

The characteristics of the age The 18th century was marked by a shift from formalized styles to more accessible ones, with the rise of comedy of manners plays, naturalistic acting, opening to a wider middle-class audience, establishment of patent theatres, and technological developments in stage performances. In the 18th century, the highbrow and provocative Restoration comedy lost favour, to be replaced by sentimental comedy, domestic tragedy such as George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731), and by an overwhelming interest in Italian opera. Most notably, there was a shift away from the traditional, heavily formalized styles of the previous period towards a lighter, more accessible style that often explored societal themes and values. Emphasis was also placed on naturalistic acting styles and clear pronunciation in the English language, marking a departure from the larger-than-life depictions in the Restoration theatre. Finally, the era brought about technological developments such as rotating stage machines, stage lighting, and the inclusion of visual effects in stage performances. Furthermore, this era saw the rise of the middle-class, with theatre opening to a wider audience beyond the nobility due to the Licensing Act of 1737. The 18th century theatre, also known as the Age of Enlightenment theatre, exhibited several significant characteristics. The Act also led to the establishment of patent theatres which held a monopoly over the performance of 'legitimate' drama.