revision. He seems to have told Dr. Johnson and Reynolds privately that he believed the play would fail. Probably he delayed taking a decision not because of any spite although he and Goldsmith had their mutual bickerings and Goldsmith had attacked him in *The Enquiry*. As a shrewed theatrical businessman intent on popular and commercial success, he must have thought that the play
went against the prevailing popular taste and demands. It is significant that eventually he preferred to produce Hugh Kelly’s *False Delicacy* which proved how right was Garrick’s commercial instinct. George Colman of Covent Garden to whom Goldsmith submitted the play next viewed it favourably, but even he seemed to be none too eager to produce it even though Dr. Johnson, Reynolds, Burke and others thought highly of it. Johnson in particular, according to Boswell, considered it the best English comedy since Vanbrugh and Cibber’s *Provoked Husband*. However persuaded by friends he finally produced it on 29th January 1768, rather late in the season, by which time Kelly’s *False Delicacy* had had already a week’s glorious run. The contemporary reviews of Goldsmith’s play in its acting as well as printed version were at best only moderate in praise, but most of them were critical of the bailiffs’ scene.

How does *The Good-Natured Man* fare in the light of the intention professed in the preface to be an ‘anti-genteel’ or ‘anti-sentimental’ comedy? To what extent has Goldsmith succeeded in realising these intentions in dramatic terms? How effective has been his onslaught on sentimental comedy? The task he set for himself, of restoring humour and laughter, was by no means easy as Dr. Johnson pointed out in the ‘prologue’ to the play. He knew that the response of the audience to a play which departed from the familiar beaten track was uncertain. Therefore he likens the playwright, the ‘anxious bard’, to Caesar’s Pilot caught in a ‘common storm’. To boost the morale of the author and to humour the audience he concludes the “prologue” saying that the author ‘.... confident of praise, if praise be due, Trusts without fear, to merit, and to you’. It is doubtful whether Johnson’s grave prologue to the play had any sobering effect on the first audience to make them receptive to its unconventional humour (that is, by the current standard).
Diverse opinions have been expressed about the play. As Bevis puts it, "It still divides critics as do few other eighteenth-century plays; some call it laughing, some sentimental, some mixed." For him however, "it is basically a sentimental comedy." There are, to be sure, features in the play which seem to point towards sentimental comedy. The title itself, like Steele's *Conscious Lovers*, seems to announce a sentimental play of the customary kind. The heroes of most sentimental comedies are good-natured, and they are ultimately presented as exemplars of the virtues they are supposed to have. Young Honeywood in *The Good-Natured Man* is a potentially sentimental character, who likes to believe that he is practicing universal benevolence. It should be seen however whether he is ridiculed and laughed at or sympathised or empathised with. There are in the play other devices frequently employed in sentimental comedies. In the main plot are the 'follies' of the hero, his repentance, and his fifth-act reformation. Honeywood's follies spring from his 'good-nature', which, in the words of his uncle and benefactor Sir William, "arises rather from his fears of offending the importunate than his desires of making the deserving happy (Act I). He is so credulous that he is unable to distinguish between his true friends and well-wishers on one hand and exploiters and swindlers on the other. He mistakes his 'extravagance' for 'generosity' and misplaced trust as 'universal benevolence'. Having landed himself in a series of troubles and got into scrapes, he learns his lessons, realises what has been wrong with him, and reforms ultimately. In his own words, with which the play concludes:

I now too plainly perceive my errors; my vanity, in attempting to please all by fearing to offend any; my meanness, in approving folly lest fools should disapprove.
Henceforth, therefore, it shall be my study to reserve my pity for real distress; my friendship to true merit; and my love for her, who first taught me what it is to be happy. (V Act).

He learns to renounce his imprudent generosity and ill-considered acts of benevolence. He is not the only person to reform. Even Lofty, that blustering politician who pretends to be on intimate terms with the great and powerful and hoodwinks the gullible, on being exposed, admits his imposture, and reforms rather unexpectedly. To strengthen the impression that the play might be sentimental, admirable 'sentiments' are generously sprinkled over it. Sir William Honeywood, the benevolent incognito uncle of the young man and father figure, resembling Stockwell the unacknowledged benevolent father of Belcour in The West Indian, controls the life of his nephew as well as that of others, with a lofty confidence which is reflected in his sententiousness, a habit shared in a measure by his nephew too. "The two of them", remarks Quintana, "provide the sentimental antiphony which brings the play to a close". He also adds that a sympathetic audience must have shed tears at such a close. In other words, the sententious dialogue, recognition and reform motifs, and a somewhat drawn-out moralising close, all seem to make the play sentimental.

If it is remembered that Goldsmith had been attacking sentiment and drama of sensibility long before he wrote The Good-Natured Man, one could sense the irony implicit in the title of this play. It is a part of his strategy to choose a seemingly sentimental title as well as the framework of a sentimental comedy in an attempt to ridicule it, and to express his distrust of it. If the play is read, as
Quintana suggests, "against its full Georgian background" one is not likely "to miss its satiric intent and its characteristic Goldsmithian irony". The title of the play indicates that Goldsmith's fundamental purpose is to ridicule extravagance disguised as generosity and gullibility masked as universal benevolence. His desire is to check virtue by prudence. He had known firsthand the bitter consequences of thoughtless generosity and imprudence. In a letter to his brother Henry written in 1759, he laid bare the cause of his impractical emotional being:

I had learned from books to be disinterested and generous, before I was taught from experience the necessity of being prudent. I had contracted the habits and notions of a philosophy while I was exposing myself to the insidious approaches of cunning; and often by being, even with narrow finances, charitable to excess I forgot the rules of justice, and placed myself in the very situation of the wretch who thanked me for my bounty.

Goldsmith's novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, at least in part, is an elaboration in fictional terms of the above passage. The Primroses as a family 'had but one character, that of being equally generous, credulous, simple, and inoffensive'. The bulk of the novel details their varied misfortunes for want of caution. Sir William Thornhill, who is presented as a foil to Dr. Primrose, learns the lessons of prudence after a too whimsical display of generosity under the influence of a 'sickly sensibility'. The Vicar of course has a sensitive heart, but Sir William is careful to test the worth of the Primroses before he rescues them from the calamities that their guilelessness brought on.
Goldsmith may admire the Primroses for their virtue, but he certainly does not recommend them as models for action to be emulated. An analogous case is that of the Man in Black in his essays. The anti-benevolence theme, which underlies *The Good-Natured Man*, may be seen to have been present in his mind from the first. In the play the 'good-nature' of young Honeywood is recognised as a virtue but it is not extolled, nor is he presented as an exemplar, as is done in the case of the heroes of most sentimental comedies. Further, the play does not present virtue as triumphant either. When Miss Richland, who is in love with Honeywood attempts to defend his 'tenderness, his humanity, his universal friendship', Sir William, who for all his affection for his nephew has no illusions about him and totally disapproves of his incorrigible benevolence, tells her though somewhat sententiously:

That friendship, Madam, which is exerted in too wide a sphere, becomes totally useless. Our bounty, like a drop of water, disappears when diffused too widely. They who pretend most of this universal benevolence, are either deceivers or dupes: men who desire to cover their private ill-nature by a pretended regard for all; or men who, reasoning themselves into false feelings, are more earnest in pursuit of splendour, than of useful virtues. (Act III).

Sir William is speaking here for his creator too. Honeywood's good-nature exposes him to scrapes in such quick succession that one feels sorry for him rather than empathises with him. It can hardly be said that Goldsmith, like the other sentimental dramatists, rouses our pity for the distressed virtue and admiration for the innate
oodness of his protagonist. No tears are shed for him. One may feel glad that at last he has learnt through distress the lessons he ought to have learnt long ago. The ridicule of his sentiment is implicit throughout. Goldsmith combines in Honeywood "both sentiment and criticism of sentiment".10

The Good-Natured Man may be viewed as a play on the education of the protagonist, his reformation from his excessive impractical and undiscriminating benevolence, which is tantamount to a sort of self-indulgence, to prudence and commonsense by outgrowing his folly. Appropriately it opens skillfully enough with the appearance of Sir William, Honeywood's guardian angel and educator, in conversation with the faithful family servant Jarvis who is no less exasperated by his master's imprudence and folly than the older man. To reclaim his errant nephew who 'requires correction', Sir William plans 'to involve him in fictitious distress', by getting him arrested for a debt (although without the knowledge of his nephew he plans to redeem it), 'clap an officer with him, and then let him see which of his friends comes to his relief' (Act I). During the entire process he remains a concealed spectator of his nephew's follies so that he 'can have frequent opportunities of being about him without being known'. It is his wish to 'weed out the vice' 'without eradicating the virtue' in Honeywood.

Honeywood's difficulties, caused by his good-nature, are not just financial. His inability to say no to any request, involves him in other difficulties. It is not only his footman, butler and other household servants that exploit him, but others, the Croakers and for example, who impose themselves on him, for different reasons make demands on his attention and time. Mr. and Mrs.Croaker are essentially 'humour' characters. They are a contrasting pair. As Jarvis rightly assesses them,
Mr. Croaker is 'a fretful poor soul, that has a new distress every hour' and his wife is his exact opposite, 'all laugh and no joke'. Even Honeywood knows that the very mirth of Croaker is 'an antidote to all gaiety'. He sees alarms and dangers everywhere. Yet for all his sense of impending doom, he wants Honeywood to use his friendship with his ward Miss Richland to make her consent to marry his son Leontine, purely for mercenary reasons. Although Honeywood himself is in love with her and knows that she too loves him, he does not say 'no' to Croaker's request lest he should offend him. (Later, in the play for similar reasons, much against his own inclination, he resigns her to the imposter Lofty who wants him to intercede on his behalf). He cannot say 'no' to Mrs Croaker either, who insists that he must go with her 'upon a strolling party'. His attempts to put into practice his belief that 'universal benevolence is the first law of nature' (Act IV) lead him unintentionally to do disservice to Leontine and Olivia at their elopement, and get blamed and called a betrayer, villain, and coward.

Sir William, as good as his word, sets a bailiff and his assistant on his nephew and is made a prisoner in his own home for a while so that he may experience distress. Miss Richland unexpectedly arrives on the scene much to Honeywood's confusion and embarrassment. She has actually forestalled Sir William, by bailing Honeywood out of debt to the pleasant surprise of his uncle who is glad to find that there is at least one good friend for his nephew, and senses that she must be in love with him. Miss Richland, who too plays a significant role in reclaiming Honeywood, is not the passive heroine of sentimental comedy. She is level-headed, knows her mind, and is capable of effective and unobtrusive action. Her regard for Honeywood is genuine, and is not a party to his 'benevolence'. Her rejection of Lofty's overtures through Honeywood is firm and final. No heroine of a sentimental comedy could tell the man she loves as forthrightly as she does. 'I must disclaim his friendship who ceases to be a friend
to himself' (Act.IV). Nevertheless, at the end Honeywood who has realised his failures and lapses announces his decision to quit and 'seek amongst strangers that fortitude which may give strength to the mind, and marshal all its dissipated virtue', she stretches out her hand to detain him. One might be reminded by Miss Richland of some of Shakespeare's heroines in his comedies, rather than any 'sentimental' heroine.

One must assume that with Honeywood winning his lady love, his reform and education are complete in which his uncle as well as Miss Richland have a hand. His reform is not as sudden as it may seem, because his uncle, a man of determination, announces at the beginning of the play itself to reform his errant nephew. One naturally looks forward to it. In fact it is the reform of Lofty, who is exposed by Sir William, that seems rather sudden.

In his "Preface" to The Good-Natured Man, Goldsmith says that his principal aim is to 'delineate character'. Lofty is one of his interesting creations, who like his predecessor Beau Tibbs pretends to be on intimate terms with the great and powerful. He could have been both evil and destructive. But the playwright, perhaps intentionally, does not direct attention on these possible potentialities of his, to keep up the spirit of comedy. By making him reform, he allows this pretender a measure of goodness. Lofty plays upon the good-nature of others, and seeks to win their opinion by projecting an illusory image of himself as a man of consequence and importance. He uses others to serve his own ends, and he often succeeds because of others' credulousness. It is not only Honeywood and Mrs Croaker but even Miss Richland (though for a while only) who are taken in by his claims of importance because they are gullible. Through him Goldsmith
as a dig at the French and Frenchified people. In the character of Lofty, George Daniel remarks, Goldsmith presents "a well-drawn picture of a gratuitous asconader, who, having strutted his hour in borrowed plumes, is condemned to exchange them for cap and bells for ever after".11

A characteristic feature of this play is the presence of a couple of 'humour' characters, the Croakers. They are marked by certain 'humour' or eccentricities and are not treated as object of satire or figures of ridicule. But they do provide laughter by their delightful absurdities. Goldsmith had created such characters in his essays and *The Vicar of Wakefield*. By the side of Croaker, all the other characters pale into insignificance. He is the crown of the piece. It is said that luring the premiere of the play it was actor Shuter playing Croaker by reading the incendiary letter who held the attention of the spectators who had earlier hissed the bailiff's scene.12 Rich, greedy, sullen, and always imagining calamities in future, his "perennial well-do-do pessimist", as Jeffares calls him,13 contributes much to the comic spirit of the play. Goldsmith seems to have found the outline of this character in Johnson's 'Suspirious' in the *Rambler*. But he has so ingeniously simplified, as to give it all the force and value of an original conception.14 Croaker's melancholy, which finds a new distress every hour, becomes more and more comic as the play progresses. The contrast with his wife, who is his exact opposite, reinforces his comedy. As Robert Herring observes, throughout he remains his own man and relies on none. The whole of life is material for his gloom, and when real sorrows come he finds that the advantage of fretting over misfortunes beforehand has been that 'we never feel them when they come'. He takes encouragement from that to continue his dismal forebodings: his last words
ing, when he sees content all round, "Heaven send we be all better this day eee months". Wrong as his philosophy may be, he is strong in it; and that, Goldsmith says, is the thing".  

Lofty and Croaker provide manners satire and situation comedy. These two are the most living characters in the play and keep up the spirit of comedy more than others. By virtue of their vitality they - Croaker particularly - overshadow the other characters, including the protagonist young Honeywood. In handling the young man Goldsmith has indeed a difficult taste. He has to expose his follies and weaknesses without making him look contemptible, and at the same time ridicule him rather in a veiled fashion. In fact shaping Honeywood is the most intractable part of the dramatist's task. And his success is only moderate in this respect. However, Honeywood remains within the limits of probability: Loftis has rightly observed that "Honeywood is a more convincing character than Kelly's lords and gentleman", although "his altruism, in his supreme act of generosity, is curiously like theirs". In the 'ebb and flows' of his humours, he is "like Yorick in Sterne's sentimental Journey". Goldsmith comes very close to ridiculing him in the scene where caught between Mr and Mrs. Croaker and unable to say 'no' to either of them, he 'agrees' and disagrees with them by turns.

Now the bailiff's scene in Act III may be looked at briefly. Though it offended the first spectators' taste and sensibility and Goldsmith felt obliged to expunge it temporarily from the acting text in deference to popular taste, he wisely restored subsequently in the printed text. This scene without is a doubt a most amusing and humorous scene. By introducing this 'low' scene Goldsmith is doing something old and courageous as he is going against the prevailing 'genteel' fashion. But,
he is being true to his conviction that one should be free to seek humour wherever one could find it, irrespective of the class of people. Further, as Loftis observes, "the scene of Honeywood's confrontation with the bailiff" is "an authenticating reminder of the eighteenth-century realities of life". And Goldsmith tries to dispel the impression conveyed by too many eighteenth-century comedies that only the rich need be taken seriously. It is not only the bailiff's inability or unwillingness to give a direct answer to a simple question without involving legal jargon but the embarrassed and confusing attempts of Honeywood to convince the bailiff and his assistants are only visiting acquaintances who are officers in the navy that make the scene most amusing and comic. As if to cast doubts on Honeywood's profession of universal benevolence the dramatist makes Timothy Twitch a most human bailiff who confesses to a love of humanity. The scene, thus, remains integral to the theme of the play, though one could easily mistake it for a digression inserted to provide incidental laughter.

Allardyce Nicoll has pointed out that Goldsmith in this play has "not yet completely thrown over the shackles of the style he condemned." The apparently "sentimental" devices in the play have already been pointed out. However, it is important to note that the play is free from certain stock devices of sentimental comedy. First, there is no direct appeal to the emotions alone, and no indulgence in emotions for its own sake. Second, there is no deliberate mingling of tears and joy, although there are situations in the play which could have been used for this purpose. Third, there are no lengthy protests and wordy expressions of contrition, comparatively speaking, and no special and emotional pleading for forgiveness when the protagonist realises his follies. The lovers do not go in to ecstasies when their wishes are fulfilled. When Sir William reveals his identity, there is only a brief
xclamation from his nephew. There are very few scenes which are deliberately prolonged for their emotional charge. And above all there is plenty of laughter and humour in the play to establish it as a comedy.

Viewed as a whole, The Good-Natured Man appears by and large to be in conformity with the theoretical position that Goldsmith takes in his 'preface'. Luminous and un-sentimental, it contrasts sharply with the tearful sentimental comedies of the period. Few of them have its comic and satirical characterization, its amusing misunderstandings, comic entanglements and ludicrous scenes, and its lively dialogue. False sensibility and superficial refinement have been consciously rejected in favour of 'nature', 'humour', delineation of manners, and character. That Goldsmith is not yet sufficiently experienced as a dramatist, in spite of his natural gift for the dramatic, may be seen in some scenes of the play, especially in the elaborate expository and explanatory scenes. But there can be little doubt that the play is not only unsentimental but anti-sentimental too. It holds promise of better work by Goldsmith as a courageous experiment in anti-sentimental comedy rather than as an assured achievement. In the foregoing analysis of the play, it may be pointed out, the stress has been on its anti-sentimental character. And therefore little has been said about the other aspects of the play.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. Ibid., p.62.


6. Ibid., p.201.


8. Ibid., p.147.


12. Wardle, p.182.


17. Ibid., p.22.