While the Restoration comedy of manners has excited keen controversy in recent years, the eighteenth-century English sentimental comedy has not attracted much critical attention. Indeed, it has often been dismissed with contempt. Short discussions by dramatic historians and anthologists include definitions of sentimental comedy which are not of much help. Generally, these accounts rely heavily on Ernest Bernbaum's *The Drama of Sensibility* (1915) which contains a detailed historical account of sentimental comedy in the eighteenth century. The subsequent scholars who have tried to discuss sentimental comedy at length have usually been happy to share Bernbaum's rather questionable view that sentimental comedy was dominant throughout the eighteenth century, and that Goldsmith and Sheridan who tried to rebel against it were themselves infected by the prevailing sentimentalism. Such criticism is rather unsatisfactory and likely to foster a distorted reading of Goldsmith and Sheridan. In fact, the whole subject of the vogue for sentimental comedy and of the reaction of Goldsmith and Sheridan needs to be explored with the care which the subject deserves. It is this feeling that has prompted the present study.

Some scholars have ably written about the eighteenth-century English sentimental comedy. But although they have treated the
subject as fully as the breadth of their various studies permitted, none of them, so far as I am aware, has made a careful, detailed examination of its principal themes and characters in order to show its true nature. As sentimental comedy enjoyed great popularity in its day, it deserves attention for extensive study. Also, though much has been written about Goldsmith and Sheridan as dramatists, there has been surprisingly little in the way of really close examination of their plays as "laughing", unsentimental comedies. Opinions of their place as comic dramatists have been disturbingly variant. Some writers have rather overestimated them as revolutionaries against sentimental comedy by suggesting that the comic spirit was entirely dormant until Goldsmith wrote his plays and was followed by Sheridan. But what is more untenable from the point of view of the present survey is the position of those critics who have put Goldsmith and Sheridan on the sentimental bench by greatly exaggerating the resemblances and ignoring the differences between their comedies and those of the sentimental school. In their anxiety to prove the dominance of sentimental comedy, they have underrated the unsentimentalism of Goldsmith and Sheridan. In order to restore a correct perspective, I have tried to lay special emphasis on the gay and unsentimental nature of their plays.

The comic pattern of the comedy of manners which the Restoration age evolved to express the contemporary ethos started
disintegrating after 1688 until, towards the close of the century, it yielded place to sentimental or exemplary comedy which harmonized with the new ethos. In the 1690s some playwrights seem to have felt the attractions of both concepts of comedy. Guided by the middle-class preference for sentiment and conscious moralizing, and supported by a contemporary movement in philosophical thought, sentimental comedy remained a popular, though not dominant, form of drama almost throughout the eighteenth century. Perhaps the most notable opposition it met with came from Goldsmith and Sheridan. Not content with merely theoretical opposition to it, they wrote brilliant plays in the tradition of laughing comedy, though it cannot be said that they inspired any school of writers to follow their example.

The first two chapters of this study attempt to place sentimental comedy in perspective, showing its rise in reaction to the "immoral" Restoration comedy of manners, and in response to a change in social and moral climate. The next two chapters bring out in detail the distinguishing features of sentimental comedy by a close examination of its important themes and characters with special reference to the most important and successful examples of the genre. The last two chapters, dealing with Goldsmith and Sheridan, reveal their dissatisfaction with sentimental comedy and attempt to bring out the unsentimentalism of their comedies. Here I have thought it necessary to include an almost scene-wise survey
of their comedies in order to show how their spirit or tone is antithetical to that of sentimental comedy. An attempt has also been made to defend their comedies against certain misguided charges of sentimentality.

The scholarly work of Nettleton, Bernbaum, Nicoll and Sherbo lays a heavy debt on all students of eighteenth-century drama. I have acknowledged this debt at several points in the body of the text. I wish to record my special indebtedness to my Supervisor, Dr. Jagdish Chander, Ph.D. (Wisconsin), Professor and Head, Department of English, Panjab University, Chandigarh, for his valuable help and guidance throughout the course of this thesis. Despite his own heavy work, he looked through the preliminary draft of my chapters with meticulous care and offered many helpful suggestions. For the errors that may have escaped his close scrutiny of the final typescript, I alone am responsible. Next, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Ferguson of Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, for his useful advice in the preparation of my chapter on Goldsmith.

I am grateful to my friend, Manjit, for sending me from Lancaster some of the research material that was inaccessible to me in India where the library resources in my research area are, unfortunately, woefully limited. I also wish to thank Dr. R.L. Mittal, Librarian of the Himachal Pradesh University, for his
exceptionally courteous and friendly assistance within his modest means. And, finally, I am grateful to my wife, Sarla Pathania, for her constant encouragement in my pursuit.

Department of English,
Himachal Pradesh University,
Simla.
August 30, 1977.

Baldev Singh

(BALDEV SINGH)